



## COMMON QUESTIONS THAT MAY BE ASKED UPON EXIT INTERVIEWS AND SUGGESTIONS FOR PROFESSIONAL WAYS TO DEAL WITH THEM

Q: Didn't know you were unhappy or looking?

A: I wasn't unhappy or looking but this position sounded interesting enough to investigate.

Q: How did you get the job?

A: I answered an ad. I was referred by a friend or neighbor. I was recruited.

Q: Where are you going?

A: I am going to join \_\_\_\_\_. I will be glad to call you after I start and give you my number in case you need me for something.

Q: How much are they paying you (what can I do to keep you)?

A: This was not a decision based upon money. It is based on my career goals – (*make this clear*) – it will keep the talk positive and professional.

Q: This puts me in a bind – how to get work done?

A: I will be happy to train any replacement or assist the transition in any way.

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## COUNTER OFFERS

Another company has approached you, and offered a position that should allow a good career growth opportunity and a moderate increase in compensation. You've analyzed, if not agonized over, the decision to leave a good (or bad) job for what could be a better one, and have accepted, or decided to accept, the new positions. However, upon tendering your resignation, your current boss asks you to stay. This appeal is known as a counter-offer, or buy back.

In recent years, it seems to be the norm, and almost the expected course of action. "It's almost like a part of the accepted divorce proceedings, and allow the boss to save face with his boss," explained one departing executive. "And it sometime has to take its course."

But take care not to fall into the trap, or be blind-sided to your own detriment. You should understand what's about to be cast upon you. Counter-offers are typically made in conjunction with some form of flattery.

- You're too valuable, and we need you.
- You can't desert the team/your friends and leave them hanging.
- (guilt trip)
- We were just about to promote/raise you, and it was confidential 'til now!
- What did they offer, why were you leaving and what do you need to stay?
- Why would you work for that company?
- The President wants to meet with you before you make your final decision.

Counter offers usually take the form of:

1. More money
2. Promotion/more responsibility
3. Modified reporting structure

4. Promises of above or future considerations, and/or
5. Disparaging remarks about the new company or job and/or
6. Guilt trips

These tempting gestures inevitably create confusion and buyer's remorse. Career changes are tough enough as it is ... leaving a comfortable job, friends, location, etc. for an unknown and challenging opportunity in which one must reprove oneself. These anxieties frequently cloud the best of logic. But just because a new position is a little scary, does not mean it's not a positive move. It is just usually more comfortable to stay.

Of course, we all prefer to think that we are MVP's, and want to believe these manipulative gestures, but beware! Accepting a counter-offer or appeal to stay is the wrong choice to make.

Think about it. If you were worth "X" yesterday, why are they suddenly willing to pay you "X + Y" today, when you were not expecting a raise for some time? Further, reflect on how you felt when someone resigned from your staff.

The reality is that bosses/companies do not like to be fired. Your boss is likely more concerned that she/he may look bad, and that this could jeopardize his/her career. S/he is judged by the ability to retain staff. When a contributor quits, morale suffers. Further, your leaving might jeopardize an important project, cause a greater workload, or foul up a vacation schedule. It's never a good time for someone to quit, and it may prove very time consuming and costly to replace you, especially considering search and relocation expenses. It is much cheaper to keep you even at a slightly higher salary. And, it would be better to fire you later, on the company's time frame.

"We have made counter offers on occasion, if a good person approaches the issue professionally," states a former senior partner of a Big 6 accounting/consulting firm. "But usually it was a stop-gap measure because we couldn't afford a deflection at that point in time. We did not count on those people long term, and usually they'd burned bridges two or three levels up, if not with their immediate manager. It definitely put them in a career holding pattern." He went on to recall a long conference between himself, his boss and two subordinate managers, in which a counter offer/raise to a person two levels down was approved. "Immediately after that meeting, my boss called me, and said, "We can't afford to lose him now, but our number one priority is to find a replacement, ASAP!" And, we replaced him within a few months."

Another senior executive from a major financial service organization shared the following opinions, "If it's a real 'hitter', I'll try to get him to stay. But to be honest, any additional compensation is 'stealing' from his future earnings, and I'll always question his convictions, knowing he can be bought. Further, I'll wonder if I can really count on him (which equates to limited future opportunities). In other words, the damage is done."

While your employer may truly consider you an asset, and may genuinely care about you personally, you can be sure that your interests are secondary to your boss's career, and your company's profit or survival. In other words, flattering offers and comments are attempts to manipulate you to do something that is in your employer's best interests, and not necessarily yours. It's not about you.

### **The negative ramifications to accepting a counter-offer are numerous.**

Where did the money or responsibility come from? Was it your next raise – just early? Will you be limited in the future? Will you have to threaten to quit to get your next raise, or might your (cheaper) replacement be sought ASAP? Our client executive, who preferred to remain unnamed, commented that "90% of the time, accepting a counter-offer is the wrong thing to do. And, if the business is so dependent on one person, it's a weak business."

You've demonstrated your unhappiness, or your lack of blind loyalty, and will be perceived as having committed blackmail to gain a raise. You'll not be considered a team player again. Many employers will hold a grudge at the

next review period, and you may at the top of the next Reduction-in Force “hit list”. “Like an adulterous affair that has been discovered, the broken trust is never fully recovered,” stated one client that requested anonymity.

Apart from the short-term band aid treatment, nothing changes with the company. After the dust settles from this upheaval, you’ll be in the same old rut. In fact, statistics indicate that more than 80% of those accepting counter-offers leave, or are terminated, within 6-12 months anyway. In our search practice, although counter-offer acceptances are discouraged 50% of those who did succumb had re-initiated their job search within 90 days. In fact, one candidate called us back in 5 days!

