

“Seeing Through Glassdoors”

Dear Stephen,

I am considering changing jobs. I have been to several different interviews but I would only make a change if the move was not lateral, and there was a big salary increase. I always do my homework on the companies I am interviewing with. I visit their websites, look up the people I am meeting with on LinkedIn and even Google the companies and people individually to see what I might have missed. Recently, I discovered there are sites that allow employees to rate companies, which has been fascinating to me. I have primarily been using Glassdoor, but I know there are similar features on Indeed and Vault as well. These sites compile ratings based on current and past employees' comments and survey responses.

I'm sure you know all about this stuff, but for someone who hasn't been job hunting for a while, these new resources are fascinating. It never occurred to me that workplaces could

be rated like restaurants (if it had, I suppose I would be far richer). The bases for the ratings and the wide variety of comments have also amazed me. Some people comment only on the general company culture, but many others offer specifics about their bosses, their company's owners and even their colleagues. No holds barred. Looking through all these sites has been quite the eye-opener.

Ultimately though, I'm just not sure how much I should trust these comments. Should what these sites say weigh on my decision to accept a job? Often, reviews go from one extreme to another — one person has been there for 20 years and jumps out of bed in the morning because she's still so excited to get into the office. Another person from the same company was there for two months and hated his bosses so much he didn't even come in to get his last paycheck. Some of my friends who are just out of college take the Glassdoor ratings as law — if a company has under a three-star



You can send your workplace questions to Stephen at: StephenSays@bellow.press.

Questions selected to be answered, will appear in this column. Please use the Subject: Stephen Says for all emails. Stephen Viscusi is a bestselling author, television personality, and CEO of The Viscusi Group, global executive recruiters located in New York. Follow Stephen on Twitter @WorkplaceGuru, Like Stephen on Facebook; and follow him on LinkedIn.

rating, they won't even apply for jobs there. Other friends of mine seem to read it only as entertainment and barely even look at the ratings. There's just so much you can't know with these ratings.

What do you know about these sites? Are these reviews a valid way to judge a company? Are any of the employees' stories verified? Even some of the good ones are hard to believe. And most importantly, how much should I think about these ratings when making a career decision?

-Stargazer

Dear Stargazer:

They call me America's Workplace Guru — that's my Twitter handle, too, — so it's my job to know this stuff, but even I must admit the jury is still out on how much you should let these sites inform your career decisions. Some of my employer clients tell me these reviews not only affect their ability to hire, but major manufacturers tell them their customers have reviewed these sites to see how these companies treat their people before they buy products. Even if you are not paying attention to these ratings, someone else is. They can affect hiring and revenue.

All of us know about the major furniture manufacturers that are so proud when they make that famous Fortune Magazine's "Best Companies to Work For" list. Many of those same companies have some pretty mixed Glassdoor reviews. This tells me a couple of things. The first is that it is tough to decide unambiguously that a company is good to work for. So much can determine what makes a good or bad work experience that all types of company rating systems leave a lot to be desired.

The reason you didn't think workplaces could be rated like restaurants is revealing here. There is only so much that can make a restaurant experience good or bad, after all you're there

for a couple of hours at most. Our jobs consume so much of our lives that rating a workplace can often feel like rating how your life is going. The second point is I think these company-rating sites are both most and least valuable because they tell individual stories. By this I mean that because it's a number of individual ratings, I have found in most cases the overall stars rating is not very useful or instructive. Often, it feels like the good reviews and bad reviews balance each other out, and the just-OK reins supreme. Now, of course, if there are hundreds of ratings and the vast majority are saying great things or terrible things about a specific aspect of a company, it is worth paying attention. Otherwise, finding employees whose comments you relate to is the best way I have found to use these sites. For example, if you know you don't respond well to people yelling at you, and an employee has reviewed a company and commented that every manager he worked with yelled at him, that company might be a bad fit for you.

I also feel we have all been trained to be skeptical of overly good or overly bad reviews. Millennials and younger workers in particular are quite savvy about cutting through BS on the Internet, but I don't think it's too hard for most of us to determine whether or not a review is genuine or is a disgruntled former

employee trying to take revenge. Most of the reviews I read on these sites are very transparent, even if they are not vetted. Trust yourself to figure out what happened.

My conclusion, as of now, is that you would be crazy not to at least look at company reviews on these sites. The tricky part is figuring out how to use the information. My opinion can be summed up in these steps: Look at the big picture to see if there are patterns. Then look through the individual comments to see if anything stands out to you personally. The miracle of the Internet is that we have endless information; the curse of the Internet is that we have so much information that contradicts itself it's difficult to figure out what's the truth and what's bogus. Certain political figures have figured this out and parlayed this ability to make up truth into a real shot at the presidency. Go figure.

Bottom line, do not just glance at the ratings on these sites; they're only as valuable as how you use them. I think most of you are smart enough to figure out what's worthwhile and what's garbage. For the rest of you, good luck because if you can't figure your way through Internet commenters, you're likely to have trouble in just about anything you do.

Stephen