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TOOLS AND RESOURCES FOR FINANCIAL EXECUTIVES

You've Got a Great Employer

How do you know if you're working for the right company? Here are ten markers that all point to the same thing: a great workplace for finance managers.

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In 1914, The Ford Motor Co. made an announcement that shook the industrial world. Henry Ford, inventor of the Model T and the company's eponymous chairman, was going to start paying Ford factory workers the unheard of sum of \$5 dollars a day. That daily rate was more than double the minimum wage for the industry -- yes, double. At the same time, Ford also reduced the standard work day from nine hours to eight.

In the years that have followed, most businesses have substantially upped the ante. The majority of employers now offer workers paid vacations and health benefits. Some have even have turned to offering workers flexible hours, day care, and the option to telecommute. During the new economy boom of the late Nineties, some employers really larded on the niceties, allowing workers to wear sneakers to work, installing cappuccino bars next to foosball tables, and issuing reams of generous stock options.

Why all this largesse? Real simple: good companies start with good employees. To retain prized workers -- and to maintain an edge on competitors -- it almost always behooves employers to give valued employees incentives to keep them from jumping ship.

That's true of finance employees as well. In past years, finance department staffers were often regarded as faceless, backoffice workers. In Henry Ford's parlance, interchangeable parts. But given the rising importance of finance, many employers now seem keen to keep turnover in the finance department to a minimum.

That's smart, considering a recent survey conducted by HR consultancy Towers Perrin showed that a fair number of employees are currently looking for other work. "When the economy begins to rebound," notes Don Lowman, managing director at Towers Perrin, "companies with a high percentage of disengaged or moderately engaged employees could become revolving doors for talent."

Seemingly bad news for employers, good news for employees. But while taking on a new job can be exciting and rewarding, it also has its snares. The fact is, it's almost impossible to know exactly what you've gotten yourself into until you've worked at a company for a while. And even with large amounts of due diligence, some finance employees will sadly discover they were better off at the jobs they left behind.

That, of course, raises the obvious question: how do finance department workers -- from junior accountants up to CFOs -- know they've got it good where they are? Admittedly, identifying a great job situation can be an exercise in relativity. The fact is, human beings value tangible - and intangible -- benefits differently. And even good employers employ some bad managers. An accounts payable hand may love his boss, the treasurer, while a VP of internal control may really dislike her boss, the CFO.

Nonetheless, we asked our careers expert, assistant editor Lisa Yoon, to talk to finance managers, headhunters, and recruiters, all in an attempt to identify the tell-tale signs that you've got a great employer.

As Yoon found out, many of the signs are non-pay-related -- often intangible. As CFO Bob Briggs of San Francisco-based healthcare network Kaiser Permanente puts it, "I'm a CFO -- I'm not touchy-feely. Still, at the end of the day, there's that element of 'how does it feel?'" The following ten signs may not apply to all finance workers everywhere. But generally speaking, they're fairly solid indicators that you may be better off sticking than kicking.

1. Your opinion is valued

Despite almost two decades of expanding job scope and ever-increasing CFO pay, the top financial executive isn't always one of the key decision makers in a company. "There's an inclination sometimes, when you're at the wrong company, that you don't get included," says Bigelow Tea Co. CFO Dan Janezic, who says he's "truly in love with [his] company."

Comedy Central CFO Chris Pergola says that for confidentiality reasons, talks regarding the sale of half the company to Viacom -- which already owns the other half -- were initially limited to the network's CEO and COO. But it wasn't long before they called in Pergola. Since Pergola understood all the financial and operational details of Comedy Central's business, top brass insisted that he be involved throughout the process. Eventually, Viacom inked an agreement -- which closed May 22 -- to purchase AOL Time Warner's Comedy Central stake for \$1.2 billion. Pergola credits his bosses for "realiz[ing] the strategic value of the CFO's organization."

Most CFOs interviewed say that a [good paycheck](#) -- even in a glamour industry -- doesn't always make up for being on the outs with the in crowd. Briggs of Kaiser Permanente says that a boost in salary, although always welcome, can feel like hollow praise if it's not accompanied by action. He would rather a pay raise come with the knowledge that the CEO implements his recommendations, or embraces the changes Briggs champions.

2. Free to Be Me

If a good employer makes a CFO feel like an indispensable member of the executive team, the flip side is also true. Great employers give autonomy to those who earn it. "CFOs are often sensitive to [the issue of autonomy]," says John Fink, CFO of career-management consultancy DBM.

