

Best Places to Work

By

Russ Bredholt, Jr.

“Culture’s what it’s all about.”

--J. W. “Bill” Marriott, Board Chair, Marriott International

Thirty years ago, in anticipation of working on a Marriott engagement, I went to Miami, Florida to observe the grand opening of the Marriott Biscayne Bay Hotel. I remember asking my waiter at breakfast if by any chance then CEO Bill Marriott would be here for the occasion. Pointing toward the serving area, he replied, “There’s Mr. Marriott in the kitchen.”

So it is that Marriott International, with a penchant for detail in its DNA, and now led by CEO Arne Sorenson, shows up as one of 12 companies which have appeared on all 18 of Fortune Magazine’s “100 Best Companies to Work For” lists, currently ranked at No. 53.

What the report has to say

If you’re looking for ways to become a better workplace the 15 March 2015 issue of Fortune is worth buying and studying. The “Best Companies” list is a result of research conducted by Great Place to Work using a “Trust Index” survey which is distributed to a sample of employees at each company. Workers vote their companies onto the Fortune list using criteria related to the quality of their workplace cultures.

Here are three trends from the “100 Best” report:

- The best workplaces are getting better. With the same basic methodology nearly two decades of comparisons can be made. In 1998 the average amount of training for managers and professionals was 41 hours. Hourly and administrative staffers received 33 hours. This year the numbers were 78 and 94 hours respectively, nearly 80% higher
- The best employers are better because more business leaders are focused on workplace culture as a competitive tool. Most firms on the list are winners in the marketplace as well as the workplace. Google explicitly attributes financial performance to benevolent people practices.
- Each of the “Best Companies” has leaders who genuinely listen to their employees and craft distinctive policies and programs that suit today’s workforce. Perks are only the tip of the iceberg in workplace cultures. As Scott Scherr, founder and CEO of Ultimate Software observed: “The true measure of a company is how they treat their lowest-paid employees.”_

So who's No.1?

At the top of the list is Google, Mountain View, CA, with 44,862 employees and 2,500 job openings. Perks include: Free food; up to 12 weeks of full paid baby-bonding time.

Rounding out the top five:

2. Boston Consulting Group, Boston, MA, with 2,701 employees and 1,000 job openings. Perks include: Social-impact leave of absence for up to three months.
3. Acuity, Sheboygan, WI, with 1,039 employees and 150 job openings. Perks include: No limit on tuition reimbursement; no cap on paid sick days for full-time employees.
4. SAS Institute, Cary, NC, with 6,647 employees and 350 job openings. Perks include: On-site childcare; fitness centers; pharmacy; and subsidized meals.
5. Robert W. Baird, Milwaukee, WI, with 2,822 employees and 98 job openings. Perks include "the Rule": No jerks allowed.

A complete list of all 100 company profiles and job information can be found on fortune.com/bestcompanies.

What else do we learn?

That the healthcare industry is dominating the market for female talent by offering flexible work options and promoting many into leadership roles.

The top five companies for women:

1. Meridian Health
2. Children's Healthcare of Atlanta
3. Perkins Coie Law
4. Alston & Bird Law
5. Novo Nordisk Pharma

Other important takeaways

The tendency when reading these kinds of stories is to look at the perks. As good as they are perks alone don't seem to get companies on the "100 Best" list. What else to look for?

- That the essence of a great workplace is just that: an essence, an indispensable quality that determines its character. And to build a corporate organization around it. That process and practice is hard to copy since it is unique to each organization.

- Those that show up high in the surveys focus on personal relationships, not transactions. “The key to creating a great workplace was not a prescriptive set of employee benefits, programs, and practices, but the building of high-quality relationships in the workplace.”
- Companies gain a competitive advantage by attracting and keeping the most valuable workers.
- Knowledge is becoming a commodity. What differentiates today are those who excel at team building, collaboration, and cultural sensitivity. (Oxford Economics)
- The goal for leadership is not always having the best ideas but harvesting them from others.
- It's not wealth or prestige that motivates people; it's respect and help from peers.

How important is culture?

A company's culture ("the way people behave from moment to moment without being told") is even more important than its leadership according to a Deloitte survey of 3,300 executives. I would add that it's more valuable than corporate strategy.

“Culture” was Merriam-Webster's 2014 word of the year.

Unfortunately, the report indicates that most employers have no clue where to begin when it comes to creating the culture they need. There are some hints at what might be helpful:

Mission. Pursuing a bigger purpose and making sure everyone knows what that purpose is.

Colleagues. The best people want to go where the best people are.

Trust. Show people that you consider them trustworthy and they'll generally prove you right.

Caring. Don't say it. Show it.

So what was Bill Marriott really doing in the kitchen?

Continuing a long-held corporate tradition, established by his father, the late J. W. Marriott, Sr., when he opened the Hot Shoppes (A & W Root Beer) in Washington, D. C., in 1927. On that grand opening morning in downtown Miami Bill Marriott was caring for his employees, who now number just over 100,000 worldwide, making sure they had everything needed to do their jobs.

Leadership by example has proven essential to Marriott's long-term success. That includes paying attention to the right details, especially when your name is on the door.

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