



SOCIETY OF ACTUARIES

Article from:

The Stepping Stone

November 2013 – Issue 52

What Would You Do?

Responses to "Can You Go Back?"

By John West Hadley



John Hadley is a career counselor who works with job seekers frustrated with their search, and professionals struggling to increase their visibility and influence. He can be reached at John@JHACareers.com or 908.725.2437. Find his free *Career Tips* newsletter and other resources at www.JHACareers.com, and watch for his upcoming book, *Cruising Through Executive Interviews ... To Land That 6 Figure Job You Deserve*.

In the August issue of *The Stepping Stone*, I posed the question “*What would you do?*” to a business situation. I received a terrific response, more than it was practical to publish in its entirety. I sincerely thank everyone for their contributions!

Below is the situation, a number of insightful responses I received both pro and con (edited for space and clarity), insights extracted from other responses, and the real-life conclusion of the situation. Send your own ideas for situations to pose in upcoming issues to SteppingStone@JHACareers.com.

CAN YOU GO BACK?

Bill had been an actuarial student under Joe for a year at a small insurance company, and seemed likely to be a future superstar. He communicated well, presented himself very professionally, was a fast learner, and was well on track to receive his FSA in the next few years.

One day, Bill came to Joe requesting that he be allowed to move his workstation out of the actuarial student area, as he was finding it very difficult to work in the same area with Matthew. There were only four actuarial students, and all were in a common area. Even though Bill and Matthew had no projects in common, and even worked for different bosses, Bill found Matthew’s presence and habits annoying and distracting.

Joe discussed it with Tim, the chief actuary, but space was tight, and Tim felt it sent the wrong signals to attempt to reconfigure the operation just to accommodate one person. Joe took this back to Bill, and the next day, Bill resigned to go work for Tillinghast.

Six months later, Joe received a call from Bill. It seemed that Bill had realized that consulting wasn’t really what he wanted, and he understood that Matthew had left. He asked to be considered for his old job.

The adage goes, “You can never go back.”

1. If you were Joe, would you consider rehiring Bill? Why or why not?
2. If you were Bill, would you consider going back? Why or why not?

WHAT WOULD YOU DO?

This case elicited strong opinions in both directions. The tally:

Consider rehiring Bill:

Yes: 16

No: 15

Many who said “no” above didn’t respond to whether they would consider going back:

Yes: 9

No: 10

REACTIONS FROM THOSE WHO WOULD CONSIDER REHIRING BILL

Actuary #1

Joe should sit down and talk to Bill. He needs to ask a number of questions:

- What was the specific issue with Matthew?
- Is this an issue that is likely to arise again in Bill’s career or can we anticipate it was really a one-off circumstance? (After all—he changed jobs over this.)
- What did he like best about working for Joe and his past role?
- What did he think he would like most about consulting?
- What difficulties did he encounter that have him changing his mind?

He’s trying to figure out if Bill is a superstar who made one error in judgment by overweighting his dislike for Matthew, or whether he is a high-maintenance problem child who will never be satisfied and never be able to effectively co-exist on the team.

Of course Bill should consider going back. If it was truly an error in judgment that can be explained, and he has a story to sell to his co-workers that can be accepted, and especially if his co-workers liked him and want him back. But here is the challenge. Bill needs to figure out if the team wants him back and he will be welcome, or if it is just Joe. It will all depend on how he departed and what he said on the way out the door.

Good people who fit the team and the culture are hard to find—neither Joe nor Bill should ignore the opportunity to reunite the team with an effective member. At our firm we have lost one or two individuals whom I would happily take back, with no hard feelings that their life took them somewhere else at an earlier stage.

Actuary #2

Just because Bill had a seemingly petty complaint before he left doesn't mean that was the reason he left.

