Forbes
Jacquelyn Smith, Forbes Staff

11/05/2012 @ 3:00PM |

What to Notice Around the Office When You Go For a Job Interview

You just arrived for a job interview. As you wait in the reception area your mind is racing. But instead of running through your rehearsed responses to possible questions*again*, use that time to survey the workplace. In fact, you should be keenly observant from the time you arrive until you say your goodbyes.

Why? Paying close attention to the workplace and people will allow you to get a better sense of the company culture, and in turn, can help you determine whether it's a good fit for you. Interviewers can tell you what they want about the environment and personnel—but your own first-hand observations will be far more useful.

 "The interview process is a two-way street," says Amy Hoover, president of Talent Zoo, a site for marketing, advertising, and digital professionals. "Not only are you being evaluated, but you should be evaluating the company and its people. It's absolutely your duty as an interviewee to observe the culture of the company and its employees. If you're not offered a tour, be sure to request one so you can get a sense of the environment and its vibe. If possible, you should also request to meet some potential co-workers. It's as much your responsibility as the candidate to determine if you're a good fit for the company as it is your interviewer's, so don't be shy."

Dr. Katharine Brooks, director of Liberal Arts Career Services at The University of Texas at Austin and author of *You Majored in What? Mapping Your Path from Chaos to Career*, agrees. She says it's hard to relax and remember to observe when you're stressed about an interview, "but make a plan to stop for a minute and assess the office or setting," she says. "Just take thirty seconds to look around and see how formal the setting is. Do people have personal items on their desks? Is there informal and casual conversation in the hallways? Is the feeling relaxed or tense? Does everyone seem like they are on an urgent mission? These are easily made observations despite personal nervousness."

So, while you'll still want to use the interview as your chance to make a great impression and ask important questions, you should also think of it as an opportunity to evaluate the role, the prevailing culture, the company's leadership, the growth path, and the boss, says Meredith Haberfeld, an executive coach and co-founder of the Institute for Coaching.

Here are 11 things to look out for while you're on a job interview:
How do employees interact with each other? "In interactions, do the employees seem friendly and supportive of each other, or disrespectful?" says career coach Phyllis

Mufson. "Do they take the time to greet the receptionist, and if so, does she respond with a smile?"

"This is a critical observation," adds Michael Kerr, an international business speaker, author and president of Humor at Work. He says when he toured Zappos he stood in the lobby and was amazed by the level of energy and the way co-workers greeted each other in the morning. "You knew within minutes this was a workplace that had energy, a place where people actually wanted to be on a Monday morning, and a big part of that was just watching the genuine and outgoing ways people interacted with each other."

Are the people happy and welcoming? This isn't something you can figure out in your pre-interview research. When you arrive, take note of whether or not the receptionist or security guard is friendly. This will be the first person to greet you each morning—so his or her attitude may be more important than you'd think. Once you enter the office, figure out if the employees look happy. Do they smile at you or acknowledge your presence? This can tell you a lot about the overall environment

How do employees answer the phone? Do they sound human and engaged, or does it sound like they are on autopilot reading from a script? How people answer the phone, especially in a larger organization, can reflect a few characteristics of their brand, Kerr says. It can tell you if it's a fun place, if they are truly customer-focused, and if people are allowed to let their own personality shine through. "If they sound as though they are reading from a script, this could be a sign that the culture is very controlling," he adds. "I think you can also get a sense as to how engaged and happy employees are just by how they answer the phone, or even by the nature of the voice mail greeting. Is it warm, human, friendly and fun? Or overly somber, serious, and devoid of any personality?"

What does their body language say? Body language speaks volumes about the energy level in a workplace, and can often be more revealing than what people actually say, Kerr says. Are people walking with a sense of purpose? Do they look comfortable in this environment? Do they get nervous when the boss walks by? Look out for body language cues while you're in the office.

Is it a fast-paced work environment? This usually depends on the industry or department, but some companies tend to run their businesses at a faster pace than others. If employees are literally running around the office and phones are ringing non-stop, that's a sign that things move quickly. Do you prefer this type of environment? Do you perform well under pressure? Determine whether you'd be able to keep up and thrive in this type of environment.

Is it an organized place? Does the interview start on time? "There could be legitimate reasons for lateness, but if your potential boss is late and doesn't apologize, this is a red flag," Mufson says.

You'll also be able to determine whether this is an organized place by the way the interview is conducted. Is your interviewer prepared and focused on you? Or is he or she distracted with calls and hand-held devices? "Even in a busy workplace where constant calls and message checking is normal, your interviewer should have arranged uninterrupted time for the interview. Failure to do so is a bad sign," she says.

What is the physical office environment like? This can give you a lot of clues as to the culture of the workplace, Kerr says. Are people allowed to personalize their office or cubicle space? Does the environment look sterile and devoid of personality? "If you get a chance, try and check out a few of the beaten path rooms such as a meeting room, lunchroom and even the washroom," he suggests. "These communal spaces can often speak volumes about a work environment. Often meeting rooms or lunch rooms are places where organizations let their personalities shine through a little more." Is the meeting room look like a place designed to encourage conversation and innovation, or does it look sterile? Are there fun posters in the lunch room and announcements about outside activities, or is there an angry scolding note chastising someone for not cleaning their dishes?

"Notice the décor," Mufson adds. "A plush reception area and bosses office coupled with dingy and drab offices for employees could indicate an emphasis on impressing visitors at the expense of caring for employees."

How do employees dress? "Maybe you like a formal setting where people wear suits, or maybe you prefer a casual setting with less formal dress," Brooks says. Observe what everyone is wearing, and determine whether you'd be comfortable in that attire every day.
What is the physical layout of the office? "This can also be critical for a lot of people, so take the time to check out whether there's an open door policy, or an open office concept," Kerr says. "Again, some people hate open offices, others love them, so it's about what is right for you." Maybe the office is a cube farm. How do you perform in that type of setting? These are things to take note of when you go in for your interview.
How do managers interact with employees? Although it can be hard to determine sometimes, if you have the opportunity, try to get a sense of how supervisors and managers interact with employees. This can be very telling as to the kind of environment, Kerr says. "It can send subtle clues as to how hierarchical the work environment is or how oppressive it may feel."
Is everyone busy? Don't draw conclusions based on how busy one or two individuals look. Instead, take note of the overall picture. In general, do the employees seem to have a lot of down time? Or are they engaged in work? Do they look *too* busy, with stacks of papers piled on their desks? If it appears that nobody is working, that may be an indication that business is slow. If everyone looks exhausted and overworked, this could mean the company is understaffed.