

What to do when the offer comes too soon

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The bonus check has cleared, winter is half over and you are ready to “see what is out there.” Months ago you concluded that it was time to make a lateral move. One of your favorite partners has gone in-house and your work has become less interesting. In addition, the firm does not seem to be offering partnership to associates in your department.

You are about to send out cover letters when the phone rings. A recruiter wants to talk to you about a mid-sized firm that seems to have what you are seeking. You are intrigued.

The recruiter sends out your resume with a nice cover letter, and the next day the firm invites you in for an interview. Your adrenalin is pumping. The next two weeks are a whirlwind. By the end of the second week, the firm makes you an offer.

You panic.

Everything looks right. You connected with everyone you met and your own due diligence has uncovered nothing but good things. You are already starting to picture yourself working there.

But maybe there is something that is even better. If you were able to get an offer this easily, maybe you are selling yourself short. How can you accept the only offer you have received? What should you do?

In an ideal world, you would be completely informed about all of your options. In the real world, however, we are often asked to make decisions with imperfect information. So how should you handle this situation?

Know what is important to you

If you are contemplating a lateral move, the most important thing you can do is to take the time to think about what is important. Putting your thoughts on paper can give you clarity about your priorities. It can also serve as a resource when you are weighing your options. Are you looking for more partnership potential? Shorter hours? A different mix of work?

If you need help in focusing your thoughts, I have published a career audit tool that originally appeared in this column. You can find it at www.bcgsearch.com/seckler_stephen.html (scroll down to the articles under “Career Satisfaction” for a link).

An ounce of prevention

You are more likely to make a good decision if you have more than one choice. While this may not always be possible (the vicissitudes of the job market and your own marketability put much of this

beyond your control), once you make the decision to approach the market, it is good practice to investigate multiple options. This will have many benefits.

First, you are less likely to fall blindly in love with the only option available to you. Second, you will increase your negotiating posture. And third, you will have more confidence that you are informed about the job market. Ultimately, you will feel better about any decision that you do make.

Understand the employer's concerns

If the offer does come too soon and you are still waiting to hear back from other employers, see if you can buy more time. Ask the firm when it needs to have an answer.

If you are trying to find reasons to get an extension, it is important not to make the employer feel like it is your second choice. One option is to explain that this is a very important decision and you promised yourself (and your family) that you would go through the whole process before making any decisions. Make sure the firm knows that you are very flattered and very interested.

Another legitimate way to buy more time is to ask to meet more associates. Most firms will be happy to honor these requests if they are made in a respectful way. Tell the firm you want to feel good about your process.

The employer wants to know that you are seriously considering the offer and not just wasting its time (and potentially causing it to miss out on its number two choice). But once it has made an offer, it is committed to getting you to accept and is likely to be accommodating.

Measure against your self-assessment

If you only have one option on the table and it looks very attractive, go back to the list you made. Look at the criteria you said were important to you. While a good practice is to look at several options at once, if the right thing happens to come along and you have to make a yes or no decision, do not throw away a good opportunity simply because you only interviewed at one firm.

In today's legal market, making a lateral move is no longer looked at with suspicion. Just know that if things do not work out at the new firm, that you can always consider another move.

But do your best to make good career decisions by knowing what you want and weighing all of your options.