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The careerist: a better job offer

As told to Rhymer Rigby

You have accepted one job offer but then a better one comes along. It is a nice problem to have but that does not make it any less of a dilemma

What should I take into account? “You need to think quite hard about what constitutes a better offer, especially if you’ve gone through a recruitment process for a senior role,” says Alan Redman, a business psychologist with the Criterion Partnership. “Make sure you ask yourself if the new offer is as good a fit. This is particularly true if the better offer is financially better. Once you’re in a role, salary tends to be unimportant compared to things like your relationship with your boss.”

Corinne Mills, joint managing director of Personal Career Management, advises: “If you’re unsure, go and spend half a day in the new company. You’ll pick up very quickly on whether it’s right for you.”

You should also bear in mind that the first company may counter-offer. If you are using the second company’s offer as a negotiating chip that’s fine, but you shouldn’t get into negotiations if you already know you’re going to go for the second job.

Does it depend on where I am in the process? As the old joke has it, verbal agreements are not worth the paper they’re written on – and the verbal agreement stage is perhaps the last point at which you can walk away without much awkwardness. This is also true of the better offer. “The first thing is to make sure you have the better offer in writing,” says Ms Mills. “Until that happens, you shouldn’t say anything.” If you haven’t signed and think that a better offer is likely, you may need to delay a bit. It is perfectly OK to say you need time to look at the contract, but Nigel Parslow, UK managing director of Harvey Nash Executive Search, says: “You need to manage the process professionally and if you’re unsure it’s better to stay silent until you’re sure.”

What if I have signed a contract? “Here, you’re contractually engaged,” says Mr Parslow. “To cut and run is a bit cheap really and it eats at your integrity.”

Ms Mills says you need to do what is right for your career, though she adds: “If you’ve signed, then legally you do need to be a bit careful. It might be worth getting the contract checked out by a lawyer. However, although HR departments can take legal action against you, they rarely do. They’ll normally write it off. If you don’t want to be there, they’d rather you weren’t there.”

How do I deal with actually letting them down? Mr Redman says the way you tell them should be appropriate to the relationship that's been formed.

“If you've been in regular telephone contact then this is how you should tell them. Anything else is cowardly. Tell them what attracted you to their job and be clear why the other job is more attractive”

Remember that your original employer may not be that surprised – especially if you are considered top talent.

“Companies – especially big ones – will survive the disappointment,” says Mr Redman. “You shouldn't be too squeamish about looking after your own prospects.”

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