Fink notes that finance is different from other areas of a company because of its regulatory responsibilities. The finance chief is ultimately accountable to third-party watchdogs, who dictate deadlines and penalties. So, CFOs and other financial executives seek control over compliance, and "guard jealously the areas where they have autonomy," adds Fink.

Savvy employers also grant CFOs the freedom to lead, especially if other executives expect to reap the benefits of an effective corporate finance function. "CFOs need autonomy, for example, to restructure the finance team and recruit efficient players," says Bobbie Little, senior vice president of global leadership and learning at DBM's Center for Executive Options.

What's more, the increasing [work load](#) heaped on financial executives presents a quality of life issue, Little says. Certainly, finance departments of public companies are being asked to step up compliance efforts to meet a cadre of new rules aimed at curbing corporate corruption. To avoid putting their family and personal life at risk, CFOs may want to find employers who give them a free hand to structure tasks and time to ensure effectiveness, while averting burnout.

It's also worth noting that there are different kinds of autonomy. The best of the bunch, according to [CFO recruiter Peter Crist of Crist Associates](#), springs from a relationship of dependency: the partnership with the CEO. "The CEO and CFO know what sandbox to play in," he says, but they also know they play in the same playground, and recognize situations in which they should overlap.

Bigelow Tea's Janezic suggests that autonomy is earned. To get that respect, however, he says it doesn't hurt when the boss engages in a little micromanaging. Yes, you read that right. Micromanaging "helps when I have to probe deeply so I can answer specific questions [about financial matters]. If you can succeed when being micromanaged, you can build comfort and trust, and the micromanaging eventually loosens."

3. Executive development is SOP

After working in the retail and packaged-goods sectors for many years, CFO Bob Briggs came to the healthcare sector as an industry novice. To ease his healthcare learning curve, Kaiser Permanente used what Briggs calls an "enlightened approach." Instead of asking him to dive into the day-to-day finance responsibilities, the CEO suggested that Briggs spend the first six months at Kaiser traveling; visiting company offices around the country and attending industry events. "It was a luxury," he says, "to have the company say, 'Take your time, learn the jargon, meet the people in the industry.' They didn't just throw me in and say, 'You're on your own. Good luck.'"

Knowing that an employer invests resources into executive development is a big plus when assessing a company's corporate culture. If continuing education appeals to you, the experts say to look for companies that promote attending industry events, [work load](#), sessions with executive coaches, or functional networking groups.

As a member of Senior Executives Network, Bigelow Tea's Janezic exchanges ideas with other CFOs in the group. He attends meetings on company time, and on the company dime, a benefit he repays by sharing new perspectives with colleagues. "I tend to come away [from the networking meetings] with a tremendous number of ideas, which I share with other executives through a report."

Management's willingness to provide one-on-one development opportunities is important too, particularly when a CFO could use some coaching in a specific area, such as, as public speaking. "A lot of people take the wrong view of executive coaching," says Jeanne Lambkin of Mellon HR Services. "They think it's remedial help to address a problem." Actually, coaching is a useful support system "commensurate with the responsibilities" of a C-level job.

It can also be discreet. Lambkin explains that coaching provides a sounding board in a protected environment, "where CFOs can confidentially admit 'I don't know something.'"

4. Grace Under Fire

All businesses go through fallow periods, particularly during times of recession. It's how managers handle those rough patches that speaks volumes about the collective soul of a company.

Indeed, companies that go through tough stretches without pushing the panic button usually engender a tremendous amount of loyalty among workers. In fact, a company that emerges from tough times can be a source of pride for employees, says Melissa Cruz, who calls her job as CFO of Concord Communications "the best job I've ever had."

Concord, which makes technology-management software, went public in 1997, and has been profitable all but three quarters. (The trio of under performing quarters came in 2001, in the midst of the dot.com crash).

During the three-quarter drought, executives relied on the usual belt-tightening measures, but also doubled the company's investment in sales training. The sales staff then boned up on a new "solution selling" approach that targeted business executives, instead of IT managers. It worked; the company returned to profitability.

By taking a proactive approach to solving the problem, employees came out with a sense of accomplishment, says Cruz. "We were

collectively proud."

Furthermore, Concord management continues to set reasonable goals, commensurate with the economic climate. With \$77 million in cash and no debt, Concord is "barely growing and barely profitable," says Cruz. But she seems comfortable with that, given the slowdown in the economy.

