

Fun, Games and the Youth Culture in UK's 'Best' Companies

Every March we are presented with 'The Sunday Times Best Companies to Work For' list. Companies who achieve a position in the prestigious best companies list use it as a branding exercise to firmly position themselves as good organization citizens via their best practice approach to people management and as 'employers of choice' in a competitive labour market. But much more than that, they appear to offer the magical formula of making work fun. Play hard, work hard is the mantra of a broad range of companies in the 'best' list and employees of these companies repeatedly cite skiing trips, weekends in Spain, boozy barbecues and extravagant award ceremonies as indicators of their caring approach to employees. Best Companies are clearly fun places to be but is this inclusive 'party' culture also an exclusive club for the under 35s?

Closer examination of data derived from the Sunday Times Best Companies to Work For 2005 (100 top large companies)* reveals that the workforce of the 'best' companies are predominantly made up of young people under 35. On average 56% of employees working for 'best companies' are under 35 years old, and only 6% over 55 years old compared to only 36% of the general working population being under 35 and 15% over 55 (according to Labour Force Survey data, dec04-feb05). Age diversity is certainly not a feature of the top 100.

However, why should this be a matter of concern? People working for 'best' companies are clearly very happy with their lot. Employees from a broad range of sectors, financial service, hospitality, professional services and sales, all report work as 'fun', 'exciting', 'a buzz'; 'rewarding', 'one long party' – a seemingly endless endorsement of work as fun in a 'best' company. And this is the case even when long hour cultures appear to be the norm amongst the best 100 companies. The Sunday Times itself highlights in its commentary on the companies included in the list that there has been a rise in the number of companies where people work between 40-50 hours a week from 32.7% in 2004 to 37.9% in 2005. Yet in the reported top 10 companies for worklife balance, between 74 % and 80 % of employees report they are happy with the hours they work. This could be because there is no distinction between work and life – boundaries are continually blurred as weekends and evenings are spent together in organised 'fun' activities. Work colleagues are also play mates and the company spans work and social life.

So it is fun, fun, fun working for a 'best' company. However, fun is a serious business. There are clear links between performance and fun. Fun at work makes people feel committed and energised and the resulting performance is celebrated with award ceremonies highlighting the high achievers. Attendance at these events is often compulsory and in some companies written into the job description. In other companies it is more a matter of 'this is the way we do things around here'. Either way, fun cultures are very much about working and playing hard. High pressure work environments (where rewards are performance related) integrated with late nights, weekends away from home along with the apparent consumption of large amounts of alcohol.

Who can possibly keep up? From an investigation into the age demographics of the ‘Best’ companies, obviously only the under 35s. Little wonder these cultures are rarely diluted – research carried out by ‘working families’ reports that people who are unhappy with long hour cultures at work do not stay around to attempt to change the culture; they leave. In addition, the mantra ‘we recruit attitude’ is now well rehearsed as companies spend a huge amount of resources to seek employees not only with the right job skills but with the attributes that mean they will ‘fit in’. And, once again, we hear management gurus actively advising companies to ‘recruit for attitude, induct for culture’. Whilst acknowledging this may put diversity at risk they go on to say that it is more important that the company employs and retains people who fit in and can be comfortable with the values of the prevailing culture.

It could be optimistically envisaged that the recently introduced legislation on ageism at work will ensure doors remain open to older workers. However, the realistic scenario is that it will be difficult for legislation to reach into the heart of a deeply ingrained culture of play and fun at work. How can not having the time or energy to commit to a 24 hour party culture be defined in legislation? In effect, if you are over 35 the chances are you have other commitments (family, for instance) so you don’t apply for a job in a ‘best company’ as the job description is carefully worded in such a way you just know it is not for you and if by any chance you do apply and slip through the net you are either the rarity who does survive (or make it into senior professional and managerial groups) or leave as you don’t ‘fit in’. Subtle mechanisms of exclusivity are at work in a fun culture.

Top 100 companies are defined by their approach to key areas of best practice people management and are described by the Department of Trade and Industry (DTI) as a ‘key benchmark’ for other companies to follow. Though it might be argued such carefully managed ‘fun’ cultures have sinister connotations of ‘big brother’ type controls on workers and the expectations of associated levels of long hours and emotional commitment from workers is unjustified, clearly many ‘Best’ companies are good places to work in many cases offering above average pay, opportunities and/ or benefits. But if these companies are indeed the ‘best’ and if they are to be seen as beacons of best practice on the UK corporate landscape then surely they should be more closely investigated as to how this links to what might be the ‘best’ for a diverse workforce.? At the moment and this is without a closer interrogation of issues such as gender, race and disability, to be an employee of a ‘best’ company is to be part of an exclusive youth club. Given the constant references to the aging workforce, a demographic time bomb and growing structural inequalities the UK government should be pointing out that the ‘best’ companies are missing out on some of the ‘best’ the UK labour market has to offer.

- Data utilised with the kind permission of Best Companies Ltd.

Sharon C. Bolton
Professor of Organisational Analysis
Strathclyde University Business School
sharon.bolton@gsb.strath.ac.uk

Key Reading

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