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“Never Accept a Counteroffer: It’s Career Suicide”

By Paul Hawkinson
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It's nice to be wooed back, but don't expect to stay long

A tax accountant with a Chicago-based public accounting firm accepted a top corporate position at a local manufacturer that paid \$15,000 more than he currently earned. But the accountant changed his mind after his firm's senior partner made him a counteroffer. The partner dangled a plethora of incentives, including the promise of a partnership in the near future. Three months later, after the tax season ended, the accountant was fired.

A manufacturing manager with a medium-sized metal products company in Albuquerque, N.M., accepted a new position that included a higher salary and better benefits. But he decided to stay put after his company agreed to match the offer and told him of great things on the horizon. However, he wasn't told that the firm might be merging with another. Six months after the executive decided to stay, he was merged out of his job. Following nine months of unemployment, he landed a lower-paying position.

No matter what the company says when making its counteroffer, you'll always be a fidelity risk!

Ask any executive recruiter and you'll hear dozens of heartbreaking stories like these involving Counteroffers. Unfortunately, more executives seem to be getting and accepting them because of the inconsistent economy. Companies are operating with reduced staffs and any defections from the ranks create problems for those who remain. It's much easier for employers to sweeten the pot to keep executives from deserting than to conduct grueling and expensive searches for replacements.

Mathew Henry, the 17th-century writer, said, "Many a dangerous temptation comes to us in fine gay colors that are but skin deep." The same can be said for Counteroffers, those magnetic enticements designed to lure you back into the nest after you've decided it's time to fly away.

But in good times or bad, the dictum remains constant. Counteroffers should never be accepted . . . EVER!

Those few rare instances where accepting one is beneficial, occur about as frequently as being struck by lightning.

The Right Perspective

A counteroffer is an inducement from your current employer to get you to stay after you've announced your intention to take another job. It doesn't include instances when you receive an offer but don't tell your boss, or when you tell your employer about an offer you never intended to take in a classic "they-want-me-but-I'm-staying-with you" ploy.

These are merely positioning tactics that can reinforce your worth by letting your boss know you have other options. Mention of a true counteroffer, however, carries an actual threat to quit. Interviews with employers who make counteroffers, and employees who accept them, have shown that accepting a counteroffer - tempting as it may be - is tantamount to career suicide. Consider the problem in its proper perspective.

What really goes through a boss's mind when someone quits?

"This couldn't be happening at a worse time."

"He's one of my best people. If I let him quit now, it'll wreak havoc on the morale of the department."

"I've already got one opening in my department. I don't need another fight now."

"This will probably screw up the entire vacation schedule."

"I'm working as hard as I can and I don't need to do his work too."

"I lose another good employee, the company might decide to 'lose' me too."

"My review is coming up and this will make me look bad."

"Maybe I can keep him on until I find a suitable replacement."

"My word. We're working with a skeleton crew already. If I lose this one, we'll all be working around the clock just to stay even."

What will the boss say to keep you in the nest? These comments are common:

"I'm really shocked. I thought you were as happy with us as we are with you. Let's discuss it before you make your final decision."

"Aw gee, I've been meaning to tell you about the great plans we have for you, but it's been confidential until now."

"The V.P. has you in mind for some exciting and expanding responsibilities."

"Your raise was scheduled to go into effect next quarter, but we'll make it effective immediately."

"You're going to work for who?"

"How can you do this in the middle of a major project.' We were really counting on you." (They're always in the middle of one.)

Just a Stall Tactic

Let's face it. When someone quits, it's a direct reflection on the boss. Unless you're really incompetent or a destructive thorn in his side, the boss might look bad for allowing you to go. It's an implied insult to his management skills. His gut reaction is to do what has to be done to keep you from leaving until he's ready. That's human nature. Unfortunately, it's also human nature to want to stay - unless your work life is abject misery. Career change, like all ventures into the unknown, is tough. That's why bosses know they can usually keep you around by pressing the right buttons.

Before you succumb to a tempting counteroffer, consider these universal truths:

- Any situation is suspect if an employee must receive an outside offer before the present employer will suggest a raise, promotion or better working conditions.
- No matter what the company says when making its counteroffer, you'll always be a fidelity risk. Having once demonstrated your lack of loyalty (for whatever reason), you will lose your status as a team player and your place in the inner circle.
- Counteroffers are usually nothing more than stall devices to give your employer time to replace you. Your reasons for wanting to leave still exist. They'll just be slightly more tolerable in the short term because of the raise, promotion or promises made to keep you.

Question:

Should you have to solicit an offer and threaten to quit from your current employer every time you deserve better working conditions?