



SOCIETY OF ACTUARIES

Article from:

The Stepping Stone

February 2014 – Issue 53

What Would You Do?

Responses to "Go for the Offer?"

By John West Hadley

In the November issue of *The Stepping Stone*, I posed the question "What would you do?" to the interview situation below. Here is the situation, your responses, and the real-life conclusion of the situation. Send your own ideas for situations to pose in upcoming issues to SteppingStone@JHACareers.com.

GO FOR THE OFFER?

Charles was a recent FSA seeking a new leadership role. A recruiter who had placed several actuaries at Industrial Life reached out to him about a position in their actuarial department, telling him she thought he would be a very good fit to their culture and operation. Although it wasn't exactly the role he was seeking, it had enough positive attributes to be worth exploring.

Charles arrived for the interview, and was having a good discussion with Frank, the department head and hiring manager, when he realized that the specific job really wasn't what he wanted. He was tempted to reveal this to Frank, but he had heard that in any interview you should always go for the offer. After all, there's nothing to turn down until you actually receive an offer, and you can always negotiate once the company has decided they want you.

If you were Charles, would you tell Frank you're not interested in the job? Why or why not?

WHAT WOULD YOU DO?

Actuary #1

I have been in this situation. I never fessed up, feigning interest. The other company saw the mismatch as clearly as I did, and I did not get an offer. In fact, the only times I did not get an offer were the times when I reached the point of feigning interest.

Being on the hiring side more often these days, I wonder if it might have worked better if I had simply said something on the day of the interview.

I think that as hiring manager I would be impressed by someone who saw the mismatch and spoke up, saving me the time of wondering whether to offer them the job. That job I interviewed for was probably not the only opening that the company had over the next year. It might well have led to another interview later for a job that would have been a good fit.

Recently we interviewed a student who had applied for a position on one team. We also had an opening on a different team doing totally different work. We set him up to interview for both positions while he was there. Fortunately, he told HR at the end of the day that he had very specifically not applied for job #2. The preference was clear, and it saved us a disagreement over who would hire him.

So, yes, I would probably tell Frank that I wasn't interested in the job. I would say that I came on the interview because it sounded worth exploring, but I am looking for a job that includes more (whatever). Frank might well know that the FSA in the next office was about to open just that very job or he might think that I am so wonderful and have so much integrity that it is worth revisiting the job description to better fit my skill set.

Actuary #2

I think that we should always do what makes us sleep better at night. I always prefer to be honest and straightforward to avoid any surprises in my business dealings. Because of this, I would tell Frank during the interview that the position is not what I was led to believe and that I'm disappointed by this turn of events. I would thank Frank for his time and simply mention that I'm not interested in that specific role.

Actuary #3

Before I can answer the question, I need to better understand what Charles is trying to accomplish:



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*.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 6

... if the position does not seem to be a good fit, Charles would do well to provide that feedback to establish a good relationship that might turn into a better offer later on.

- Is the firm he works for currently a good one, but one where the leadership opportunities he seeks aren't available at this time?
- Is Industrial Life a great organization where Charles would like to work or just one of a number of firms he is willing to work for if the job is right?

If Charles is trying to transition from a “good company” to a “great company,” then he should use the first interview to learn about the position and help the employer learn about him. He shouldn't reach any conclusions about fit. If a second interview or job offer materializes, Charles can use that opportunity to explore the role and the fit, and everyone can make a better decision. In this way he doesn't rush to judgment and he also gets more face time with Industrial Life. Sometimes it is wise to take a role that is a lesser fit if it is with an organization that you respect.

If Charles is already in a “great company” and his motivation is strictly to find a new and more challenging role in another great company, then I would recommend that Charles “cut to the chase” a little more quickly by steering the discussion to his fit and his desire for the role. Frank may be disappointed that he is not the right candidate but will appreciate his demonstration of analysis and his clarity on his own strengths and goals—this opens the door to future opportunities that are a better fit, and saves Charles and Frank a second interview which would likely be a waste of time.

Actuary #4

Rather than immediately revealing a lack of interest, Charles can ask a few more “leading” questions. Such as: *“When I heard about the position, I imagined that “x” would be a key responsibility of the incumbent. I'm starting to hear differently in our conversation today. Can you clarify this for me?”* Another way to get to the same place: *“The recruiter had really sold me on this particular*

aspect of the job (fill in details). Can you tell me if that is a significant part of the role?”