One rarely complains about the “big” things, as one cannot do anything about them. Bill may have thought that perhaps if the prior job were a little more pleasant, the uncertainty around taking a consulting job wouldn't be worth it. He may have been thinking, *“Well, I can't do anything about the money situation here, but maybe this one small thing could be changed.”* Given that he couldn't get the small thing adjusted, he would think there was little hope about any of the large things.

This is someone who doesn't have to be trained—so there's a boost in the short term. I wouldn't assume Bill would be jumping ship rapidly again. I have seen people leave insurance for consulting and then come back again soon. They had not tried consulting before, and of course, more money was an attraction. They determined fairly rapidly that it was not what they desired. Most who did the boomerang routine stuck around for a while after returning.

Actuary #3

Bill communicated well, presented himself very professionally, and was a fast learner. Bill's only problem is Matthew and Matthew is gone. Personally, I don't like the way that the chief actuary approached things. Before deciding to not make exceptions, I would have dug in and asked whether Matthew was a problem. Bill is not described as a prima donna, but as a professional. If the problem with Matthew is valid, then it is worth having a talk with Matthew rather than risking losing someone solid.

Bill did go through channels to try to deal with the Matthew problem in a professional way. He was denied and he left. Matthew is gone and Bill is interested in coming back. Nothing here screams that Bill is a problem or a risk.

This doesn't mean that Bill automatically gets the job. I would make him interview for the position again and treat him like any other applicant as much as possible. I wouldn't want him (or others) to think that it is okay to quit any time you don't like what you are told to do or where you are told to sit. However, if he still seems to be as bright and professional as originally described, I would definitely consider him seriously.

If I were Bill, would I go back? If my primary reason to leave was Matthew, then I'd consider it. However:

- I would also consider the reaction of the chief actuary. Did I get a fair hearing from him before? If not, why would I want to work for him again?
- How will the others treat me if I come back?
- How long will I be stuck in a common area with other students? Matthew is gone, but who is to say that his replacement isn't even worse.

I'd also look at myself and question whether there is something I needed to learn from all of this. Am I well served by going back? Or am I better off by going elsewhere? Granted, consulting isn't for me, but maybe I should look at a different company

I have seen people leave insurance for consulting and then come back again soon.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 8



The company I used to work for has hired many (mostly younger) people back with usually great success. Not everyone who asks gets accepted, but the success rate is much better than for completely new employees.

or a different path. Would I be settling by going back?

I would be very cautious. I would consider going back, but it would be far from a foregone conclusion.

Actuary #4

Bill is a budding superstar. He has shown super skills in all areas. He left the company when he wasn't given what he wanted. He showed that he is a strong-willed person. He also wants to come back now that the problem went away on its own. He is still not showing weakness. If he had asked to come back even though the annoying neighbor was still there, I would consider it a weakness. So the company should try to work with him. After all, budding superstars are quite rare.

Actuary #5

The adage should be changed. As Joe, I would hire Bill back. And if I were Bill, I would certainly consider going back.

People often make a mistake when they leave a job—and that goes especially for younger people who are on their first or second job. Every job includes things that one hates. Until you have some experience, it can be hard to understand and

accept those. The grass appears especially greener in the next pasture when you are early in your career.

As long as the person was a great worker, was not a personnel problem, and did not burn bridges on the exit, rehiring them can be a positive for both parties. They already know the environment, work and people. You know them. And now they have a much better appreciation for your company—so that they want to come back.

The company I used to work for has hired many (mostly younger) people back with usually great success. Not everyone who asks gets accepted, but the success rate is much better than for completely new employees.

Actuary #6

I would invite Bill to meet for an informal conversation (not an interview) outside of work. Bill is young and clearly needs guidance on appropriately managing his career, understanding the expectations of the workplace, and getting along with people.

I would encourage Bill to give his current position more time, since six months is insufficient time to judge job fit without extreme external circumstances. I also would provide Bill with constructive feedback regarding his departure from my company and how others perceived him (assuming he didn't have great relations with the other students either). If Bill came back after a year seeking a position, I would probe on his personal learning from the experience and ability to fit successfully into the current team before considering a rehire. I also would be crystal clear with expectations regarding interacting with staff, informing management, etc.

