

# Beware of burning bridges when declining offers

By Sheryl Silver  
Career Source

If you're an information technology (IT) professional with any of today's sought after skill sets, it wouldn't be unusual for your job search to yield multiple job offers.

Although an enviable situation, if you've never dealt with it before, you may be wondering how to manage the negotiating process without burning any bridges. What do you do, for example, if you get a job offer from your number one company? Can you use the first offer as leverage to speed up the hiring decision at the preferred organization organization?

Apparently. Recruiters say if they're really interested in a candidate, they can move more quickly. Linda Wood, a recruitment manager for Computer Sciences Corporation (CSC) in Falls Church, Virginia, says, "If someone lets us know an offer falls short, we have an extremely fast turnaround time. I recall a situation when we were even able to make an offer on a Saturday when someone had another offer they had to respond to."

Karen Gelman, an HR specialist for Coopers & Lybrand in Arlington, Va. says it can be advantageous to share the details of an offer, particularly with your preferred employer. "If we really want

someone, we may come back with a more competitive offer," she says.

Anne Johnson, staffing manager for The Boeing Company Space Systems Division in Downey, California, suggests job hunters try to get all their offers submitted before making a decision. That avoids the egregious faux pas of accepting a position, then calling back to say you've changed your mind. "It's really better if [candidates] believe another offer is imminent, to try and accelerate that decision so they can compare the offers simultaneously and stick with whichever one they pick," says Johnson.

Tom Weidenkopf, a vice president of human resources for AlliedSignal Aerospace in Torrance, California agrees, saying it really raises questions about a candidate's ethics and integrity to accept an offer, then call back to say they've received a better offer. "It's more appropriate," he says, "to ask an employer for an extension of time to make a decision if you're anticipating other offers."

If you don't intend to accept a company's offer, let the organization know immediately, urges Gelman. "Employers are more likely to think favorably of someone who lets them know as quickly as possible," she says. Wood agrees noting, "It frees [the company] to pursue

other candidates."

What about the employers whose offers you turn down? Is a future relationship still possible? "Absolutely," says Wood of CSC. "We're talking to someone right now who turned down an offer not long ago. At the time, he said he was interested in the company's philosophy, but felt the position wasn't the right fit. Two months later, he called us back and said he was ready to make a commitment. Keep in mind, if we've been interested enough in someone to go through the entire interview process and extend an offer, we've identified that individual as someone we really want."

What about counteroffers? They're common today, in part, because employers know how tough it is to replace qualified IT staff. "What I've seen is that in 75 percent of the cases where employees accept counteroffers, they leave their employers within a year," says Weidenkopf. In explaining the phenomenon, he says, "Once you announce you're leaving an employer, you break a bond." Even if you accept a counteroffer, he says, "the bond between employer and employee is broken."

Further, unless money was the issue that prompted someone to look for a new job, a counteroffer that simply includes an increase in compensation doesn't usually resolve the problem. With that

in mind, Weidenkopf counsels, "before accepting a counteroffer, people should ask themselves 'What motivated me to look for a new job in the first place? What's not being satisfied by my current job or employer?'"

Gelman and Wood also advise job hunters not to let the money aspect of a counteroffer blind them to other issues. "Be sure you're looking at more than money when considering counteroffers," says Gelman. "It's also important to look at the culture of the company and at growth opportunities, and to ask yourself, 'How are you treated there?'" If you decline a counteroffer, can you do so without alienating your employer who, may at some point serve as a reference for you? Weidenkopf says, "You can if you handle the notification and transition out of the company professionally, graciously, and thoroughly. That means complete your commitments and talk positively about the company and people you're leaving."

Whether you decide to stay with a current employer or leave, Wood says honesty in your dealings is essential to maintaining your reputation. "If they play around with us, we'll remember that too!"

Sheryl Silver may be contacted by mail at "Career Source, P.O. Box 65754, Washington, DC 20035-5744

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