

# Great Places To Work?

*What you get may not be what you see in many of these surveys*

Jeffrey Pfeffer and M Muneer



It's that time of the year when "great places to work" surveys and reports get published across the world. People love lists – even if the criteria for getting on the list is not transparent. The 2018 India list is yet to come out, but each year fewer and fewer seemingly good companies figure in this for-profit tamasha. Ever wondered why? Have they fallen to "good" from "best" or just stopped participating altogether?

Fortune's 2018 Great Places to Work (GPTW) list just came out in the US, and it was surprising to see a couple of specific companies in the top 10. That's because when one of us (Jeffrey) interviewed a few people from these organisations for his research on toxic management practices, what they described was far from a healthy workplace. We did similar interviews of random employees from the 2017 India list of "Best Places to Work", and the findings were similar.

Many people described horror stories of facing pressures to deliver beyond reasonable limits. A few complained of additional work getting dumped on them; still more narrated about long work hours and post 5pm meetings. One lady was asked to return from maternity leave two weeks after delivery to make an important presentation. Another, several months pregnant at the time, found herself on a plane to Europe on Saturday night to be able to attend a Monday meeting – having been given little notice of the unexpected trip and not much choice to opt out.

Of course, workplace health and being a "great place to work" may not be the same thing – but intuitively these two workplace measures would seem to be highly correlated.

Some may argue that our random interviews are not statistically significant. That's possible. But we are increasingly convinced that much of the survey data used in constructing reviews is unreliable. The Journal of Consumer Research



published a paper that shows this is the case for consumer reviews of products and services. Because evidence shows that people rely on these reviews in their decision-making – the reviews are economically consequential – companies have incentives to get fake reviews posted. And they do.

A recent peer-reviewed study reported that 16% of restaurant reviews on Yelp are fake, and a news story reported that one-quarter of the reviews submitted to Yelp are also fake, with similar problems on Facebook, TripAdvisor and Google. There is a burgeoning scholarly literature on ways of uncovering fake reviews, and all of the major websites that post reviews have ever-evolving algorithms attempting to discern review fraud. Nonetheless, such scholarly research suggests that the validity of online user ratings is poor as assessed by several different methods.

Having consulted some of the HR honchos of India clients, we are convinced that such listings are at best scratching each other's backs. The organisations that do the number crunching with employee

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reviews for various publications including Forbes and Fortune, are for-profit organisations that sell products and services to some of the same companies they are ranking. In many cases they offer services to improve the companies' scores. Don't you see the red flags of conflict of interest all around? Now postulate why seemingly good companies want to stay out.

So how can we diagnose the real truth about workplaces? Some of the people working in the "best places to work" confided in us they had gone on antidepressants and anti-hypertension tabs after only a couple of months in these

companies. Perhaps the proportion of people on such drugs might be a useful indicator of how toxic workplaces really are.

It actually has substantial research validity – prescription drug use can, if such data were publicly available, as they are in some countries like Denmark, provide excellent indicators of workplace stress. It will be much more objective too in compiling the lists of top ranking health enhancers and low ranking health destroyers. We hope the two organisations that prepare such lists will correlate the above findings with those of their current methodology.

A study undertaken by Aarhus University, Denmark, has used prescription drug data to examine a number of interesting issues. For instance, first time entrepreneurs and their spouses were found to have increased their use of sedatives/hypnotics in the first two years after becoming entrepreneurs, but their use of antidepressants declined. Another study found that when wives out-earned their husbands, the men were more likely to use Viagra while the wives were prone to use anxiety and insomnia drugs. A third study threw up increased stress related medication usage by employees of organisations that underwent significant restructuring. Clearly, all these point to the use of drugs data as a potential measure of social stress.

At a town hall meeting of one of the top-ranked GPTW companies, employees were shocked to see charts and figures that showed sharp increases in medical claims and prescription drug use. While such information remains confidential and not publicly available, we would recommend making this data filing with RoC and stock exchanges mandatory. If we were to trust any one indicator that would reveal what was going on in an organisation, it would be the medical and healthcare claims changes rather than the GPTW rankings.

The next time you apply for a new job, don't just rely on the GPTW rankings. Instead, politely ask the interviewers about what drugs they are taking. That may tell you volumes about the workplace you are contemplating joining.

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