

# Lessons for employers from *Fortune's* "100 best"

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***Fortune's* "100 Best Companies to Work For," which are both superlative workplaces and superior performers, have some important lessons to teach. A content analysis of the websites of these firms and a comparison group suggests three lessons: The 100 Best are distinguished by employee development programs, diversity initiatives, and a fun work environment; they use their websites to tell the world about themselves; and they take advantage of the BRS cycle: *Behavior* creates the desirable workplace, which leads to public *recognition*, which leads to the company's public *signaling* about its work environment—which in turn leads back to behavior that creates the desirable workplace.**

**T**he popular press loves to make lists of great workplaces. *Computerworld* regularly publishes a selection of the 100 best places for IT professionals to work. *Working Mother* magazine identifies the "100 Best Companies for Working Mothers." Each year *Mother Jones* reviews corporate charitable giving, labor, and environmental practices, along with company benefits and employee satisfaction, then publishes its "20 Better Places to Work." The best-known list, though, is probably *Fortune's* annual "100 Best Companies to Work For."

These preferred employer lists generate plenty of fodder for business journalists and researchers. One approach favored by the media is to analyze the shareholder performance of the listed employers. For instance, *Fortune* has proclaimed of its 100 Best, "It turns out that these companies are not just great to work for, they're also fabulous to invest in" (Watson 2002). The Frank Russell Company created an index of the publicly traded companies on the list and compared it to the S&P 500. As of 2002, an investor in the 100 Best who bought the stock when the list was first published in 1998 and reinvested earnings in each year's new list would have received a 10.6 percent annual return, compared to 5.7 percent for the S&P 500. It is also worth noting that 25 of the 29 largest public companies on the 2002 100 Best list—including Pfizer, Goldman Sachs, Microsoft, and Continental Airlines—were also among *Fortune's* 2002 list of America's most admired companies.

But do these companies take the opportunity to inform the public and, more specifically, potential employees about exactly what it is that sets them apart? It seems logical that they would, if for no other reason than to provide additional information to qualified candidates who read about the company on such a list. Since *Fortune's* 100 Best are not only the choicest workplaces but also superior performers, they must have some important lessons to teach, including how they create desirable work environments and what they tell the public about them. And what source of information about such businesses is more publicly accessible than their corporate websites?

These sites are, in effect, the textbooks containing the lessons of those 100 best companies. They allow the firms to communicate directly with potential employees. As computer use increases, so does the number of interested indi-

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viduals with access to the sites of the best workplaces. Website content analysis may identify the essential ingredients of a desirable workplace and suggest how to use a site as an effective recruiting tool. However, before taking a look at some of the essential components of the best workplaces, it is important to examine how *Fortune's* 100 Best are chosen and to touch on what is known as *signaling theory*.

### **Selecting *Fortune's* 100 Best**

The Great Place to Work Institute creates *Fortune's* annual 100 Best. Interested companies often ask to be included on the list. To qualify for inclusion, a firm must have at least 1,000 full- and part-time US employees. Anyone can nominate a firm by sending a letter to the Institute.

The 100 Best are chosen based primarily on responses to the Great Place to Work Trust Index, a proprietary employee attitude survey. The company must distribute the surveys to at least 250 randomly selected employees, who return them in postage-paid envelopes.

The rest of the score is based on an evaluation of materials submitted by the company, including its response to the Great Place to Work Culture Audit. The audit asks for data about the company and for responses to open-ended questions about its working environment, workplace practices, and philosophy. Each company is also asked to provide the Institute with documents such as orientation and recruiting materials that provide additional insight into what makes the workplace so desirable.

### **Signaling theory**

In the context of corporations, signaling theory suggests that a business with favorable information about itself will

“signal” that information to others. In order to attract capital, corporations will provide investors with favorable financial information through annual reports and so on—even information they are not required to disclose. Although a failure to disclose may also serve as a signal, companies generally maximize their self-interests by disclosing all favorable distinguishing information.

Yip (2000) maintains that “the Web creates a public forum for signaling,” so signaling theory can be applied to firms’ use of their websites. In the mid-1990s, businesses began to see the value of websites as tools for communicating with external stakeholders, and those with favorable information about their work environments began to signal that information to potential employees through the Web.

