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Page 1 of 2

# What to look for in a new employer

All employers are not created equal — so when looking for a new job, how do you find a good one?

Sarah Eil

Everyone's idea of a good employer is slightly different. Some people might just be glad to have a boss who pays them regularly and doesn't shout too much. But most of us are looking for something a bit more than that: favourable working conditions, including flexibility if needed; strong, positive leadership and a clear sense of goals and rewards might be on your list of "must haves".

Human resource consultants Aon Hewitt conduct research into what makes New Zealand and Australia's Best Employers stand out from the rest — accrediting qualifying companies each year and naming an annual "best of the best".

Last year's winner was telecommunications infrastructure provider Chorus — the first time a New Zealand company, rather than an Australian one, has won the award. This year's new accreditations and top company will be announced this month.

Jocelyn Anso, who leads Aon Hewitt's New Zealand talent team, says between 120 and 150 Kiwi and Australian organisations, encompassing around 100,000 employees, participate in the programme every year, but only the top 10 per cent are accredited annually as Best Employers. Companies must undergo a rigorous three-stage process — a survey of employee engagement, a people practices inventory and interviews with the CEO and HR director — before gaining the "Best Employers" tick.

"We are looking for evidence that they are walking the talk, and that their people policies are not just fancy words on paper, but are also put into day-to-day practice," says Anso.

One of the key qualities of companies that gain accreditation is a high level of employee engagement, Anso says.

"The best employers have an engagement score averaging 82 per cent

— that's compared to the New Zealand average of 59 per cent, and the Australian country average of 57 per cent. So we can see they are well above other organisations," Anso says.

The next strong contributing factor is the quality of senior leadership: CEOs and other managers who have a clear vision of what the company is trying to achieve and are able to com-

municate that to employees in an inspiring way. "In many companies, employees feel they don't often see their senior leaders, don't trust them totally, and feel they are not really interested in them as people. But in the 'best' organisations, employees trust their senior leaders, get a lot of communication from them, and feel like they are accessible and approachable," Anso says.

These companies also tend to have a strong, differentiated employment brand, "not just to attract good talent initially, but to remind [employees] why they should stay with the organisation".

Finally, Anso says, the best employers cultivate a "high-performance culture".

"They set really clear goals for their people, so they know what they have to do to be successful in their jobs, and how what they are doing is contributing to what the wider organisation is trying to achieve," says Anso.

Part of this may be performance-based pay: rather than paying everyone doing the same job the same amount, those who are making the greatest contribution are financially rewarded.

"They're not afraid to reward people for top performance, and they are not afraid to have the tough conversations with their poorer-performing employees," Anso says.

Anso sees an emerging trend in these best employers having a strong sense of purpose beyond making money for our shareholders.

"The average company is very financially driven, but these organisations realise that while that is important, what is equally important is having a strong sense of why they are here, and each is unique.

"Every Best Employer is very different as an organisation, but their purpose is what holds their people to them, a strong connection to what they stand for as a business."

Anso says this is particularly important to millennial job-seekers, who want to feel as if they are "making a difference" rather than just taking home a pay cheque.

Anso says in the current job market, organisations competing for top talent know the value of positioning themselves as good employers.

Plus, having an engaged workforce who actually want to do their best for you is good for business.

As Chorus CEO Mark Ratcliffe said last year when the company was named "best of the best": "When you have an engaged workforce, you can ask them to do things that unengaged employees won't do.

"A highly engaged workforce allows you to get through tough times together."

The Chorus example also shows a company doesn't need to be in a positive growth phase to be a good employer: the award came after two years of restructuring and uncertainty, during which time engagement might have been expected to drop without good management.

So how can job-seekers find out more about a prospective employer? Anso recommends asking some questions of your own at the recruitment stage, to find out more about the company's culture.

At many New Zealand companies, around 20 per cent of people who join the organisation leave in their first 12 months, often due to cultural incompatibility, or a sense that promises have not been delivered on.

She says it's important when being interviewed to get a feel for the company's performance culture — if you work hard and make a significant contribution, how will you be rewarded? — and its attitude to work-life balance.

"What can I expect from my time working for this organisation, and what will the organisation expect from me?"

"You could ask about what leadership looks like at this organisation, and what expectations the organisa-



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Page 2 of 2

tion has of its leaders in driving the right culture to bring out the best in each person," she says.

"It's important to get a realistic preview of what it's going to be like working in that organisation. Then you can make the decision, is this is the future for me?"

**In the current job market, organisations competing for top talent know the value of positioning themselves as good employers.**

### **'Best of the best'**

Yesterday Cisco Systems were named Aon Hewitt New Zealand and Australia's 2016 Best Employers.



**In the "best" organisations, employees trust their senior leaders, get communication from them, and feel they are approachable.**