The best collective advice executives offer about surviving the downturn: Create an environment that encourages the staff to learn something from the experience, rather than just learning how to place blame.

And make no mistake, there's no shortage of executives willing to blame everybody but themselves for poor results. If your company's top brass has managed to avoid that very-human pitfall, you should give them high marks. Remember, they're probably getting plenty of pressure to make changes -- including personnel changes.

5. The Equipment Works

If you're watching a movie with great cinematography, film buffs say you shouldn't notice the technology behind the lush shots. Rather, the cinematographer's magic should seamlessly pull you into the scene.

It's the same with the office technology -- albeit a bit less dramatic. If the technology works, you shouldn't notice it. And while access to stuff that works seems like an obvious job requirement, it's surprising how many experts ranked access to good office tools and technology as a top priority in identifying a worthwhile employer.

"A good employer supplies tools that have the sophistication and currency" to help you do your job, notes David Opton, CEO of executive-career resource Execunet. Is the ERP and financial software upgraded? Are Internet connections secure, reliable, and fast? Will that blinking fluorescent bulb in your office ever be replaced? These basics, Opton says, are things to consider when evaluating an employer.

An organization's physical condition is also a clue to both culture and financial wherewithal, suggests DBM's Little, who urges clients to assess a company's physical environment before taking a job. A lousy office space and outdated computers are two certain signs that a company 1) doesn't have much money or 2) doesn't care about its workers. Even thrifty employers provide their employees with decent working conditions.

When contemplating leaving one company for another, DMB's Little counsels ship-jumpers to "go on site [at the prospective employer] and get a gut reaction." Some questions to ask yourself as you tour: Could I imagine myself working here? Do they use state-of-the-art equipment? Do they invest in the physical plant? For example, think twice about signing-on with a trucking company with a fleet from 1970s. You should be questioning the company's commitment to growth.

6. Flexible, Very Flexible

From time to time, just all about employees find themselves dissatisfied with some aspects of their jobs. But that doesn't necessarily mean it's time to hit the road. If the angst goes beyond a few months, it may be time for a change.

That doesn't necessarily mean a job change, however. Experts point out that a good boss is usually willing to work with an employee to keep things interesting -- and rewarding.

Some companies will work with employees to alter the scope of a job (the chance to add operations responsibilities to the finance function, for instance). Others might bump up or modify existing benefits.

DBM's Little suggests doing a little scouting by networking with other CFOs to compare company perks. She talks about one client who, after some checking around, was surprised to learn he wasn't getting the leadership development training other companies routinely offered.

So, the client presented his case to the company's executive committee, and he eventually got them to include executive education and industry conferences in the budget.

That's a clear marker of an employer who cares about holding on to staff. Management should value you enough to be willing to listen and, if necessary, change, insists John Wilson, CEO of CFO search firm J.C. Wilson Associates. He points to Dell's recent decision to give cash bonuses in lieu of worthless options. "If you were the CFO at Dell, you'd be happy that management thinks enough of you to adjust the bonus structure," he says.

Not all companies have the financial wherewithal of Dell Computer, however. But poor cash-flow shouldn't stop companies from keeping executives satisfied and intellectually stimulated. "If I want to keep my CFO," for example, "and I know headhunters are calling, I'm going to get creative," asserts Wilson.

One possibility: if a CFO seems bored after a few years at the same grind, the CEO may suggest a move to operations. The finance chief will likely appreciate the offer to expand his resume, says Wilson. "The funny thing is, you don't have to part with money to satisfy employees -- at least, not initially."

7. Open Door Policy

There are some finance chiefs who politely fend off recruiters like John Wilson, saying, "I wouldn't want to be disloyal to my CEO."

It's a response that invariably impresses the usually unflappable Wilson. Indeed, a [good relationship with the boss](#) is key to a great workplace, especially for CFOs. In fact, [CFO recruiter Peter Crist](#) believes the role of the COO is fading, making the CEO-CFO relationship "the critical combo."

"The best [CEO-CFO] relationships work like a doubles team in tennis," says Wilson, referring to the familiarity that allows long-standing doubles partners to anticipate each other's movements. "The CEO confides [in the CFO], doesn't micromanage, and is comfortable giving responsibility."