## **Components of the best workplaces**

**F**irms create a desirable work environment in a number of ways. Competitive pay and benefits, such as life and health insurance, vacations, and paid holidays, are obviously important. However, this study does not analyze pay and benefits; instead, it assumes that the websites of the best workplaces are indistinguishable from other, less recognized firms with regard to content about wages and traditional benefits.

A preliminary review of the websites of a few of the 100 Best suggests that desirable employers frequently boast of a fun work environment and are distinguished by more up-to-date additions to the benefits menu, including programs on employee development, diversity, work/life balance, and employee wellness. The study also assumes that the best workplaces are more likely to have mission statements posted on their websites that refer more often to their employees.

### **1. Mission statements**

Textbooks on strategy almost universally extol the virtues of mission statements, which declare a firm’s reason for existence—its central purpose. Collins and Porras’s 1997 bestseller *Built to Last* states that firms cannot exist simply for the purpose of generating profits. To excel, they must have a “core ideology.” But another reason for having a mission statement goes to the very core purpose for creating a desirable workplace: motivating employees toward achieving the firm’s goals.

Although *BH* authors Bartkus, Glassman, and McAfee (2000) have questioned the effectiveness and usefulness of mission statements, other empirical studies suggest that mission statements do have an impact on employee behavior. Bart (1997b) suggested in these pages that mission statements affect employees in three ways: by allow-

ing more control over them, by ensuring that their interests are not ignored, and by creating a common set of values and behaviors.

A number of studies suggest that a mission statement gives meaning to the work beyond any organizational purpose. It moves a job from being merely work to being more of a calling or vocation. Because the mission statement is a tool that helps create a desirable working environment, and because it is meant to be read, I hypothesized that companies on the *Fortune* list were more likely to publish a mission statement on their websites than those in the randomly selected comparison group. I also assumed that the 100 Best would more often recognize the importance of their employees.

## 2. Employee development programs

In our context, development refers to employees' long-term personal and professional growth. Training and development activities range from seminars to independent reading to job rotation to supervisory coaching. From an employee perspective, a development program says that the firm is interested in the well-being of its people. Most workers benefit from continuous learning and adaptation. Research suggests that managerial advancement can be predicted by the amount of the employee's training and development activities.

Development activities are also important to a firm because, as some have said, human resources provide the sole source of competitive advantage. "For example," says Holton (2001), "support and information provided to new employees by their employers has been found to be positively related to satisfaction, performance, and commitment, and negatively related to turnover, intent to leave, and stress."

## 3. Diversity initiatives

Diversity, or differences among the members of a group, is generally thought of these days in demographic terms, such as age, race, and gender. But it can also include differences in education, abilities, and tenure. Some argue that diversity improves performance and hence organizational effectiveness and efficiency. One line of research, according to Milliken and Martins (1996), suggests that groups that take into consideration a larger number of perspectives are more likely to reach better solutions than more homogeneous groups.

Ng and Tung (1998) list several benefits of a diverse work force, including "the ability to attract and retain the best human talents, lower operating cost, stimulation of higher levels of creativity and innovation, improved marketing efforts, fostering of more creative problem solving, and engendering of greater organizational flexibility." They also found evidence of higher profitability among diverse work groups. Regardless of its effect on performance, however,

businesses may desire a diverse work force to improve access to specific customer groups, sales to minority customers, and the firm's reputation.

## 4. Recognition of need for work/life balance and employee health

The number of hours managers and professionals work is on the rise. The conflict between work and family has been associated with lower levels of job satisfaction, a greater likelihood of leaving a position, lower career and life satisfaction, and substantially increased stress. Most people seem to be interested in work/family benefits.

As the competition to attract and retain talent intensifies, an employer's ability to address career satisfaction issues becomes more important as well. Increasingly, firms have turned to such benefits as on-site child care and flexible scheduling options as a means to reduce the impact of work/family conflict. A business that provides benefits addressing such issues also receives favorable attention from the media and a reputation as a desirable employer.