If I were Bill, I apparently feel remorseful about my impetuous decision, and must have liked the work I was doing at the first company. However, I need to complete some serious self-reflection and work on my long-term career goals, preferred work environment, emotional intelligence and people skills, since I seem to make quick decisions with limited information and lack of long-term thinking.

After taking Joe's advice and staying in consulting for a year, if I still really believe the consulting role

isn't right for me, I would try to go back if I can demonstrate that I have learned and grown from my experience, and that I have a better understanding of how to work in a group/team environment. If I can't demonstrate that, I should be circulating my résumé to other potential employers, and be ready to discuss my job hopping as shown on my résumé, as well as my preferred work environment.

Actuary #7

You'd want to explore the hypothetical issues Joe had with Matthew first. However, an employee who has explored consulting and decided it's not for them might well be a loyal productive worker in a corporate environment. It shows maturity on Joe's part to recognize and admit when a choice wasn't the right one.

Actuary #8

Life is a continuing process of learning and, from that, growth. I had the opportunity to work in consulting and insurance companies, and they are quite different environments.

The aspects of consulting that appear exciting to an insurance company actuary are very appealing from a distance, and they are, but they come with a different system of stresses for performance. For some individuals the stress is motivating; for others it is debilitating. Having experienced the "wild side" of actuarial life, my expectation is that Bill will be better able to focus on the needs and demands of life inside an insurer.

Whether Joe and Bill should get back together is a different question. Issues with Matthew should be addressed, but that should have already been done regardless of Bill's actions. It could be that Matthew is restive and he is the one who needs the challenges and opportunities that are much of the fabric of the consulting world.

The skills and insights I gained in consulting helped me be much more effective in later stints with insurers.

Insights from Others

- I would consider how much of Bill's prior behavior was due to being young and lacking maturity. If this is the case, I would probably consider rehiring him to retain his talent,

and coach him on how to handle different personalities or conflicts.

- As Bill, going back would be humbling, but if I realized I had made a mistake, I would take ownership of the mistake and come back letting the employer know that I realized my error. I would also let them know that I would work to better resolve similar situations in the future.
- As Bill, if I really didn't like consulting and I had matured in this time and was prepared to face Matthew again, I would rejoin. The consulting experience would have broadened me, so I might be more valuable to my old firm.

WHAT THOSE WHO WOULD NOT CONSIDER REHIRING BILL HAD TO SAY

Actuary #9

I would not rehire Bill. There are plenty of great candidates in the field, and one who complains about a co-worker instead of using his communication and social skills to defuse the situation paints himself in a bad light.

Actuary #10

Absolutely not. Anyone who left for such a petty reason is likely to do it again. Hiring this person back sends the wrong message to your other employees.

Actuary #11

One could argue that Matthew's habits were so distracting that Bill had no choice but to get out of the situation. And clearly there was some merit because Joe took it up one level. However, when the request was denied and, without any further effort to rectify the situation, Bill abruptly quit, he showed himself as a prima donna of sorts. The "my way or the highway" mentality, from my perspective, kills Bill's chances for a return. So, no, I wouldn't bring him back. If Bill had instead tried to work out an alternative workable solution with Joe and Matthew and eventually failed at that and left, then I might consider a rehire.

Bill should stay with his new employer for a lot longer than six months before making a change.

The "my way or the highway" mentality, from my perspective, kills Bill's chances for a return.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 10

Otherwise, he appears to be (and is) too much of a job hopper. Besides, six months isn't necessarily a sufficient amount of time for Bill to make the determination that consulting isn't the right course. And that's yet another reason that Joe should not be interested in bringing Bill back.

Actuary #12

Bill is a bit of a prima donna and appears to be high maintenance. While his work is good and he has good skills, the angst that he can cause a manager may not be worth it. In addition, when he didn't like the answer he left for a job that was already lined up.

