

Juggling 2 Suitors Takes Special Skill By the Job Seeker

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Last year during his job search, information-technology consultant George Cresto found himself in the fortunate position of having two companies express interest in him. There was just one problem: His second choice offered him a job first, while the other firm had yet to make a decision.

And more job seekers could face this dilemma if the job market continues to improve. Juggling two potential employers can be a delicate challenge. A job seeker who botches the balancing act risks alienating both employers and ending up without either job, while a candidate who misleads a potential employer can tarnish his or her reputation across an industry.

"The worst thing to do is surprise a company who thinks you're ready to be there," says Karen Armon, president of executive-coaching company Alliance Resources in Littleton, Colo.

She suggests that candidates tell recruiters and hiring managers from the outset that they are looking for jobs at other companies. Most potential employers will appreciate the honesty.

If the less-favored firm makes an offer, career coaches advise candidates to buy time. Tell the employer you are grateful for the offer, but that you want to take a few days to consider it, discuss it with your family, or perhaps talk with some other employees at the firm. Then call the other company. Explain that you have gotten another offer, but remain interested. If the second firm can't give any indication of your status and won't speed up its process, some career coaches suggest taking the offer that is on the table.

Meg Montford, an executive career coach based in Kansas City, Mo., reminds clients in this situation that they have only one firm offer. "Can you afford to say, 'I don't want this offer. I'm going to hold out for something better?'" she asks.

Ms. Montford says job seekers can't put off a potential employer for too long. If you ask for two weeks to consider an offer, the employer probably is "going to get suspicious," she says.

Tony Blake, recruiting director for Great-West Life & Annuity, a Colorado-based insurance company that is a unit of Great-West Lifeco Inc. of Canada, says recruiters do become suspicious when candidates want weeks to decide. He says candidates should be honest. "If you're clearly the number one person, we're going to do everything we can to accommodate you," he says.

Mr. Blake says he will try to buy time for a candidate with a hiring manager. One week is reasonable, he says. Sometimes the company will grant two weeks. But anything longer is usually too long, he says. "Now you're getting to the point where [the delay is] probably going to be impacting the business too much," he says. Alternatively, if a candidate with a firm offer elsewhere needs a decision from Great-West, Mr. Blake asks senior leaders if they can speed the decision.

Career coaches offer different opinions on the acceptability of committing to a job and then reneging. Some emphasize that you may tarnish your reputation among people you may work with later, especially in a tight-knit industry. If a candidate has signed a contract, reneging can bring more serious consequences than a tarnished reputation.

If there's no contract, other coaches say job seekers must do what is right for them, even if that means renegeing. Ms. Armon says recruiters might be mad at first, but she says this will usually fade and is unlikely to doom a career.

Mr. Cresto, the information-technology consultant, tried to buy time from the first company while speeding up the process at the second. His situation was especially tricky because he had received -- and verbally accepted -- an offer from the first company before he even started in-person interviews with the second. Nonetheless, he still had lingering concerns about how well he would fit in at the first firm, where projects were performed mainly by individuals rather than teams. Mr. Cresto prefers the team approach.

So he told the first company that he wouldn't be able to deal with the paperwork immediately. Meanwhile, he told the second firm he had another offer. "I understand you have a process to go through," he told the firm, "but I just want to let you know that I have a very short time window where I'm going to be on the market."

Normally, the second firm's interviewing and hiring process takes one to two months, Mr. Cresto says. For Mr. Cresto, the firm compressed it to two weeks. After a week and a half, an offer from the second firm was imminent. So he called the first firm to decline its offer.

He explained what had happened. He stressed that he appreciated how much time the firm had invested in interviewing him, and that he didn't take that for granted. "Luckily the person I was dealing with was not offended and basically left the door open" if things didn't work out at the second firm, Mr. Cresto says. He happily accepted the offer at the second firm, where he is a senior principal and enjoying his work.