The health of a firm's employees is obviously related to work/life balance. As this balance has become more difficult to maintain, work stress has become an important con-

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sideration for both employers and employees. When work interferes with family life, it apparently tends to affect psychological and physical well-being. Occupational stress substantially raises absenteeism and turnover and reduces productivity. According to Parasuraman and Simmers (2001), the financial impact of work-related stress on the productivity of employed women has been estimated to be in the tens of billions of dollars.

Lifestyle issues also affect employees' health, accounting for the majority of the causes of death resulting from preventable illnesses such as heart disease. Health risk factors related to lifestyle include cigarette smoking, excessive drinking, obesity, high cholesterol level, high blood pressure, and a sedentary lifestyle. Improving lifestyle practices could potentially have a major impact on health and health care costs.

In light of such knowledge, many firms provide health programs for their employees. The positive effects include

improvements in blood pressure, weight, and heart rate. Voit (2001) reports that they also improve "cardiovascular health, life style, and emotional well-being."

Businesses implement health programs not only to improve and maintain employee health but also to boost productivity. Job satisfaction and absenteeism improve, and the firm's health-related costs drop. Voit argues that the programs also create a positive image of the company to its employees and the community.

## 5. Fun!

In light of the attention attracted by the likes of Southwest Airlines, no analysis of the best workplaces would be complete without considering humor and fun at work. Southwest appears regularly on *Fortune's* 10 Best list; it was among the top five from 1998–2001, though it opted not to compete in 2002. According to Sunoo (1995), Southwest Chairman Herb Kelleher says the company looks first at individuals' sense of humor in assessing their potential fit with its corporate culture. The airline's reputation as a fun workplace allows it to recruit and grow without using headhunters or employment agencies. In addition to Southwest, companies like Ben & Jerry's Ice Cream and Sun Microsystems have also reportedly benefited from their leaders' sense of fun. Humor at work is said to boost

creativity, motivation, morale, and cohesiveness, as well as improve communication and productivity. Some relate a fun workplace to improved employee retention, stress management, and profitability. Humor has also been suggested as a tool to manage workplace conflict.

## The study findings

To confirm the actual ingredients of a great workplace and to assess whether and how, in accordance with signaling theory, the best workplaces use their websites to tell the world about their desirable work environments, I conducted a content analysis of the sites of 30 of *Fortune's* 2002 list and a comparison group of 30 publicly traded businesses on NYSE and NASDAQ (see the box below). The purpose was to determine whether a relationship exists between public recognition of a firm as a desirable workplace and its communication with the public about its work environment. The hypothesis was that a greater proportion of the websites of *Fortune's* 100 Best would contain references to these essentials of a desirable workplace than would those of a randomly selected comparison group, and that the references of the 100 Best would be more numerous.

### The study

#### Sample

The company websites analyzed for the study are shown in **Table 1**.<sup>\*</sup> I used a random numbers table to select 30 companies from among the 2002 *Fortune* 100 Best because, unless a population is extremely abnormal, that number is large enough to allow significant statistical inferences to be drawn. Then I chose a comparison group of 30 from a total of about 3,037 businesses on the NYSE and NASDAQ listings, using systematic random sampling and a sampling interval of 101. The number randomly selected as the entry point of the sampling frame was 1,399, which corresponded to the 196th company listed on NASDAQ, Barnes & Noble. I picked every 101st firm by continuing alphabetically through the NASDAQ list and NYSE lists. Using online NASDAQ and NYSE lists to identify company names from their ticker symbols, I ended up with a group that included 18 NASDAQ companies and 12 from the NYSE.

#### Method

Using content analysis, I examined the text of the companies' Web sites. The first analysis I performed was to determine whether each of the 60 websites did or did not contain a mission statement. A sample of such a statement is Innodata's, which read: "Our mission: to build the Web one byte at a time."

The second analysis was to determine whether each posted mission statement referred to the company's employees. The unit of analysis was a sentence or paragraph, depending on the length of the mission statement. Among the words or partial words (\*) that were counted as referring to employees were *people*, *employee\** and *professionals*.

