

How Do You Get On the Fortune 100 Best Companies to Work For List? A Successful Applicant Explains How

Charlotte Miller is a past president of the Utah State Bar Association and was the first female representative to the American Bar Association from Utah. In addition to these legal positions, Charlotte has held corporate positions, including general counsel, chief administrative officer and global HR-VP. She currently serves as Chair of the Board for the Utah YWCA and is the Chief Human Resources Officer of the [U.S. Ski and Snowboard Association](#), the governing board for all Olympic athletes on skis or snowboards. In 2013, I interviewed Charlotte about the secrets to respectful terminations; you can find that article [here](#).

In her previous position as the Senior Vice President of People and Great Work for O.C. Tanner, a worldwide leader in employee-recognition programs, Charlotte headed the application process for the [Great Place To Work](#) certification, which resulted in her employer debuting at 40 on the [Fortune 100 Best Companies to Work For list](#).

Jathan Janove: What is the Great Place to Work organization and what goes into the application process?

Charlotte Miller: The Great Place to Work organization selects the companies that are on the Fortune 100 Best Companies to Work For list, which is released each spring. Some companies hire teams to do the application work, but the HR Team at O.C. Tanner did it ourselves. It was a great experience and it was validating to be named a Great Place to Work.

Companies sign up for the Great Place survey and complete the application in the summer. They are then evaluated and the list is released in the spring of the following year. O.C. Tanner was on the list in March of 2015 and again in March of 2016, but the work that went into the application was done in the summers of the previous years.

The application is pretty intensive — there are questions about your employees, the benefits you offer, demographics, changes over the years, how you build trust, what you do for communication, and so on. It's over 100 pages, including links to videos, pictures and stories. They are really trying to find out if you are a great place to work by taking into account how your employees feel.

JJ: How are the applicants evaluated?

CM: The committee looks at your scores from the survey and your application to determine whether your company makes the list. More than half of your score is from the results of the survey and the remainder is from your application.

JJ: What are the benefits of applying?

The process of the application — whether you make the list or not — can help you step back and think about what your organization should be doing to provide an environment where employees are engaged. It did that for

me. Creating a great work environment is not about giving people stuff like free lunches or ping pong tables; a lot of companies do that and they're not great places to work. It's about making people feel valued. When employees go home at night, how do they feel? When they walk in the door, are they excited? An organization should do whatever it can do to make its employees feel joyfully about their work. If your employees' kids think their parents hate where they work, you've got a problem.

JJ: What are the benefits of actually being selected as a Great Place to Work?

CM: It's great for recruiting, but it also builds pride for current employees. It makes them feel good about where they work. A company may actually be a great place to work, but once it is named as such, it's validating for employees and gives them pride.

We spend so much time at work and it's really important to feel joyful about it. Being able to tell your family and friends you're an employee of a Great Place to Work is powerful for employees.

As you know, people who are engaged at work, and feel valued and included, work better, smarter and harder. It's great for the organization as a whole — it's more profitable, productive, innovative and efficient.

JJ: In the spirit of creating a great work environment, what advice or suggestions do you have for employers based on your experiences in the legal field and HR?

CM: The most important thing an organization can do is build an environment where employees feel trusted and know their ideas matter. Trust goes both ways. Employees need to feel they can try and do things, including speaking up, and not be afraid. That trust then builds engagement.

I've always told people complying with the law is a minimal standard. You want people to feel they belong at the place they work. When you have an environment where people complain or feel distressed about demeaning comments, you may or may not have a legal problem, but the bigger problem is that people are talking about those comments instead of collaborating about a work project. The distraction in time, energy and passion costs more to an organization than a lawsuit.

Policies, processes and procedures also need to send a message of trust. Sometimes we make rules to prevent one or two people from doing something bad, but we forget that we need to be communicating with a bigger group of employees. Often, someone does something wrong, so we create rules for that one person instead of talking to them about it. But that person probably would've broken the rule anyway! A great example comes from a law firm where I once worked: a secretary played her radio too loud and nobody wanted to tell her, so a rule was passed that nobody could play a radio in the office, but this woman still played hers! So everyone felt bad and the problem wasn't solved.

We so often fear having tough conversations with people who are creating a problem. And they're not necessarily evil people. But if we could have the conversation, then we could focus on all the people who are creating a good environment, and not spend all our time making rules.

JJ: Why is it so hard or scary to have these tough conversations with employees?

It's really hard for us to tell people something they're doing is bothering us. I have worked with powerful CEOs who are afraid to have tough conversations and they let things build up. Then, they want HR to fire the employee.

When you need to have a tough conversation, it's helpful to start by admitting you have something to say that will be hard to talk about. It helps decrease the tension in the room. When I need to have a difficult conversation, I like to go on a walk with the person. The physical energy and tension is then being used and it can make it easier to talk.

JJ: Do you think the increase of technology in the workplace has changed how we have conversations with people?

CM: Yes. People can be harsher in emails and say things they wouldn't say to a person's face. My belief is that email is for sharing facts, not having a discussion or solving a communication problem.

JJ: Anything other words of advice?

CM: Encourage employees to get to know people in the workplace and what makes them tick. You don't have to be best friends with everyone; and, you don't have to agree with everyone. But, sharing ideas, opposing opinions and how to solve problems can be done more collaboratively if we trust everyone is working in good faith. We are more likely to expect people to work in good faith if we know them and appreciate their contributions, and understand everyone's desire to be valued and have an impact.

For more information on Jathan's new book, visit: [**Hard-Won Wisdom: True Stories from the Management Trenches.**](#)

