

Should I Stay or Should I Go?



This is the question many millennials and Gen Zers are asking themselves regularly when considering their future careers. In a marketplace of full employment, opportunities abound, why wouldn't they.

A good place to work.

In May 2000, my Erasmus college placement in Portugal was coming to an end, determined to keep the hedonism of sunshine and freedom alive a little longer, my Derry friend Karen and I hopped on a bus in central Portugal to the Algarve. As we whisked past fields of fading hues of spring bloom, Alanis Morrisett lamenting irony on my CD player, I was hopeful that a summer job in Albufeira's thriving tourism industry was our ticket to continued adventure.

There, by the end of a 10-minute chat with the English owners of a Scottish bar, we were told we got the waitressing jobs because we were Irish and the odds of being good workers were in our favour. They were right, we worked hard for the next 3 months.

Although I was relatively new to the working world, from the very first day, the pros and cons of our newfound workplace were strikingly obvious. Each observation was closely tied to a feeling, and that feeling was either positive or negative. Irrespective of it being our first job or last when we enter our new workplaces for the first time it is a highly visceral experience, the emotional reactions happen automatically, consciously, and subconsciously and immediately some aspects fostered positive emotions, some things negative.

The uniform for all female staff was a short kilt, for the men it wasn't. Not a great feeling. From the first encounter, husband and wife owners were warm and caring, as we worked there all staff said the same thing, a good feeling. One bar manager frequently berated the summer staff for making mistakes, a terrible feeling. We got a free meal during every shift, a great feeling. I could easily and accurately assess our new organisation's culture after the first three days.

As a bright eyed, fun-loving 20-year-old I could assess this as well as an acclaimed organisational psychologist, because those factors of our workplace are intrinsically tied to a feeling and a feeling isn't wrong. As Maya Angelou's most famous quote says, *'people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel.'* People respond emotionally to their work environment even in the most right-brain dominated workplaces.

What's important is changing as our workforce demographic changes too. According to a 2018 Deloitte study, 77 % of adults now consider the company culture before applying for a job. By 2025, our workforces will comprise of 75% Millennials, for whom company values and culture are a key consideration. Ask someone employed in the 1970's and they'll most likely tell you job security was then the holy grail. Not so much now, as our economy boosts full employment and cries of skill shortages reverberate from shiny new dockland buildings.

Since the turn of the millennium, as I served English breakfasts and irn-bru to the British masses in 30 degrees heat, and many workplaces later, I've come to understand that there are a few key factors, that either make our workplace a place in which we want to stay and give our best, or don't.

People

To work in a place where people are simply pleasant and respectful is not to be underestimated. Being part of a team where people are not trying to get one up on each other to impress the boss but instead a place where people generously share the applause of their achievements is a nice place to be. It's tempting to say, we want to be part of a workforce where we have lots in common with each other, but that's not necessarily an essential factor.

Diversity

In fact, the research tells us that the opposite is more advantageous. More diverse teams foster a climate of innovation and creativity, and we broaden each other's perspectives when we have greater differences.

We don't need to agree with each other all the time, we're more authentic if we don't. Nor do we need to be best friends, it's okay if we are, once it's not a friendship based on what Brené Brown calls 'common enemy intimacy.' Which is when the only thing we have in common is that we reject the same people. While the thrill of that connection can be potent, according to neuroscientist, the brain's neural pathways light up in a similar way when we bitch as when we take cocaine. While it's a pleasant and bonding experience, suffice it to say, it's not a real connection, it usually doesn't last, and it doesn't create a nice working environment.

Trust

It's important that we can trust our colleagues and know that they value our contribution and effort. If we can authentically express ourselves and feel supported and included by our teams, not only does our ability to innovate increase by 83% we also know we're in a safe place.

To create this environment as employers we may need to refine your recruitment processes. It's worth putting the time and effort in to choosing the right people, while bringing awareness to our subconscious biases, (we all have them). It's equally important to create a robust probation process and performance management structures, where values and goals are equally rewarded.

Environment

The Physical

First let's look at the basics. Few would choose to work in a cramped, underground, dingy space under rows of fluorescent lights. While it's not feasible for all of us to dwell in the lofty glass towers that are popping up like spring flowers across our cityscapes, there are fundamental aspects of our workspaces that will positively impact our work experiences. Creating a space that is clean, uncluttered and well maintained will set the right tone. A decent coffee machine and a place where we have the space and equipment (in good working order) to do our work, will set us up for higher levels of productivity and wellbeing. As much natural light as possible will go along too, although this aspect can sometimes be out of our control, several studies have proven the positive effects of natural light in our workspaces, if there's an opportunity to introduce some more, it will be worth the investment.

The Invisible

Yet it's the nontangible aspects of the environment, that really packs the beneficial punch and essentially make up the company's culture. Which, very simply put, is 'how we do things around here'

And if the ways we do things is:

- Pay the going rate and introduce benefits that people value.
- Have strong, open channels of communication.
- Offer flexibility and a degree of autonomy, in the ways we work.
- Promote staff wellbeing, incentivise a workforce to get or stay fit and healthy and
- Promote a healthy work life balance from the tops down.

Then we're creating a culture that will attract, retain, and motivate the best people.

