

Your reputation is priceless: Protect it

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These days a lot of people go around saying, "I'll take a job with anyone or any company, I don't care who they are." My advice: Not so fast.

Especially these days, you want to know not just about the job and responsibilities, but what kind of company you'd be working for and about its philosophy and ethics. Working for the wrong person or firm could not only leave you out of work, but branded.

This isn't easy to root out. But there are questions you can be asking and there is information to unearth to help you decipher just what kind of place you might be getting yourself into.

First, look for the obvious. Does the company you're considering post a code of conduct on its Web site and other conspicuous places? Just because something is in writing doesn't make it so. But when a company goes to the trouble to create and post such a code, it's a good start.

What's a code of conduct? A set of values that guides how a company operates that doesn't ensure good behavior, but certainly encourages it. "Building an enterprise-wide ethical culture reduces misconduct by as much as 75 percent," says Dr. Patricia J. Harned, president of the Ethics Resource Center in Arlington, Va.

If a company has a decent ethics and compliance program which is well implemented, it nearly doubles employee reporting of misconduct, she says. Less misconduct takes place and when it does, management is more likely to know about it.

When you're in an interview try to get a general sense of a company's ethical culture, how things get done and who gets rewarded. How does a company motivate people through pay? How do people get ahead? Is it by any means necessary? Or is it when someone is successful while upholding a high standard of integrity?

When you're in an interview, notice how the interviewer refers to such ethics standards, says Harned. Is emphasis placed on these being taken seriously by employees? Specifically, she suggests asking:

Is there an ethics office or program?

Are employees trained on the ethics and compliance regulations that relate to their job?