The unit of analysis for the categories of employee development, diversity, work/life balance, employee health, and workplace fun was a word or partial word, if used to refer to the employees or the workplace: *develop\** or *multicultur\**; *divers\** (but not when referring to customers or clients); *work/life*, *balanc\** or *family-friendly*; *health\** (but not when referring to insurance) or *fitness*; and *fun*. For instance, Johnson & Johnson's site includes content relating to development ("We encourage our employees to take the lead in *developing* their career paths"), diversity ("to value *diversity*"), health ("We also provide a variety of *health* and wellness services"), and work/life balance ("to help employees achieve *work/life balance*"). These categories were analyzed quantitatively by noting the number of occurrences of any of the above words.

<sup>\*</sup>Note: In Table 1, the fourth company on *Fortune's* 2002 list was McCutchen, Doyle, Brown & Enersen LLP; however, that firm had merged with Bingham Dana LLP by the time of my study, so I reviewed the website of the merged company, Bingham McCutchen LLP.

**Table 1**  
**Web content of randomly selected companies from both groups**

<b>100 BEST FIRMS</b>	<i>Mission</i>	<i>Miss/ppl</i>	<i>Diversity</i>	<i>Devel.</i>	<i>Fun</i>	<i>Balance</i>	<i>Health</i>
Axiom	0	0	0	1	2	0	0
American Express	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Beck Group	1	1	0	1	0	0	1
Bingham McCutchen	1	0	10	0	0	0	0
CDW	1	0	0	0	0	0	0
Cisco Systems	1	0	7	0	0	0	0
Container Store	0	0	1	1	1	0	0
Continental	0	0	3	0	0	0	0
Deloitte & Touche	1	1	12	0	0	1	0
Discovery Comms.	0	0	0	0	0	1	2
Duncan Aviation	1	0	0	0	0	0	2
Harley-Davidson	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
JM Family Enterprises	0	0	0	4	0	3	3
Johnson & Johnson	1	1	5	2	0	7	2
Lands' End	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Lilly	0	0	9	8	2	2	5
MFS Investment	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Men's Wearhouse	1	1	0	0	3	0	2
Nordstrom	1	0	4	0	0	0	0
Procter & Gamble	1	1	5	2	0	0	0
Publix	1	1	3	0	1	0	1
Qualcomm	1	0	6	0	3	1	9
SAS	1	0	0	0	0	0	0
SEI Investments	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Sun Microsystems	1	0	6	6	2	2	7
Synovus	1	1	4	1	3	0	0
TDIndustries	1	1	0	1	0	0	0
VSP	1	0	0	2	0	0	0
Vanguard	1	1	14	4	0	0	0
Whole Foods Mkt.	1	1	0	0	0	0	0
<b>COMPARISON FIRMS</b>	<i>Mission</i>	<i>Miss/ppl</i>	<i>Diversity</i>	<i>Devel.</i>	<i>Fun</i>	<i>Balance</i>	<i>Health</i>
American Power Conv.	1	1	1	0	0	0	0
Barnes & Noble	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Centillum Comms.	1	1	0	0	0	0	0
CopyTele, Inc.	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Dyax Corp.	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
FileNET Corp.	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
HTE Inc.	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Innodata Corp.	1	0	0	0	0	0	0
LCC Int'l, Inc.	1	1	1	1	1	0	1
Max Re Capital Ltd.	1	1	0	0	0	0	0
Nassda Corp.	0	0	0	0	1	0	0
Oshkosh Truck Corp.	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Powerwave Tech.	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Roslyn Bancorp	1	1	0	0	0	0	0
Sonic Innovations	1	0	0	0	0	0	0
Tekelec	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Urban Outfitters	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Wright Medical Group	1	1	0	1	0	0	0
America West	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
American Standard	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Computer Sciences	1	0	4	7	0	0	1
El Paso Corp.	1	1	7	4	0	1	6
H&R Block	1	0	0	0	0	1	3
Hughes Electronics	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Ingersoll-Rand Co.	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
M/I Schottenstein	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
NorthWestern Corp.	1	0	1	2	0	1	0
Putnam Investments	0	0	0	3	0	2	0
Selectron	1	0	0	0	0	0	0
Xcel Energy	1	1	0	0	0	0	0

In general, as expected, the individual websites of the 100 Best sample contained more numerous references to the components of a desirable workplace than those of the comparison group. The ranges for the 100 Best sites were: 0–14 references for diversity; 0–8 for development; 0–9 for employee health; 0–7 for work/life balance; and 0–3 for fun at work. The comparison group's ranges were 0–7 for both diversity and development, 0–6 for health, 0–2 for work/life balance, and 0–1 for fun.

