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Avoiding corporate culture shock

Craig McGuire - 29 Mar 2004 00:00

As a brighter economic picture creates more job openings in PR, Craig McGuire talks to HR heads and uncovers techniques for finding the posting that is right for you

With the economy improving and new business abounding in the PR sector this year, David Langston, like many of his peers, was ready for a change. For nearly three years as a director of internal communications at a major multinational PR agency, he admits he felt trapped in an environment that was never a good fit for his personality.

"It was a very dry, corporate culture, where I had difficulty expressing myself," Langston reflects. "I needed an environment where my ideas would be nourished. But at 54, I'm not a kid anymore that can keep moving from shop to shop."

As the job market in the PR sector continues to improve this year, even more disenfranchised PR professionals are expected to seek out new positions more closely aligned with their personal styles - whether that be the pressure-cooker pace of corporate IR or the more socially conscious atmosphere of a charitable nonprofit.

For Langston, his quest involved an eight-week courtship with another major, though slightly smaller PR agency, including multiple rounds of interviews and several on-site visits.

"I took my time touring the facilities and making the rounds, seeking out employees at all levels," Langston says. "You really have to look at the company from as many angles as possible to determine whether or not it will be a good fit."

Satisfied with what he found, he recently accepted a position at the new, more suitable firm that is comparable to the job he had previously.

"The market today is still not great, but it has gone from terrible to OK, and we are seeing more people be more selective," says Ben Long, president of Travaille Executive Search in Washington, DC.

To many people, compensation might still be king, but in an increasing number of placements, it is not as much of a deal-breaker as it was just last year.

"I see more people taking lateral moves, agency to corporate, or even leaving a cushy post at an agency to launch a practice," Long says. "They are seeking a better quality of life, but these are the kinds of things you only see in a firm market."

Obviously, the more you know about a company, the better position you will be in to make an

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informed decision. But it is not so evident how to gain a truly objective perspective.

As president of PoliTemps, a staffing agency in Washington, DC, Chris Jones is used to herding a new crop of bright-eyed professionals into PR, political affairs, and public affairs positions every year.

"Washington is like a magnet for young PR and public affairs professionals," Jones says. "I tell them, 'If you aren't looking for a position today, chances are you will at some point. So while you are networking, in the back of your mind you should always be taking mental notes.'"

If you are at the point where Langston was a few months ago, chances are your job hunt is a bit more aggressive. Smooch Reynolds, CEO of Repovich Reynolds Group, a search firm, says that once you've set your sights on a particular company, you need to look through as many "lenses" as possible.

For instance, ask around at the likes of the IABC and the PRSA, Reynolds says. Chances are someone knows someone who knows something about the firm you're investigating.

"You should also do a bit of sleuthing," Reynolds says. "Contact vendors that do business with the company. Read its releases on PR Newswire. Explore its corporate website. Track down and talk to reporters and analysts. Read its annual report, especially the chairman's letter. Go on Yahoo! and do a search, and always Google as you go."

"Fortunately, the PR world is a pretty small industry, where most people know other people," adds Judith Harrison, SVP of human resources at Ruder Finn. But it is also important to understand how the firm fits into the overall business world, especially in terms of ethics.

Harrison suggests looking the company up using resources like Business Ethics (www.business-ethics.org), Business for Social Responsibility (www.bsr.org), and the United Nation's Global Compact (www.unglobalcompact.org).

"You want to not only research the ethics of the company itself, but the clients that the company does business with," Harrison says. "You may be surprised by what you find. And this is information that usually will never come out in the interviewing process."

But while it is unlikely that HR professionals will discuss corporate scandals and unsavory business practices, it is possible to get the interviewer's thoughts on the company's philosophy and ethics by asking the right questions, Harrison continues. "You never want to ask the interviewer directly about things such as scandals, because you simply won't get a response... What you can ask the interviewer is what they like about the company, and sometimes what they'll tell you is that they like the philosophy and the ethics of the company, so you are home free."

To gain yet another perspective of the organization, it might be a good idea to cast a wider net on the local front.

"Ask the opinions of third-party vendors who work with the firm, whether it is a printer, graphic designer, or even a messenger service," says Long. Though these service providers are unlikely to be negative, they can still provide insight into the pace of the organization.

Lastly, if you've tapped every available resource, exhausted every avenue of due diligence, and you are still not satisfied, you simply might be looking in the wrong place.

"If you haven't already, explore trade associations, nonprofits, even government relations," says Jones. "Healthcare in particular seems to be drawing a lot of people in now. The important thing is don't despair. If you look hard enough, chances are you'll find the right fit."

Eight questions

If you're working with an outside recruiter, there are questions you can ask to reveal more than a company will about itself. Sandra Charet, president of recruitment firm Charet & Associates, suggests eight such questions.

1 How long has the position been open?

2 What happened to the person who held it?

3 How long has the person that you would report to held his or her position, and what is his or her background?

4 How long is the workday?

5 Do many employees have children?

6 Can I telecommute?

7 What's the salary range for this position, and am I coming in at the high or low end?

8 What are the opportunities for advancement?

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