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Small-company jobs deliver big satisfaction

More workers are giving up the prestige of toiling for a big company for the fulfillment of greater participation in the success of smaller firms

By Joanne Cleaver
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Jim Morris has worked at big advertising agencies. He has worked for the smallest of agencies--his own. And now he works for Maddock Douglas, a 40-member Elmhurst agency that is fast outgrowing its boutique roots.

Like a corporate Goldilocks, he has found the company that is not too big, not too small, but just right.

"It's very different than at a larger place, where there are more layers and your ability to have an effect is less," says Morris, who joined Maddock Douglas in June 2003 as chief creative officer.

Medium-size and small businesses in the Chicago area are finding that they are in a sweet spot: Big-company veterans with an itch to see what life is like in a smaller environment are lobbying to be hired.

Statistics regarding the specifics of small-company hiring are hard to come by because relatively little research is done on these firms. But longtime executives at medium-size and small businesses say they are seeing an unprecedented level of interest from applicants whose resumes are all big business.

Executives at smaller companies are "pleasantly surprised that they are finding good talent within reach," said Michael Shapow, division director with Robert Half Management Resources, a firm that recruits executives for permanent and interim positions.

Linford Stiles, president of Stiles Associates, a New Hampshire-based executive recruiting firm, estimates that as many as 60 percent of his searches involve medium-size companies that are scouring the ranks of Fortune 500 firms for talent.

Equal risks

No doubt, some candidates are switching their attention to smaller companies because they can't get in at the big companies of their choice. But recruiters and small-company executives say they are being approached by a breed of big-company refugees who feel battered and shaken by the most recent tremors at major companies. Layoffs are routine, and outsourcing can displace even high-performing employees.

Traditionally, big companies have been bastions of security, and smaller companies were considered an iffy bet for long-term career prospects. But these days, the level of risk seems to be about the same, regardless of company size.

With risk removed as a deciding factor, the upside of working for a smaller company starts to look pretty good.

Dave Sivak, 60, spent decades in auditing and international finance at Bank One Corp. and its predecessor companies. He took early retirement in 2001, but spending all his time and energy on his avocation--gardening--wasn't as enthralling as he had imagined.

In the fall of 2001, he joined 10-employee LG Evans, a Lombard-based company that represents machine tool manufacturers. As controller, he is getting a much closer look at the dynamics of this industry than he ever had with the bank.

"You get to see the big picture," said Sivak. "When you work for a large corporation, you are working for a unit or a group. You only see what is around you. Sure, you know what the corporate goals are, but how they actually make their money is something else entirely."

With Evans, he has learned about the ground-level concerns of suppliers and vendors in the industry.

Adaptability valued

Big companies are increasingly looking for evidence that job candidates can adapt quickly to change, and a stint at a smaller company usually indicates that, said Debbie Parker, a senior consultant with Chicago-based Mica Organizational Psychologists.

"The skills you gain in a small company would be readily transferable in terms of your profit and loss responsibility," Parker said. "It also shows flexibility: You are someone who can go off and do something different."

Rory Cutaia, chairman and chief executive of Telx, a 41-member telecommunications start-up based in New York, is interviewing plenty of people with long tenures at traditional phone and telecommunications companies.

Small companies afford the opportunity to take charge of projects that have a specific impact on the company's growth and profitability, he said. Even if an employee decides to return to the world of big companies, a proven track record of direct results at a smaller company is likely to impress executives at big firms who want take-charge employees.

A veteran of General Electric Co., Dan Weinfurter is CEO of Chicago-based Capital H Group LLC, a human-resources consulting firm. When Capital H began recruiting, candidates from big companies were most concerned about the company's growth potential and opportunities for training and development.

But now that it has 40 employees, "people are most interested in what the company can become, the type of culture we are trying to build here," he said. "They see that, as individuals, they can make a difference in the performance of the company. Ultimately, they can look back on this and say, 'What I did mattered.'"

At first, Weinfurter says, he was worried that Capital H wouldn't be able to draw top talent.

"We've done better [recruiting] than I ever dreamed when I started out," he said. "We have more people who are knocking on our doors than we have the wherewithal to hire."

"Twenty years ago, if you stayed in a large company, that was viewed as a positive thing," said Ben Machtiger, who left a spot as chief marketing officer for PricewaterhouseCoopers to become a managing partner with brand consulting boutique Prophet, which has an office in Chicago.

"Now, if someone sees a resume, and someone has stayed put, it says something about their ability to take risks," he said. "It's more of a positive that someone [pursue] a situation that would show a lot of skills and make things happen without a lot of resources."

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