DBM's Fink says the relationship he has with his CEO works, in part, because his boss, Tom Silveri, once had Fink's job. "He understands what I'm going through; and I can't pull the wool over his eyes, which is good," Fink quips. "He just understands the ups and downs of the job."

Of course, not everyone wants a boss who's been there, done that. Still, many CFOs and career experts agree that a great CEO-CFO relationship starts with a clear understanding of the responsibilities and challenges of each role.

For instance, is the CEO grooming a successor, or does the chief executive want a business partner and top counsel? [Crist recalls](#) a search in which the CEO specified that he wanted a CFO who had no hopes of becoming a CEO. "No problem," says [Crist](#). "As long as everyone's clear about it."

[Crist](#) says there's one more thing good employers are usually clear about: "A smart CEO knows he needs a CFO who's smarter."

And oh yes: take the open door policy literally. If your boss constantly keeps the corner office door shut, that's a clear message he or she has little interest in input from you or other subordinates. In fact, lots of closed doors at a company is generally a sign of a guarded, secretive corporate culture -- one that's probably rife with political maneuvering. Beware.

8. Managers play well with others

Comedy Central's Pergola points to a former employer's office party to illustrate a cultural mismatch among colleagues.

An hour after arriving at the party, Pergola removed his suit jacket. But he was quickly asked to put it back on. The lesson: Don't underestimate the positive power of a good cultural fit, or the negative pressure of a bad one.

Pergola says for him, Comedy Central is a much better fit. As a member of the network's softball team, Pergola can blow off steam and bond with a wide range of colleagues, including teammate and "Daily Show" host Jon Stewart. He touts an atmosphere that allows him to attend "extremely important meetings" in softball garb, where fellow executives value his financial acumen more than his wardrobe.

Other companies approach executive team building in different ways. Bigelow's CFO Janezic talks about the off-site management retreat run by organizational-behavior professionals, a program the tea company started in 2001. The coaches develop behavioral profiles of each executive, and then teach the managers how to properly blend their traits and talents in the corporate setting.

Touchy feely? Maybe so. But one of the exercises led Bigelow's head of sales and marketing to choose Janezic as a partner for an international sourcing project involving a new product line. As it turns out, the CFO's input was invaluable to a marketing project that was weighed down by complex financial issues.

9. The golden rule: board independence

Lately, job satisfaction for public company CFOs seems to rise and fall with board relationships, particularly the complex, often contentious, dealings with audit committees.

At well-run companies, the CEO, CFO, audit committee chair, and chair of the board, all agree on [the independence and interdependence](#) of the players. "It's important that everyone's role is clear," asserts DBM CFO Fink.

It's no longer acceptable, for example, for passive board members with little financial expertise to wait for the "CFO [to tell] them what they needed to know," declares Fink. He is quick to point out, however, that the relationship between CFOs and board members should not degrade into an executive blame game.

A good employer doesn't foster "an adversarial relationship," notes Fink, "where the board and audit committee are cross-examining the CFO."

Before accepting a position at a new company, a financial executive also should examine the board's track record. Why? To see if it mirrors your management style and ethics, says DMB's Little. Pay special attention to things such as board activity, proxy battles, how the group handles transparency and disclosure rules, views on innovation, and reinvestment of profits.

A board that chooses to pay dividends instead of reinvesting profits, for instance, is likely looking to keeping shareholders happy rather than maximizing revenue growth. Is that the conservative type of management strategy that you advocate, Fink asks, or will you be at odds with that decision? Another litmus test: does a board tend to follow technology fads, or does it do the requisite homework to make informed investments? Does it invest in its employees?

There are no right or wrong answers to the questions, Little says. Rather, it's an exercise to help executives figure out whether corporate practices align with personal career goals. The same tests can be applied to current employers as well.

10. No regrets when departing

Leaving a company doesn't turn a good employer into a bad one, notes Kaiser's Briggs. The fact is, you know you've got a good employer when you're offered a great job at another company-- and it's still difficult to push the button.

But executives at well-run businesses care not only about their employees, but their employees' careers. And they're usually willing to help the professional chops of a top worker -- despite the risk that a rising star may jump to the top spot at another company.

"Some people think the definition of a great employer is [workers] staying there 20 years, but that's not necessarily true," argues Briggs. For any number of professional and personal reasons, it may "simply be time to move on." Briggs says leaving a company with an enhanced collection of skills -- and with a sense of accomplishment and growth -- is an absolute sign "that you had a great employer."

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