

Choosing When to Accept a Job Offer

Should you take it or hope a better position comes along?

BY TAUNEE BESSON

Editor's Note: This month columnist Taunee Besson addresses a common job-hunting problem. If you have a question or concern about your job search or career, send it to Ms. Besson at the National Business Employment Weekly, P.O. Box 300, Princeton, N.J. 08543-0300. All names are kept confidential. Although she can't answer all letters personally, she will address commonly mentioned concerns in her column.

Question: When I interviewed for two excellent jobs recently, I was reminded of the following fable:

A farmer's daughter wanted to marry, but was afraid her suitor wasn't the best choice. The farmer told her to walk down the first row of the corn field and pick the best ear of corn she could find. However, she could pick only one ear of corn and once she passed one by, she couldn't go back to it. Later, she returned with a tiny ear of corn. When her father asked her why she didn't do better, she said she kept passing by large ears of corn because she expected to find a bigger one later. As a result, she ended up with one of the worst ears.

Job hunting is similar. You receive job offers sequentially, rather than all at once. At each point, you must decide whether to "pick this ear of corn" or continue looking. You can rarely delay the decision more than a few weeks. What hints do you have for deciding?

Answer: As with any decision, there may be more than one right choice. Job seekers who find themselves in such dilemmas usually lack critical information, not options. If the farmer's daughter had known the size of the largest ears of corn in advance, she could have easily chosen one of the best ears.

Fortunately, job seekers can determine in advance what types of positions would best suit their abilities, interests and needs. They can use that information to create an "ideal job" description. By comparing each job offer they receive to that benchmark, they can make well-informed decisions.

Essential Components

Consider the following elements when writing a description of your ideal job:

Functional skills. These are innate skills, such as

Ms. Besson, an NBEW bimonthly columnist, is president of Career Dimensions, a Dallas-based firm specializing in career development and job search programs for professionals and corporations.

innovating, teaching, working with numbers, investigating or solving problems. Functional skills are fun and satisfying. If you neglect them, your career will lack zest and motivation.

Special knowledge. These are learned skills, such as using Lotus 1-2-3, doing cost accounting or market research, knowing legal precedents or administering EEO guidelines. Any subject mastered in school, on the job or in your leisure time qualifies as special knowledge. In profiling your ideal job, decide what special skills you most enjoy using. Maybe you're a genius at mergers and acquisitions, but your real love is helping small businesses develop marketing plans. If so, seek an opportunity with a venture capital or start-up firm that will use the background you prefer.

Personality traits. Some people are born team members. Others thrive on solo competition. Imag-

tive if they had shared a common vision. Instead, their conflicting personalities led to an unfortunate and costly rift. Rapport becomes more important as you move higher in an organization. Be clear about what qualities you hope to see in your colleagues. When interviewing, ask about the presence or absence of those traits. Even the most exciting opportunities can derail for lack of common purpose.

Working conditions. Penthouse suites and fleets of company cars initially may impress job seekers. But such prestigious accouterments will be satisfying only if the company's mission, philosophy and culture match yours. It might seem classy for a large law firm to provide lunch for its associates until you discover that you're supposed to eat at the office so management can bill those hours to your client. If your colleagues thrive on a workaholic schedule but you don't like working 60 hours every week, your chances for promotion there are slim.

Geographic considerations. Location is irrelevant to some and critical to others. Don't dismiss the importance of family proximity, weather, scenery or job opportunities for your spouse. Better to realize that you prefer the Northeast before a corporation spends \$50,000 relocating you to the Southwest. If a move is part of the deal, make sure you and your family really want to go.

Compensation. Ah, the lure of a larger paycheck, stock options and a corner office with oriental rugs. Money, perks and bonuses can be a significant incentive for you to change positions, but they often require trade-offs. Determine your ideal compensation package, then compare it to your offer. Unless you're miserable in your current job, only change positions if you'll receive a raise of at least 10% to 15%. If you'd be moving to an area with a higher cost of living, make sure the relocation package includes a raise, a cost-of-living increase, moving expenses and a hassle allowance.

Level of responsibility. Some managers want to be on the front lines close to the action. Others enjoy project management, where they can move from one troubleshooting assignment to another. A few love wearing a variety of hats in a small, fast-growing business. Others would rather manage one department within a large company, where their special expertise is highly valued.

Before you accept a position, be sure the company offers future opportunities that suit your preferred career path. Recently, an MIS manager ago-

ine the angst of those who pick the wrong venue. Competitors might be team pariahs, and team players, competitive wimps. Include an honest inventory of your personality in your ideal job description.

Values. Certainly, your employer's moral values must be compatible with your own. You must also consider whether a company will accommodate your career values, such as making lots of money, helping others, working independently, being creative, having opportunities to learn, or achieving greatness. One of the most common causes for candidate-position mismatch is a clash of individual and organizational values. If you're an entrepreneur, don't expect to revamp a large bureaucratic institution. Remember Ross Perot and General Motors!

People environments. Ross Perot and Roger Smith would have been happier and more produc-

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Accept

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nized over an offer from a firm that designs and sells the software he uses regularly. While the money and location were attractive, the job wasn't. He enjoyed managing an in-house department and had difficulty imagining himself as a technical marketing expert. He decided (correctly) to politely refuse the position.

Additional Influences

Other factors that may influence your decision include:

Feelings about your current position. You may be burned out, bored, harrassed by your boss, worried about a hostile takeover or having family troubles because of long hours and constant travel.

The desire to relocate. You may want to be closer to family or friends, away from major fault lines, next door to the Rockies or anywhere but "here."

Concern about a layoff. Defense industry employees are no doubt revising their resumes, calling friends, and reading the want ads a lot more lately.

Availability of similar positions in your field. Aerospace engineers can't be too picky right now; software engineers can.

Catastrophic expectations. A nasty little voice may keep saying, "If you don't take this job you'll never get another."

The elusive dream job. After months of discus-

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sions, a potential employer still hasn't decided whether to offer you a coveted position.

Don't let these considerations prevent you from evaluating each offer on its own merits. If you're not about to default on your mortgage and a position doesn't match your ideal job at least 90%, reject the offer. Conversely, an offer in the hand that's genuinely meaty is worth two in the bush.

You may wish you could reduce your decision to a mathematical formula where x number of points

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equals a winner. Unfortunately, following simple logic may mean rejecting your gut instincts. And frankly, gut is usually more trustworthy than intellect. Have you ever taken a job that was perfect on paper, but just didn't feel right? Bad decision, wasn't it?

One final thought: Apply for a variety of positions to increase your yield of potential job offers. Even if you're in hot pursuit of a sure offer, have Plan B as insurance. ●