

Working in an overseas office for a US law firm

Have you ever wondered what its like to be in a branch of a US firm, and what's different about it to working at a branch of a UK firm?

I've worked for many large UK firms, such as Norton Rose (4 years), Linklaters (2 years) and Freshfields (2 years). In fact I was working for Freshfields in New York as their US Financial Controller when I saw the opportunity to work for Weil Gotshal and Manges as their Head of Finance in their London office. It seemed like a perfect fit; going from working in a US branch office of a major UK firm to a UK branch office of a major US firm. And to be honest it has been a perfect fit. The almost 6 years that I've been at Weil have flown by, which must be a good thing!

So what's different about Weil. Why have six years gone so quickly when after about 2 years at UK firms I've always been ready to move on? I think the starkest difference boils down to culture. I just find US firms a friendlier, better place to work. It's certainly more relaxed, but not in a detrimental way if that makes sense. Everyone works just as hard as they do at other firms I've worked at, but somehow it doesn't feel like that.

The dress code is a great example. This is the first place I've worked where business casual is the policy. It seems to make a real difference. When I first arrived people could wear jeans, but that was over the top. I think it dawned on us that we'd gone too far when one day a member of staff turned up looking like he was on his way to the beach! Shorts, flip flops and baseball cap. The next day the policy was revised. But now we just say no jeans, no flip flops, no collarless shirts, and we've not had a problem. Of course we all have suits here in the office in case we need them, but the dress code policy really seems to work in terms of creating a more relaxed yet hard working atmosphere.

Here at Weil, the partners just seem 'nicer'. Not a great word but the only way I can describe it. They don't take themselves too seriously. They are all really friendly and you don't worry about having to talk to any of them. They are all extremely focused on what they do, as you'd expect, but they seem to have a friendly relaxed manner that says 'I value you, I'm happy to talk to you, and just because you're not a fee earner I still really appreciate your expertise and contribution'.

I've also noticed that there seems to be far less political maneuvering here at Weil than I've seen at the UK firms I've worked for. Here the partners just seem to get on with it rather than wasting time plotting. That's probably helped by the fact that we have a managing partner in Mike Francies, who everyone genuinely respects, and who is recognized as a genuinely caring guy. Of course his legendary work ethic also sets the right example.

One of the main differences in the financial structure is of course partner compensation. Weil, like most US firms, does not buy into the lockstep method of remuneration. Instead, compensation is entirely merit based for full equity partners. A partner's compensation can just as easily go down as well as up in any given year. But rather than create a real 'eat what you kill' mentality, where partners don't care about cross selling and helping their fellow partners, it just seems to result in partners working harder but still in a very collegiate way.

Of course a major difference is the cash basis of accounting that we use in a US firm. This was a real culture shock for me. Here, cash really is king. It really does seem to have a big impact on cash collections. Much more effort is made by partners to collect their cash. So

billings, although clearly important because without them there would be no cash to collect, is not reported on at all. Therefore partners know that to get any credit at all they must get paid. No more of the bad old days of partners billing at month end and then placing their bill in a drawer instead of sending it to the client because just by virtue of billing they have received their credit.

Another thing I've noticed is that decisions seem to be taken that much more quickly here than at the UK firms I've worked for. There doesn't seem to be endless committees. You can usually propose something and a decision is made almost immediately. That allows you much more flexibility and of course is far less frustrating. For example, when we want to hire and fire we can usually get a decision made pretty instantaneously.

Of course one of the big frustrations of working in any 'branch' office of either a US or UK firm is the attitude of the of the 'head' office to the much smaller 'branch' office. This attitude has improved over time from when we were a fledgling office and needed lots of hand holding and assistance. Now, as the office and management has matured, so the trust and confidence in local expertise has increased, resulting in the frustrations of being a branch office receding over time.

So in conclusion, as you may have gathered, I'd say I prefer working for a US firm. Although it's a lot more aggressive in its attitude towards generating fees and profits, as is borne out by the higher profits per partner generated by US firms, it doesn't really feel like an aggressive place to work. Yes, we don't really suffer fools gladly, but if you have a good work ethic without taking yourself too seriously I don't think there is anywhere better.