

Corporate Cultures

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sic fortress—and at a small Atlanta public relations firm—an archetypal baseball team. She now has a temporary job at IBM Corp.—Sonnenfeld's premier example of the academy culture. Her analysis?

"I've realized that it's important for me to be a part of a team with everyone working toward the same goal," she says. Her stint at the PR agency steered her away from the baseball-team world. "My first preference is doing something I enjoy. Second is the actual work environment, the team and the people I would be working with. Third is stability and good benefits. Fourth is money."

Know Your Company

When you're a starving student, it's all too tempting to jump at your first decent job offer—without ever finding out what it's like to work for that company.

To compound the problem, many on-campus interviewers aren't equipped to provide much meaningful information about the work environment, company values, co-workers, bosses, etc. "I don't think one in 50 interviewers can give meaningful answers to those kinds of questions, even if the students know to ask them," says Fredericksen at Cal Poly.

So how do you get that info?

First, insist (if possible) on an in-house interview before accepting any job. While

there, pay close attention to the environment, meet and talk to as many of your future co-workers as possible and get a good feel for whether your personality and desires are compatible.

Internships, summer jobs and part-time jobs during college also give you an excellent chance to carefully observe yourself in a business setting. Sonnenfeld advises sampling as many different cultures as possible while you're still safely in college. A poor internship might make you miserable for a few months, but that's better than suffering through an early career misstep.

Paddy Spence's goals—to earn an M.B.A. and join a top management consulting firm—point toward the baseball team environment. Yet, while at Harvard, he worked nights sorting packages at United Parcel Service—the quintessential "club" of Sonnenfeld's research. He says he truly enjoyed UPS, and could see himself thriving in a career there as well.

"Maybe I wouldn't mind starting at the bottom and delivering packages, knowing that if

I'm patient and can stick it out, there's a pot of gold ahead," he says. "Based on what I saw at UPS, I think I can do really well in a club."

Suzanne Horn at Northwestern agrees that internships are "a real plus," but adds: "It's also important, particularly for undergraduates, to spend a lot of time talking to the

placement offices about various companies.

Networking with other students, friends or relatives also is critical." Horn and others recommend talking to alumni from your school who work at companies in which you're interested, particular recent graduates who have already experienced that difficult first year on the job.

How important is it to know yourself and

know your company? Gary Fredericksen sums it up this way: "When you get past the salary and whether it's a glamorous company, it boils down to one thing. Are you going to be happy where you are? How important is happiness?"

Mr. Thompson, a former Associated Press correspondent, is an Atlanta-based freelance writer.

It's all too tempting to jump at your first decent job offer...

Baseball Team, Club, Academy, Fortress

These four labels describe the most prevalent corporate cultures in today's business world, according to Jeffrey Sonnenfeld at Emory University. Each culture has distinctive characteristics and generally appears to attract certain personalities, he says. The following are thumbnail descriptions of each culture:

BASEBALL TEAM: Baseball team companies are entrepreneurially oriented havens for risk takers and innovators. They offer big dollars and great freedom to their star performers, who are rewarded for what they produce. But the risks can be high and stability and long term security are virtually non-existent.

Job hopping is commonplace. Top performers see themselves as free agents, much like professional athletes. If one company doesn't give them the freedom or rewards they think they deserve, they'll leave for a company that does—or form their own company.

Baseball team companies include advertising agencies, many investment banks, law firms, consulting firms, broadcasting and entertainment firms, software developers and bio-research concerns.

CLUB: Seniority is the key at clubs. Age and experience count. Not surprisingly, these companies tend to be stable, secure and considered reliable by their customers.

Clubs place a high value on "fitting in," on loyalty, on commitment, on general skills and on doing things for the good of the group. Quick upward mobility and notoriety are hard to come by, it's not uncommon for an employee of a club company to start as a teenager or right out of college and spend 35 to 40 years with one firm. The company starts people at the bottom, then grooms managers as generalists. Managers learn a number of jobs as they criss-cross their way up the corporate ladder.

At United Parcel Service, for example, the chief executive and his management committee began their careers as clerks, drivers and management trainees. Other clubs include Delta Airlines, the Bell operating companies and other utilities, government agencies, most regional commercial banks and the military.

ACADEMY: An academy is the place for steady climbers who want to thoroughly master each new job they hold.

Academies, such as IBM Corp., hire new recruits early and then train them to be experts in a particular function. At IBM, for instance, someone hired to be a marketing representative would rarely become a software engineer (or vice versa).

The strengths of the academies are continuity of service, institutional wisdom and functional expertise. Employees can become insulated from other areas by functional barriers, however. Risk takers and those motivated entirely by money may feel stifled at an academy, but there is some room for fast-trackers. Company examples also include Coca Cola, the large auto firms, pharmaceutical companies, office product and electronics companies and many consumer product firms, such as Procter & Gamble.

FORTRESS: Fortresses are preoccupied with survival. Many are academies, clubs or baseball teams seeking to reverse sagging fortunes. Others, such as retailing and oil companies, suffer never-ending cycles of boom and bust.

Fortresses offer little promise of job security and can't reward people simply on performance. A restructuring or downsizing seems always to be looming, possibly throwing even the best managers out of their jobs. This may be exciting for those who like the challenge of a turnaround. To do well, you can't be concerned about feelings of belonging, professional growth and future income. Security and conviviality are in short supply, and there's little of what Sonnenfeld calls "care and feeding" for junior-level employees.

Fortress companies include large retailers, hotels, textile firms, oil and natural gas exploration firms, forest products companies and publishing houses.

BLENDS AND TRANSITIONS: Many companies can't be so neatly categorized. Some have a blend of cultures; others are in transition.

Apple Computer Co., for example, started out as a baseball team, but is maturing into an academy. Sonnenfeld points out that General Electric Co. has distinctly different cultures within different units.