Bill is quite full of himself and will continue to be difficult. If I were Joe, I would probably not rehire him. If talent was in short supply then I might consider rehiring Bill only after a heart-to-heart conversation where he recognized that he will have to work with many different personalities and will need to adapt and that he needed to make a commitment to the firm.

As for Bill, if he is unhappy at Tillinghast, then he should consider going back but should expect that it won't be easy. He has nothing to lose, especially since Matthew has left.

Other considerations:

- Matthew was annoying to Bill, but what about to others?
- Is Matthew a problem that should be dealt with?
- Should someone look at the configuration of how they are sitting?
- Is talent tight for this company?

Actuary #13

I've seen others go back; I'm not sure Bill can or should.

If I were Joe, I'd want to know why Bill really left, and what will be different the second time. It doesn't sound like Matthew's behavior was outrageous enough to drive others to quit or complain. It does seem strange that someone with otherwise good communication and professional comportment would be the only person to have such severe problems with Matthew.

On the surface, it also seems unusual that moving work areas and changing from a small insurance company actuarial program to consulting for a big firm are comparable solutions to the same problem. The bigger changes imply bigger issues (responsibility, pay, etc.) than could be solved just by changing work areas.

Of course, if the issue really was Matthew, this leaves the question of what Bill will do if a future hire or current employee annoys him similarly. Usually employees leave to get away from superiors who are more entrenched than fellow students, and even in these cases they usually present more bland professional reasons than personal annoyance with a specific individual.

The employees I know who have left and come back typically present (and usually have) more compelling personal or professional reasons for the change (e.g., location where wife wants to live, moving to care for parents) that have subsequently been resolved.

If I were Joe and I really wanted Bill back, I'd probably see if I could get some feedback from Tim (chief actuary), as I would expect Tim has the same questions.

From Bill's perspective:

- What was different at Tillinghast from what he expected (i.e., can he fix it without quitting after six months)?
- Does he expect the insurance company to be better than before (was it really just Matthew)?
- Will leaving and returning change the way others at the insurance company treat him?

Actuary #14

I would not rehire Bill. It appears that Bill was already looking and used the Matthew incident as an excuse to take the other job. It is not credible that Bill didn't get his way with being moved and then decided to leave the company. The more likely scenario is that he had been looking for another job for some time, and after he made his decision to leave, he wanted to create a legitimate excuse besides just quitting. The fact that he was deceptive about it and left and now wants to come back,

Of course, if the issue really was Matthew, this leaves the question of what Bill will do if a future hire or current employee annoys him similarly.

reasoning that Matthew had left, sends a dangerous message and I do not think he can be trusted regardless of his great future potential. He clearly lacks the maturity and professionalism that I would expect from any of our employees.

Insights from Others

- I definitely would not rehire Bill. Who's to say he doesn't quit again as soon as something else mildly annoying happens?
- There are plenty of great candidates out there, and it would be much better for Joe and the company to move on.
- Bill obviously had already been interviewing, since he resigned with another job the next day after receiving the news. Putting it out there that he was leaving because his desk wouldn't be moved is ridiculous. If he had just left to try out consulting, but been honest about his reasons (and not had so much drama), I wouldn't have had any issues rehiring him.

- Bill should not ask for his old job back. It looks weak and people will always be questioning your loyalty.

WHAT DID JOE AND BILL ACTUALLY DO?

Joe had a long discussion with Bill to establish that he deeply understood the rashness of his move, and to explore the reasons why consulting hadn't worked out. He judged that Bill really did understand that he had made a mistake, took ownership for it, was humbled by it, and that he had grown from the experience. Joe then spoke with Tim, and they agreed to rehire Bill.

Bill gratefully returned, and over the coming months demonstrated the potential that had induced Joe to hire him the first time. ●

There are plenty of great candidates out there, and it would be much better for Joe and the company to move on.