In this way, Charles can convey the position that he was looking for, and find out more about what Frank is seeking. If Frank is perceptive, he will pick up on whether the role would be a good fit, and whether he should go to the effort to tender an offer to Charles. There is always a chance that the role would have some flexibility, and that Industrial Life might mold the role a bit to meet Charles' talents.

The honesty during the interview does not need to go to the extreme of saying he's not interested in the position, but if the position does not seem to be a good fit, Charles would do well to provide that feedback to establish a good relationship that might turn into a better offer later on.

Actuary #5

I would let the company give its best offer, without making any commitments during the interview. Once I receive an offer, I would ask to what extent the role could be modified and if there is any likelihood of an internal transfer in the short to medium term to a role which better suits my preferences. An offer in hand will not only give me a fallback option but it should also help me benchmark other prospective job offers. Furthermore, if the company is willing to tweak the job specs to an extent that it becomes acceptable to me, then I may not even have to look elsewhere for another opening.

The one thing I may lose is my credibility for future interviews with this employer, or coming from the same headhunter. So if I end up refusing their offer, I would have to do it very carefully so as to not displease either and to frame it in a way that it does not appear as though I was never serious about this role.

Actuary #6

There's nothing to turn down until you actually receive an offer, and you can always negotiate once the company has decided they want you.

Actuary #7

Unless I'm a brilliant, tactful, on-my-feet thinker, I wouldn't say "*Hey, I just decided I don't want this job after all*" in the middle of the interview process. The risk of coming off badly and burning potential bridges outweighs the benefits of saving me and Frank 30 minutes.

If they ask something like "*Why are you interested in this role over your current one?*" it may be a good opportunity to explore the fit, but I don't see any reason to halt the interview out of the blue.

Actuary #8

It's a good time to practice skills that will get you an offer, which is invaluable experience for when you're interviewing for a job you want.

Add in, "...and the offer is twice what Charles makes now." Now what? I wouldn't become uninterested (or disinterested?) in a new position until I could compare it to what I currently have. And I can't do that without the compensation amount. It's not logical at all.

The only way I'd stop an interview is if I discovered that I wasn't qualified.

Actuary #9

I would not cut an interview short, mainly for the reason that interviewing is rarely a worthless experience.

If you "know" what you want heading into the interview and at some point you get the impression that the current job is not what you "know" you want, it does not necessarily mean that it's definitively not right for you. You never quite know what the future holds.

Actuary #10

Charles failed miserably by letting the recruiter lead him to a position he is not looking for. He failed to comprehend that recruiters work for the companies

they represent, not for you. Charles should have known what the position was, and whether it met his leadership criteria or not before accepting the interview.

I would indicate to Frank that I had hoped whatever role I took on next would have more leadership opportunities. Then I would see if Frank would be open to discussing either the career trajectory and timeline or adjusting the role to meet my needs in a new position. If that was not satisfactory, I would likely ask to not continue the interview and leave since I knew that I wouldn't come on board regardless of the offer and can spare everyone's time. I would explain to Frank my career ambitions and let him know that I appreciated his time but the position does not appear to be one that I'd want.

Actuary #11

There's no point in pursuing it. You have an opportunity to make it clear what you are looking for, so that if something like that comes up, they'll have you in mind. You don't come off better by pretending to be interested.

Actuary #12

I'd finish the interview, and then in a follow-up "thank you" email, explain what I am looking for and how it is different from my impression of the opening at Industrial Life. I'd share some positives that I took away about the company, and reiterate my strengths and how they would apply to the type of position I'm actually pursuing.

There's no sense in stopping in the middle. The follow-up response gives both parties time to think about the experience and reflect. It is polite, and has the potential to make a good impression if they are interested in you, and willing to modify position responsibilities.

Actuary #13

Feign interest. Ask if you can do the things you're

I would not cut an interview short, mainly for the reason that interviewing is rarely a worthless experience.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 8



If you're not qualified, then point out your lack of qualification, and end things graciously and tactfully.

interested in. If that fails, think about how you will tactfully decline.

Actuary #14

I'd never cut off an interview unless I saw illegal activity taking place or they behaved really badly. Getting your foot in the door is a positive anywhere. Building your network is good. Talking to other actuaries about the business is useful. Part of my extensive network is people I met when I interviewed at their company or vice versa, but no job came out of it. And there's always the chance they may realize you don't fit the open position but they want you on board anyway, now or in the future. If it's drastically different than what the recruiter represented, I'd tell the recruiter privately.

