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WHAT WOULD YOU DO?

Responses to “Changing Horses”

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In the February issue of *The Stepping Stone*, I posed the question “*What would you do?*” to the career situation below. Here are selected responses and excerpts, edited for space and clarity, followed by the real-life conclusion. Send your own ideas for situations to pose in upcoming issues to SteppingStone@JHACareers.com.

CHANGING HORSES?

After many years at one company, Jim finds himself working for a much younger actuary who seems not to respect his contributions. After one too many run-ins, he decides to take early retirement and seek a new role elsewhere.

Jim has a number of good networking meetings, including one with Louis, the chief actuary of a large, local company of great interest to him. They hit it off, but there is no current opening.

He receives an offer from a strong insurer in another city, but the job level isn't quite what he wants, and he discusses that with his prospective boss. She is sympathetic, but there is no room for negotiation. He respects her for being open to the conversation, and also upfront with him about the possibilities. Everything else about the job is exactly what he wants, so he accepts. Relocation is included, and the process will start in a week.

A few days later, Jim receives a call from Louis, indicating that his valuation actuary has just turned in his resignation, and they both agree that Jim is the person they want to fill the role. Jim

is worried that entertaining such an offer will burn bridges with the other company and prospective boss, perhaps damaging his professional reputation.

WHAT WOULD YOU DO?

Many thanks to the 18 respondents to this case study! Three actually had been through this situation, and came at responses from different perspectives.

Two felt they had made a commitment, and didn't even consider the new offer. (Although one said that looking back now, he might consider it.) The third gave this explanation:

I had left my current job and interviewed with two companies in different cities. For personal reasons I preferred city X, but when an internal candidate took the job, I accepted the position in city Y. The next day the first company called to say the job was mine if I still wanted it. I knew this was a tough call, but considering everything personally and professionally, I took it. I then had the painful task of letting the other company know I wasn't going to take their offer after all. It was not an easy decision, but it worked out as I met my wife of 18 years in city X.

You need to follow what is going to make you happy both personally and professionally, as the two are interdependent.

A few respondents felt that a commitment had been made, and therefore the new possible offer shouldn't even be considered. This sentiment was captured concisely in these two responses:

The future is uncertain. The accepted position might turn out to be unexpectedly pleasant and, if not, Jim can always then search for a more suitable one. In any kind of business, credibility and reputation have to come first.

A better offer came from my preferred company after I had reached agreement in principle to accept a job with a different



company. I said to the chief actuary of the preferred company that if I would accept his offer, it would prove that I wasn't the type of person he would want working for him anyway. So if I were Louis and found out that Jim was willing to renege on an acceptance with that first company, I would withdraw the offer immediately. Jim would be trading his integrity for a job opportunity.

However, most respondents felt Jim should definitely consider the new possibility. And several thought that was also best for the company whose offer Jim might now be turning down:

Taking a role that your heart isn't in won't be a win for either side. It is simple—Jim needs to change horses. Taking the job that isn't his preference just to follow through on a commitment sounds great in the short term, but longer term he is not going to be happy. His new boss won't be either after making a full investment in him, should he leave at that point.

Yes, Jim will irritate the other boss if he accepts Louis' offer, but he already told her that the position is less than he wants, so she should be happy that she has cut her losses and did not take on an employee who would be starting out unhappy. (He would definitely be unhappy because he could have had the level of responsibility he wanted.)

Since Jim was upfront with his prospective boss about the job not being quite at the level he was seeking, and nothing is underway with relocation or the new job yet, it makes sense for Jim to have a conversation with his prospective boss about the offer from Louis. If the valuation actuary role is one that Jim would prefer, and is a better fit for his skill level, then it probably would be best for all parties in the long run for Jim to go that route.

While several were concerned about impairing Jim's professional reputation, most didn't see that as a major issue:

I would call the new boss and thank her for the offer and opportunity, but explain that something came up in the local area that I was going to go with instead. People tend to be understanding, and I think an honest, transparent conversation would not damage one's professional reputation.

It would be better to explore this new opportunity now, rather than three months into a new position in a new city. Since the job is not at the level Jim wants, the new boss would appreciate his honesty if he decides to recant his acceptance.

I know the situation from the opposite angle: Looking for a candidate to fill an open position, one of the selected persons for the interview called to say he accepted a job with another company. This is part of the process, like competition between companies

about products and services, and a clear communication about it should have no damaging consequences.

After Jim has a firm offer, he should contact his prospective boss and be completely honest about the new opportunity. She knows the role and location weren't a perfect fit. She likely will be disappointed to not fill her role, but little is lost other than time. I don't see this as damaging to Jim's professional reputation as long as he is upfront with all parties. As a hiring manager, I'd rather have a candidate be honest and withdraw prior to the start date than have an unhappy or ill-suited short-term employee.

And I found this a concise and insightful analysis of how Jim should analyze the situation:

I would first take time to reflect on what I really wanted and what is important to me based on where I am in my career, how it would affect my loved ones and other relationships, my present and future goals/desires, and how it would impact my quality of life. Once I am clear on what would be best for me and my loved ones, I would make that decision.

I would thank the company for whom I choose not to work and explain my reasons. Their reaction is their reaction and I can't control it. I have to do what is best for me. Doing anything out of obligation, guilt or fear is never a good thing. As someone who hires people routinely, I would rather the person be honest upfront, than for me to invest the time training the person, only to find out he/she is unhappy because it was the wrong decision.

WHAT REALLY HAPPENED?

Jim told Louis that he could not in good conscience consider an offer after the end of the week, since the new company would then be starting the relocation process. Louis told him that would not be a problem; if Jim came in Friday, he would leave with an offer.

Louis lived up to his word, and on Friday Jim received an offer substantially higher than the one he had already accepted, and at exactly the level he was seeking. He called the actuary who would have been his new boss to explain what had happened. She expressed regret at losing him, but was very understanding.

Jim's job worked out exactly as he hoped. He loved his role, and within a short time was considered a high performer at his new company. ■



John Hadley is a career counselor who works with job seekers frustrated with their search and with professionals struggling to increase visibility and influence. Reach him at John@JHACareers.com or 908.725.2437. Find *Career Tips* and other free resources at www.JHACareers.com.