Surprisingly, our work cultures are not greatly influenced by the nature of the work itself. I've worked for nursing homes, essentially where people go to die and a law firm that specialised in repossessing houses for the banks. They were the among the best workplaces I've been in, because despite the nature of the work, there was a positive atmosphere. That was created in simple ways, like people saying thanks, feeling as though I was listened to, training and upskilling were encouraged, and people weren't afraid to express their sense of humour.

Leaders

Care

Leaders set the tone for their organisation and at a rudimentary level, those leaders should be visible and accessible. This shows they care about the business and the people, while allowing them to keep

their finger on the pulse. Global leadership development firm DDI ranked empathy as the number one leadership skill. Consider this statement:

'My manager cares about me a person'

Now consider on a scale of 1 to 10, to what extent you agree with that statement (10 being they care deeply). If that number is less than 5, the negative impact is significant. It's a simplistic but telling indicator. They are either the type of manager who asks how your mom's treatment is going and listens to the answer or they're not, that feeling of being cared about tends to be important to all people.

Growth Mindset

Dr Carol Dweck, coined the phrase the *growth mindset* after decades of research on achievement and success. In her million copy best seller she explains why it's not our ability and talent that bring us success but having a mindset that believes that a person's abilities aren't innate but can be improved through effort, learning and persistence. If as leaders we truly believe this, we're always looking for ways to improve and can learn and grow quicker after a setback. Fostering this positive forward-thinking mindset means you also believe the skills and talents of your people will grow and develop with effort and feedback and people working with you will know that.

EQ

The correlation between higher levels of emotional intelligence and effectiveness as a leader is astounding, research by EQ provider Talent Smart and other studies have shown that emotional intelligence is the strongest predictor of performance. Emotional intelligence referred to as EQ is broken down to 4 principal factors:

- Self-Awareness
- Self-Regulation
- Social Awareness
- Social Regulation
- All underpinned by your intrinsic level of motivation.

A plan and commitment to increasing these 4 competencies will yield higher level of work performance and allow you to get more from your people. But not just work, the benefits of a higher EQ are evident in work relationships and personal relationships.

Problems

Now and through the eons of time when we humans gather in any form, tribe, family, sports team or political party, there is one thing we can guarantee, there will be problems. While workforce conflict is inevitable, if unmanaged the impact can be devastating. Research tells us that every unaddressed conflict can waste about 8 hours of company time in gossip and other unproductive activities, putting a drain on resources and morale. As leaders, we always have the choice, to swiftly sweep an issue under our proverbial carpet or openly examine it and invite solutions.

Not Ignored - Proactively Tackled

In HR speak we ask if a company has a grievance policy in place, and most organisations will, officially, because it's the law. In fact, in Ireland, it's one of the very few policies that all employers by law must have. Having these documents in a folder on the company drive somewhere, doesn't mean that you really have a workplace where people know they have the right and encouragement to raise an issue, or ask an uncomfortable question when they feel it is necessary. There's a big difference between

having a policy and creating a culture where people are open to calling it out if they see a disparity or inequality, be that a concern over benefits or a conflict among colleagues. Which, by the way, tend to be the most impactful and entrenching issues that are raised. If it involves money or behavioural issues, tackling them head-on and quickly is essential if you want to minimise negative fallout.

As an employee even if we don't get the exact outcome we hoped for when raising a grievance, but through the process feel, believed, listened to and that there was a genuine effort made to work towards addressing your problem, a level of satisfaction and trust can exist.

Working with Polarities

There is a differentiating skill when it comes to problem solving and it's rare. That is having the ability to understand and work with polarities effectively e.g., growth v's consolidation, short term v's long term, tender v's ridged, good v's evil.

As leaders we're told we must be great problem solvers, but when faced with a difficult problem, identifying the question from the polarities at play and address them with a both/and mindset as opposed to either/or will open a more creative process. When it comes to addressing a typical issue the CEO's remit of consideration will be much broader than any other person in the organisation. They must factor the satisfaction of shareholders, the board of directors, customers, clients, employees, and other stakeholder into their solution, and that often means polarised standpoints, wage cuts v' increasing profits. If we continually ignore one over the other, in the long run we end up in a bad situation.

If you have the ability of not getting caught in the either/or mindset when approaching business problems but instead get comfortable with the inevitable ambiguity, your personal and professional effectiveness will be maximised.

Barack Obama, known for his ability to hold two diametrically opposing ideas has summed it up when he said,

"Just because something doesn't have a perfect answer doesn't mean it doesn't have a better answer."

Way Forward

In August 2000, I was sad to leave the Kilt n Kelt, but the time came to put a halt to the summer shenanigans to return to Ireland to complete the last year of my degree. Like every workplace the Kilt n Kelt wasn't perfect, but it had one important advantage that tipped the scales in its favour. It had decent and empathetic people at the helm. They showed us this by the way in which they dealt with staff member's going through tough life challenges, how they delicately tackled the overzealous bar manager. I've come to understand many things about workplaces after more than 20 years in HR, and I know that the English couple, who ran a Scottish bar in the Algarve, possessed the wisdom referred to by the late Maya Angelou, because more than 23 years later, while I don't even remember their names, I clearly remember how they made me feel. That wisdom simply was the basis of a good place to work.

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