

Considering the Counteroffer

Of course, if your motivation for getting a job offer was to position yourself for a counteroffer, then you're in the catbird's seat—you can't lose either way. Or can you? Some employment experts point out that accepting a counteroffer is the equivalent of career suicide.

According to Paul Hawkinson, publisher of The Fordyce Letter, your acceptance of a counteroffer could very well blow up in your face.

Here's how. Let's say you announce your plans to leave your current job. This, in effect, blackmails your boss, who makes you a counteroffer only to keep you until he can find your replacement, at which point you're dropped like a hot potato. In the meantime, the trusting relationship you've enjoyed with your current supervisors and peers abruptly ends, and your loyalty becomes forever suspect.

Is this sort of scenario accurate? I guess it depends. My experience has been mixed. That is, some of the candidates I've known who've accepted counteroffers have remained at their old jobs for years, and have smoothed over whatever difficulties caused their split in the first place.

It's precisely for this reason that I'm so cautious when I work with currently employed job seekers. I want to feel confident that their motives are pure before we both invest a lot of time and energy in testing the market.

However, there's a lot of evidence to support the theory that candidates who accept counteroffers become damaged goods once they've been herded back into the fold.

Here Come the Three Stages

If your intention to make a change is sincere, and a counteroffer by your current company won't change your decision to leave, you should still keep up your guard. A counteroffer attempt can be potentially devastating, both on a personal and professional level. Unless you know how to diffuse your current employer's retaliation against your resignation, you may end up psychologically wounded, or right back at the job you wanted to leave.

The best way to shield yourself from the inevitable mixture of emotions surrounding the act of submitting your resignation is to remember that employers follow a predictable, three-stage pattern when faced with a resignation:

1. **They'll be in shock. "You sure picked a fine time to leave! Who's going to finish the project we started?"**

The implication is that you're irreplaceable. They might as well ask, "How will we ever get the work done without you?"

To answer this assertion, you can reply, "If I were run over by a truck on my way to work tomorrow, I feel that somehow, this company would survive."

2. **They'll start to probe. "Who's the new company? What sort of position did you accept? What are they paying you?"**

Here you must be careful not to disclose too much information, or appear too enthusiastic. Otherwise, you run the risk of feeding your current employer with ammunition he can use against you later, such as, "I've heard some pretty terrible things about your new company" or, "They'll make everything look great until you actually get there. Then you'll see what a sweat shop that place really is."

3. **They'll make you an offer to try and keep you from leaving. "You know that raise you and I were talking about a few months back? I forgot to tell you: We were just getting it processed yesterday."**

To this you can respond, "Gee, today you seem pretty concerned about my happiness and well-being. Where were you yesterday, before I announced my intention to resign?" It may take several days for the three stages to run their course, but believe me, sooner or later, you'll find yourself engaged in conversations similar to these. More than once, candidates have called me after they've resigned, to tell me that their old company followed the three-stage pattern exactly as I described it. Not only were they prepared to diffuse the counteroffer attempt, they found the whole sequence to be almost comi-