Actuary #15

The only reason I would stop an interview is if I learned that I wasn't qualified for that job. And even then, the one time it has come up I said so at the end of the interview. It's only an hour, and maybe you will learn something more and discover that there are important parts of the job for which you are qualified.

Actuary #16

I wouldn't tell him during the interview. I can't think of any way I could do that and not come across badly.

I'd finish the interview, shake hands and leave. If they followed up positively (offer / second round interview / whatever), I'd turn it down with an *“I'd love to work there, but this isn't the right position for me, maybe next time”* style message.

You've already wasted Frank's time by having the interview; he's not going to thank you for pointing out that the first half was a complete waste in order to save him the second half.

Actuary #17

If you're not qualified, then point out your lack of qualification, and end things graciously and tactfully. If you're qualified but simply not interested, finish out the interview, and decline any offer made afterwards.

Actuary #18

I've said *“I really don't think I would be a good fit for this role”* during interviews (sometimes elaborating why and sometimes not)—both on the phone and in person. I let the other person decide whether to continue the interview after that.

Actuary #19

If Charles is certain that he would not take the job even if it were offered to him, he can explain to Frank what he is really looking for—he should go for the offer, but the offer he really wants.

Frank may be able and willing to help more than Charles realizes. If Charles is professional and polite, I don't see a real cost to losing a job offer of no direct interest, when he makes it clear what he does want.

One of our regular authors, Dr. Doreen Stern, presented this response

I've been in Charles' shoes twice in my life: The first was when I saw an online posting for a prestigious postdoctoral fellowship at the University of Pennsylvania.

I can do this, I thought to myself, reading the job requirements. But I wouldn't enjoy it, I conceded. Oh well, I might as well apply; it'll be good practice.

The phone interview went well. The department head said he'd get back to me after he checked my references. I didn't give his words a second thought because I wasn't interested in the position.

A couple of weeks later, the head called back to offer me the job.

"I can't live on a post-doc salary," I told him.

"If we offer you a 20 percent increase, will you take it?" the head asked.

"I'd certainly consider it," I stammered.

The next day, he was back on the line: *"I've found the money for you. We're looking forward to you coming to Philadelphia. What do you say?"*

I suggested that I meet with him in person. He readily agreed. The more I learned, the worse I felt about the position. Nor was there any negotiating about the scope of the work. On the contrary, there were clear and compelling (high-visibility) deadlines that had to be met.

I'm embarrassed to admit that I accepted the job knowing it wasn't a good fit for me, or me for it. The good news is that it was only a year appointment; the bad news is that it was the worst year of my life. I hated getting up each morning and dreaded going to work.

The experience was positive in one regard, though: The next year, when I was again in an interview situation, I spoke authentically: *"This isn't a good fit for me,"* I told the interviewer. *"My strengths lie in designing research studies and conducting qualitative research, not in analyzing large data sets."*

This time, I didn't get the offer. I was disappointed. But the sting lasted for only a few days, not the length of the job.

The Editor's Response

I was struck that several respondents assumed that this in-person interview process would be with just Frank—a fact on which the original case was silent.

As a result, part of their reasoning hinged on only saving anyone a short amount of time. I have rarely been on in-person interviews that involved only one person, and in this particular case the interview with Frank was just the first in a series that would last most of the work day.

There's also an important psychological difference in how you approach the interview (and your consequent success) when you are prepared to walk away, vs. when you are there "to get the offer." I wrote about this in the May 2012 issue of *The Stepping Stone*. You can read "The Confidence to Walk Away" online at <http://www.JHACareers.com/ConfidenceToWalkAway.pdf>.

WHAT REALLY HAPPENED?

Charles decided to tell Frank that the job being described wasn't really what he wanted. Frank asked what Charles was looking for, and they proceeded to have a good discussion about opportunities at Industrial Life. In fact, the position under consideration was a good stepping stone to the type of position Charles wanted, as the most recent actuary in that role had recently been promoted to a similar role.

Frank continued with the interview schedule, and before the end of the day sat down with his boss, who was equally impressed with Charles, and they raised the compensation level for the role to the maximum they thought they could afford, and extended Charles an offer. ●

I'm embarrassed to admit that I accepted the job knowing it wasn't a good fit for me, or me for it.