One executive candidate told us ““It was exactly like you said it was going to be ... they butter you up, give you more money, but nothing really changes. In fact they get worse.” He went on to say, “My immediate boss was really agitated, since his boss interceded. At raise time he told me that none had been budgeted (since I had already gotten a raise) and that if I wanted, I could negotiate with the President as before.” This gentleman, by the way, left the company within months.

Attempted buy-backs demonstrate disrespect for your well thought out decision and your commitment to the new company. Should your current employer decide to eliminate your positions, or skip you for a promotion, just try to counter and change their minds. Fat chance! You’ve analyzed, accepted, and committed to the new company, which has surely made plans and accommodations around you, and is counting on you. Don’t sell out or back out. Stand by your word. Everyone will respect your decision and integrity. If the previous employer was sincere about your value, they’ll likely make a spot for you in the future.

Look at the two opportunities, your old job and the new position, as if you were unemployed. Which holds the most real potential? Probably the new one or you’d not have accepted it in the first place.

Two things are certain. (1) You can normally expect a counter-offer, and (2) you should hold a steady course from the beginning, and stick with your decision to move on to a bigger and better future.

### **Counter-offer Acceptance Road to Career Ruin**

#### **A raise won’t permanently cushion thorns in the nest**

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Mathew Henry, the 17<sup>th</sup>-century writer said, “Many dangerous temptation comes to us in fine gay colors that are but skin deep.” The same can be said for counter-offers, those magnetic enticements to lure you back into the nest after you’ve decided it’s time to fly away.

The litany of horror stories I have come across in my years as an executive recruiter, consultant and publisher, provides a litmus test that clearly indicates counter-offers should never be accepted.... EVER!

I define a counter-offer simply as an inducement from your current employer to get you to stay after you’ve announced your intention to take another job. We’re not talking about those instances when you receive offer, but don’t tell your boss. Nor are we discussing offers that you never intended to take, yet tell your employer about anyway as a “they-want-me-but-I’m-staying-with-you” ploy.

These are merely astute positioning tactics you may choose to use to reinforce your worth by letting your boss know you have other options. Mention of true counter-offer, however, carries an actual threat to quit.

Interviews with employers who make counter-offers, and employees, who accept them, have shown that as tempting as they may be, acceptance may cause career suicide. During the past 20 years, I have seen only isolated incidents in which an accepted counter-offer has benefited the employee. 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."
- "This is 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 right now."
- "This will probably screw up the entire vacation schedule."
- "I'm working as hard as I can, and I don't need to his work, too."
- "If 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."

### **What will the boss say to keep you in the nest? Some of 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 VP 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?"

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 by "allowing" you to go. 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 in 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 counter-offer, consider these universal truths:**

- Any situation in which an employee is forced to get an outside offer before the present employer will suggest a raise, promotion or better working conditions, is suspect.
- No matter what the company says when making its counter-offer, you will always be considered 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.
- Counter-offers are usually nothing more than stall devices to give your employer time to replace you.
- Your reasons for wanting to leave still exist. Conditions are just made a bit more tolerable in the short term because of the raise, promotion or promises made to keep you.
- Counter-offers are only made in response to a threat to quit every time you deserve better working conditions?
- Decent and well-managed companies don't make counter-offers ... EVER! Their policies are fair and equitable. They will not be subjected to "counter-offer coercion" or what they perceive as blackmail.

If the urge to accept a counter-offer hits you, keep on cleaning out your desk as you count your blessings.

## Counter-offers in the 90's – Benefit or Blackmail?

*Kevin was working for a medium Texas based computer-consulting firm when he was recruited by a major national consumer products manufacturer. As a computer programmer, Kevin was attracted to the new position because it included use of a higher quality technology and more pay. Kevin quickly accepted an offer from the consumer products firm and went to his boss to resign. His boss made many promises in an effort to convince Kevin to stay. Kevin finally agreed to stay, rejecting the other opportunity. Three months later, Kevin's boss gave Kevin's position to a recruiter as a top priority assignment and suggested that the recruiter get more specifics on the duties from Kevin. Naturally, Kevin was shocked that his boss was trying to replace him and asked for an explanation. His boss stated that when Kevin had first tried to resign, it would have left the company in a bind, so they did what they could to keep him ... but they would never get caught unaware again. Incidentally, the promises of high tech exposure and more pay never materialized.*

Recently, as companies become more competitive in a fast-paced technological workplace, employees tell countless stories of bogus counter-offers where promises were never kept and, in some cases, threats were even implied. A software engineer in Houston accepted a counter-offer from his employer and told the firm that had offered a new position that he would not be starting with them after all. His current boss had pointed out that they would have to close the doors if he left, thereby rendering several other employees jobless and he would have that hanging over his head.

The truth is that nearly 90% of counter-offers extended these days never end up being what the employee thought when they made the decision to stay. If your incentive to stay is the offer of more money, don't be surprised if your next scheduled review includes no increase in pay. The company claims they gave you a raise earlier in the counter-offer situation and "the money had to come from somewhere". Most companies have strict wage and salary guidelines that are in place.

Additionally, offering to make changes in the workplace to accommodate you may be well intentioned but rarely realistic. Later, employers will claim that the changes you required were detrimental to other employees and satisfying you had become a low-level priority.

The worst scenario in a counter-offer is also a highly common practice. Your employer targets you for layoff later when cutbacks become necessary. The rationalization is that you received an offer several months ago and a layoff would not represent such a hardship to you as you are "marketable".

The bottom line is that if you accept a counter-offer, the probability of you voluntarily leaving or being asked to leave the position in the next six months is very high. The company may always question your loyalty, none of your counter-offer promises have been kept and you face uncertainty and instability in your position.