



Career Planning



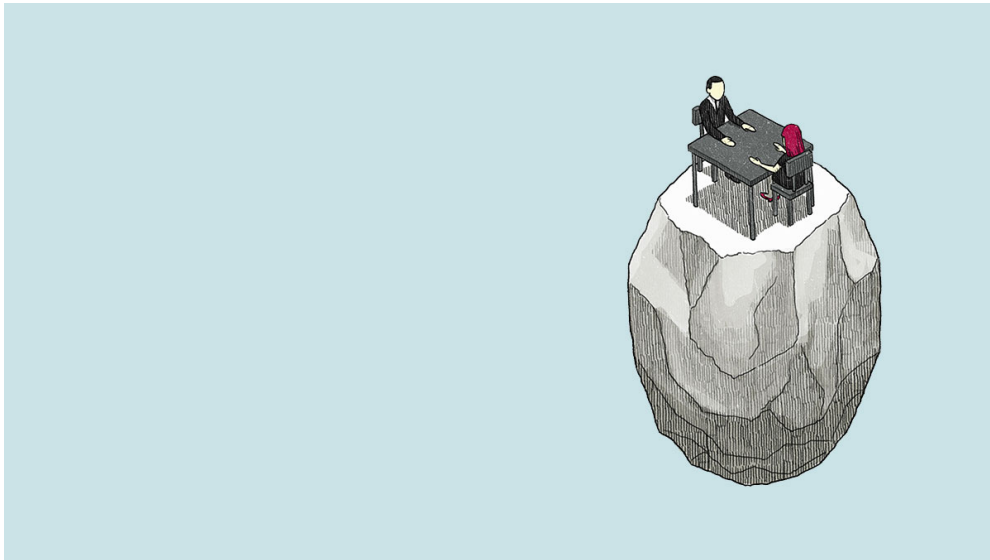
How to Evaluate, Accept, Reject, or Negotiate a Job Offer

by Rebecca Knight

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Congratulations! You got the job. Now for the hard part: deciding whether to accept it or not. How should you assess the salary as well as the other perks? Which publicly available information should you rely on? How should you try to get a better deal? And what's the best way to decline an offer if it's not the right job for you?

What the Experts Say

When an employer extends a job offer to you, he has, in essence, “fallen in love with you,” says John Lees, the UK-based career strategist

and author of *The Success Code*. “He has psychologically committed to you, and it is a critical moment.” According to Lees, “you have more leverage” to shape your job description and improve your salary and benefits package “right after you are made an offer than you do in your first two years of employment.” Still, evaluating a job offer is not always straightforward — especially since you may not have the luxury of comparing it to others. “Step back and think expansively about your objectives,” advises Jeff Weiss, president of Lesley University and author of the *HBR Guide to Negotiating*. “Think about the offer in terms of your development, your quality of life, and the variety of the work you want to do.” No job offer will be perfect, so a big part of the evaluation requires you to “think about the trade-offs you are willing to make.” Here are some ideas to help you figure out if the job is right for you.

Shift your mindset

First, you must recognize that receiving an offer represents a “new and different phase” of the job search process, says Lees. “The purpose of the interview is to get the offer,” he says. The next stage is about weighing that offer and then negotiating with your new employer. “Pause, you are starting a new chapter.” Bear in mind that even though the job is yours if you want it, you must “continue to be enthusiastic” in your dealings with your prospective manager, says Lees. “By sounding critical or suspicious or by questioning something about the offer, you are sending a negative signal,” he says. “It sounds as if you’re uncertain that you want job.” That may indeed be the case, but it’s not the message you want to send to your would-be manager. “Employers need to feel that you are committed.”

Be methodical

Next, you need to think about what matters to you in both your professional and private life and then “assess the offer” against these

metrics, says Weiss. “People tend to focus on the dollars, but it is useful to ask, “What is of value to me?” After all, money is only one component of career satisfaction. “Very often it comes down to, ‘I would rather make X amount of money and be excited to go to work in the morning, than make X plus 10% and hate my job,’” he says. Below are the most important components to take into account as you assess the offer.