Among the 100 Best, 19 of the 30 websites (63 percent) contained a mission statement, and ten of those statements referred to employees. In contrast, 14 firms (47 percent) in the comparison group had a website mission statement, and eight of the statements referred to the company's employees.

**Table 1** shows the number of website references to the best workplace components by the 100 Best and comparison groups, respectively.

As a whole, then, the 100 Best websites contained more mission statements (more of which recognized their employees) and more references to diversity, development, work/life balance, employee health, and fun. **Table 2** summarizes the findings for the 100 Best and comparison groups, including, for every category, the number and percentage of sites on which content was found and, for the above five characteristics, the total number of references and mean for that category on the sites.

Every category analyzed was tested to determine whether a statistically significant difference existed between the two population proportions. The 100 Best had many more sites that referred to development (12 vs. 6), diversity (14 vs. 5) and fun (8 vs. 2). They also had a higher proportion of sites than the comparison group containing mission statements (19 vs. 14), mission statements that referred to employees (10 vs. 8), and references to work/life balance (7 vs. 4) and employee health (10 vs. 5). Testing the difference between the two population proportions for all the categories analyzed, I found that

**Table 2**  
**Summary of findings**

	100 BEST GROUP			COMPARISON GROUP		
	No.	Percent	Mean	No.	Percent	Mean
Mission statements	19	63%		14	47%	
Statements ref. to people	10	33%		8	27%	
Diversity sites	14	47%		5	17%	
Div.: total no. of refs.	89		2.97	14		0.47
Development sites	12	40%		6	20%	
Dev.: total no. of refs.	33		1.10	18		0.60
Work/life balance sites	9	30%		4	13%	
Balance: total no. of refs.	17		0.57	5		0.17
Health sites	10	33%		5	17%	
Health: total no. of refs.	34		1.13	12		0.40
Fun sites	8	27%		2	7%	
Fun: total no. of refs.	17		0.57	2		0.07

ity. It is common in content analysis to have more than one coder review the texts. On the other hand, the simplicity of the study—systematically applying a simple set of codes to a relatively small volume of texts—minimizes that potential of unreliability. Moreover, with only 60 websites analyzed, the small sample size may have an impact on the validity of the results. Conducting the same analysis on a larger number of sites is a logical next step and would address the validity issue. Finally, further study of the BRS cycle (see below) seems appropriate and may lead to additional lessons for employers.

the *Fortune* group had significantly more references to development, diversity, and fun, but no statistical significance could be attached to the differences in mission statements, mission statements that referred to employees, and references to work/life balance and employee health. I also tested to determine where there was enough evidence to conclude that the number of references to the essential components of desirable workplaces depended on whether the site was from the *Fortune* 100 Best group or the comparison group. **Table 3** contains the results.

The findings generally support the hypotheses: that a greater proportion of the websites of the *Fortune* 100 Best refer to the components of desirable workplaces than the comparison group and contain greater numbers of references with regard to development, diversity, and fun, though not with regard to mission statements, work/life balance, and employee health.

### Contributions, limitations, and next step

Several potential limitations of this study should be noted. Typically, the fact that only one person conducted data collection and analysis might adversely affect reliabil-

**Table 3**  
**Chi-square test of contingency**

	100 Best	Comparison	TOTAL
Mission	29	22	51
Diversity	89	14	103
Development	33	18	51
Balance/Fun	34	7	41
Health	34	12	46
TOTAL	219	73	292

Test Statistic chi-squared = 20.3819; P-value = 0.0004; Cramer's V = .26

## Lessons learned

This study provides evidence, then, that the best companies to work for use methods recommended by the management literature to create desirable working environments. And consistent with signaling theory, they use their websites to inform the world about the favorable aspects of those environments. As expected, the websites of the best businesses are more likely than others to refer to the characteristics that make them the best, and to include more references to those characteristics. What, then, can other companies derive from this? What are the lessons they can learn from the websites of these companies that are so great to work for?