- **Salary.** Even when the money on offer is enough to live on, you need to figure out if it’s an amount worthy of your knowledge and skills and whether it’s in line with the local market. Look at the financial package on the whole. The key question, says Weiss, is “What is someone with my competencies and experience in this role and in this city paid?” Databases and job search websites, such as Glassdoor, Indeed, Ladders, and Salary.com are a good starting point, but Lees recommends talking to recruiters and headhunters and others in the industry. “Find anyone who knows the sector and the range,” he says. As part of your detective work, you must also devise “a good argument for why you are in the top 10-15% of that range.” But usually there is only so much wiggle room. “You must have a backup plan if there is no flexibility on money in terms of what other areas you want to push back on.”
- **Job content.** It’s also important to think about whether you will “derive job satisfaction,” from the offer that’s on the table, says Lees. To answer this question, you need to know the “kinds of activities you want to be involved in and the skills you want to use” as a professional. Ask yourself questions like “Do I want to lead a big team, supervise only a few others, or have zero management duties? Do I want to be in front of clients? Do I crave autonomy? Do I want lots of international travel — or no travel at all? What kinds of projects do I want to be engaged in? And what kinds of professional tasks do I want no part of?” Then see how well the offer matches up against the responsibilities you’re being asked to take on. “Also, look at what you

will be doing, what success looks like, and what benchmarks you'll be judged against," he says. Having a deep understanding of what's expected of you is critical for deciding whether you do indeed want the job, he adds. Think hard about whether the "the job is achievable and whether you feel you are going to be able to hit the targets set out." If the answers are no, it may be that the role is ill-conceived or not for you.

- **Cultural fit.** You must also "do your due diligence," on the organization and its people to make a sound judgment on whether you will enjoy working there, notes Weiss. Ask yourself, "Is this a place where I will be happy? Where I will be challenged? And where I will thrive?" To answer that, Lees recommends "working the phones, reaching out to your contacts and LinkedIn network," and asking questions. "What is the organization like? How long do people stay? Find out what happened to the last person who did the job." You will not be able to negotiate or change the organization's culture, of course, but it is helpful to know beforehand what you're getting into. It might make sense to do a trial run at the company during the evaluation stage. "Say, 'I really want to learn more about this organization. Can I spend a few hours with the team?' That'll give you a sense of what your colleagues are like, what it would be like to work there, and where the bodies are buried."
- **Flexibility, vacation, and other perks.** For many employees, vacation time and the ability to work flexible hours are an increasingly valuable perk. While health benefits are typically standard issue, additional paid time off may be negotiable. If flexibility is not an explicit component of the job offer, you can broach the topic in the negotiation stage, says Weiss. But bear in mind that "things like that are much easier to raise when you've made yourself invaluable," and have been working in the job for a certain period of time. That said, it's important during the evaluation stage to find out whether current employees are afforded such benefits. Get a feel for

how a request for flexibility might be received by senior management. “If you are a perfect match for the job and it’s a tight market, you have a lot of leverage,” says Lees. But if the market is more fluid, you may have little leeway.

- **Other options.** “You must also assess your walk-away alternatives,” says Weiss. Even if you don’t necessarily have other job offers in hand, you need to consider other possibilities. “Think about the offer in terms of the cost and benefit of starting the job search process all over again, of staying in your current job, or of waiting to see what other offers materialize later down the road,” he says. If nothing more, this exercise is useful in helping you realize that you have options.

Devise your plan

Once you have “determined the most important elements of the offer that you would like to change,” you need to “decide which cards you are going to play and the sequence of how you will play them,” says Lees. Formulating your negotiation strategy requires creativity, says Weiss. If you are dealing with an intermediary — an HR administrator or a recruiter, for instance — remember to “not only make requests, but also arm that person with questions, information, and ideas.” Come at it from the “perspective of joint problem-solving.” He suggests saying something like, “The salary you’re offering is great, but I want to keep developing in this role. I can imagine some possibilities that might make the job more palatable such as having access to a mentoring program, a rotation program, or an educational allowance. Which of these might be possible?”

Be tough but cheerful

The rest is “classic negotiation,” says Lees. “You want to maximize the cost of the things you are prepared to accept and minimize the things you’re asking for.” Demonstrate that you’ve undertaken a thoughtful evaluation. For instance, you might say, “I am quite happy with the role

and responsibilities, but I would like to work from home one day per week.” Seek to come across as a “tough but cheerful negotiator,” he says. “Go into the deal-making with your eyes open,” he adds. “You can’t negotiate everything, and once you’ve agreed on something you can’t go back on it,” he says. Adds Weiss: “It’s not what you ask for; it’s how you ask for it. Be well-prepared, respectful, and constructive. You want to be seen as someone they want to work with.”

Say no (politely) if it’s not right

Ideally there will be some give and take in these negotiations, but if “you keep coming up against a ‘no’ for everything you ask for, that demonstrates inflexibility” on the part of your prospective employer, and that “could well be a management style you don’t want to live with,” says Lees. Heed red flags. “Pay attention to your internal monitoring system,” he says. “If due diligence tells you that you should not take the job, listen.” Besides, there is no shame in declining a job offer if it’s not the right fit. “As long as you turn it down politely with one or two good reasons — it will not stretch you enough or you want to work in a different sector — you shouldn’t feel bad about it,” he says. And yet, you should “always leave the door open,” says Weiss. “The people you are dealing with are your potential customers, potential advisors, and perhaps even your future employers. Be respectful.”