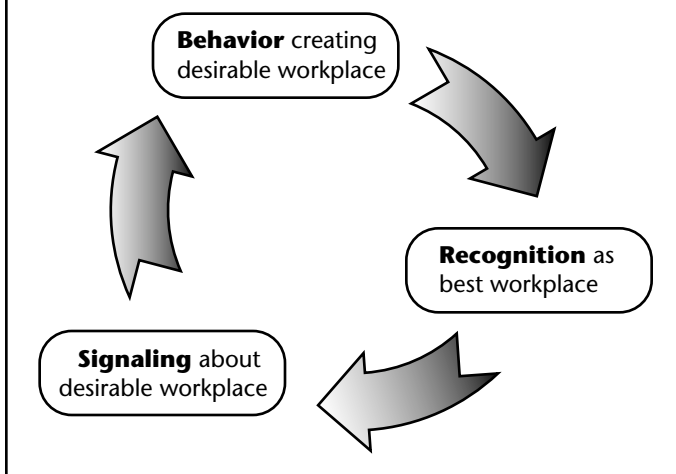
### Lesson #1. Employee development programs, diversity initiatives, and encouraging a fun work environment distinguish the best workplaces.

With a significant difference in website content between the best companies to work for and other businesses on three counts, and assuming under signaling theory that businesses are motivated to disclose favorable information about themselves, this finding suggests that the best workplaces are more likely than other businesses to have development programs for employees, to stress diversity initiatives, and to encourage a fun work environment. Managers would be well-served to develop such characteristics or assure that, if they're already in place, the programs are supported by sufficient resources to ensure their success.

### Lesson #2. Desirable employers tell the world about themselves.

Mere chance apparently does not explain the 100 Best's higher number of website references to their great work-

**Figure 1**  
**The behavior-recognition-signaling (BRS) cycle**



places. They use their sites to tell the public about themselves and their environments. The mission statements and references to employee development, diversity, work/life balance, employee health and fitness, and fun are among the items that might be included on such a website.

Employers should describe in detail for the public the steps they take to create a desirable work environment. And company websites provide the perfect medium for delivering that message loud and clear.

### **Lesson #3. Recognized employers take advantage of the behavior-recognition-signaling (BRS) cycle.**

Recognized employers obviously do more signaling than other businesses. But the recognition-signaling relationship is only one of three phases of a cycle. According to Collins and Porras (1997), "social psychology research strongly indicates that when people publicly espouse a particular point of view, they become much more likely to behave consistent with that point of view." A company's public signaling about its desirable work environment will likely reinforce the behavior that created that environment. From this perspective, a business that uses its website to publicly tout a people-friendly atmosphere is, in fact, likely to be a good place to work. Thus, the second phase of the cycle is that signaling leads to employee-friendly behavior. And no organization will be recognized as one of the best places to work without engaging in behavior that creates a desirable work environment. Thus, a relationship also exists between behavior and recognition, which completes the cycle.

**Figure 1** shows this BRS cycle: *behavior* that creates the desirable workplace leads to public *recognition* of the employer (such as *Fortune's* 100 Best), which leads to the company's public *signaling* (such as on its website) about

its favorable work environment, which leads back to the behavior that created the environment in the first place. Employers should be certain that their behavior and signaling are consistent with the BRS cycle. Doing so will increase the odds of their receiving public recognition.

**E**mployers have much to gain from studying the websites of businesses recognized as among "The 100 Best Companies to Work For." These firms, in fact, have implemented many of the components of desirable workplaces identified in the management research. They make frequent and effective use of their websites to tell the world what they've done to create organizations that people want to work for. Other employers that adopt these "best practices" ought to be rewarded with more satisfied employees, greater productivity, and maybe even better shareholder returns. ○

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