Principles to Remember

Do

- Think about what you want out of your job and use that as a framework to determine the elements of the offer you would like to alter
- Be selective about what you push back on
- Employ classic negotiation techniques by maximizing the cost of the things you are prepared to accept and minimizing the things you seek.

Don't

- Be critical or suspicious when questioning something about the offer.
- Neglect to consider your walkaway alternatives.
- Ignore red flags. If your instincts and due diligence tells you that you should not take the job, listen.

Case Study #1: Do due diligence on salary considerations and be open to making trade-offs

Two years ago, Jane Chung was contacted about a job as a project manager at Los Angeles-based AltaMed Health Services Corporation. At the time, Jane was a consultant and counted AltaMed among her clients.

When Jane got the offer, she was instantly pleased. “The initial base salary was around 20% higher than my salary at the time,” she says. “Normally, I would’ve been tempted to accept immediately, but I knew that I needed to do a more thorough calculation of the complete offer package.”

Jane’s first order of business was to do a careful, comprehensive evaluation of the money. She used publicly available information from

Glassdoor and Indeed to get a sense of the specific title's market average. She also talked to recruiters and other people in her LinkedIn network to determine her worth. "I make it a habit, whether I'm actively job searching or not, to use my personal network to inquire about other companies' paid time off allowances/policies and flexibility in work schedule," she says.

From her due diligence, she learned that going from the private sector to a non-profit health system would mean a significant reduction in bonuses. "I recalculated my total current pay to be inclusive of benefits and bonuses, and factored in the increased scope and responsibility of this new position," she says.

Next, Jane reflected on whether she would be happy working at AltaMed. "My primary motivation for pursuing a position was because of the mission of the organization to provide healthcare to disadvantaged and under-served communities," she says. She was already familiar with and impressed by the organization's culture, dynamics and senior leaders.

And there were other perks. "I also knew the company observed a corporate shutdown during the holiday season, which was a plus for me," she says.

She then formulated her negotiation plan. A recruiter was acting as a go-between, and Jane made sure to "ask a lot of questions" while continually "expressing genuine enthusiasm for the offer."

Her first request was for a higher base salary, and while AltaMed did comply, the second offer still didn't meet her goal. So she next asked the recruiter if other elements, such as paid time off, were open for negotiation. Unfortunately, "she said that wouldn't be possible because

of the company's strict adherence to the PTO formula based on years served," Jane recalls.

Still, the move "did help the recruiter know I was committed to this position and that I was also open to negotiating other elements," Jane said. She asked once more if the company could sweeten the offer and it responded with another small base salary increase plus a signing bonus. So she took the job.

Today Jane is in the middle of a new job search as her project is tied to federal funding that is due to end in September of this year.

Case Study # 2: Prioritize what's important to you and formulate an approach

A few years ago, a recruiter approached Andrea Molette Bradford, a marketing executive who has worked for Coca-Cola and Sprint, about a vice president position at a large retail company based in a different city.

Andrea was eager to make a career change and excited about the job. "The recruiter provided invaluable information about the company and coached me during the interview and the offer process," she says. "However, I kept in mind that the recruiter was hired and compensated by the company; therefore, I did not expect him to prioritize my best interests."

The offer arrived, and it was pretty good. She was pleased with role and responsibilities, starting salary, health benefits, bonus payment, and stock options.

But there were still some things that Andrea wanted to change. "Whenever I consider an offer, I always write down what I want,

in priority order. I never share this list, but it is my north star in negotiations.”

Her first priority was more vacation time; the second was a later start date. “I wanted to push it back so that I could close out my home and have time to move and get settled in my new city,” she says.

She then formulated a plan for how she’d approach these requests. The thrust of her message was that she was satisfied with the bulk of the offer but wanted to maintain the number of weeks of holiday that she had in her current job. “I also told my boss that traveling makes me a well-rounded professional, and I need that vacation time in order to see people and things outside of my backyard.” She also explained that she had relocated before and knew how important it was to allow “adequate time” for the transition.

Andrea strived to come across as reasonable and positive during the negotiation. She secured the additional vacation and, although her prospective boss wanted her to begin work earlier, Andrea ultimately prevailed. “The hiring manager pushed hard on [the start date], but I think he understood that it was important to me, and I only came to the table with two requests.” She says she made the right decision to take the job.

Today Andrea is an independent consultant. “I am always open to great opportunities,” she says.



Rebecca Knight is currently a senior correspondent at Insider covering careers and the workplace. Previously she was a freelance journalist and a lecturer at Wesleyan University. Her work has been published in *The New York Times*, *USA Today*, and *The Financial Times*.