

## NEGOTIATION SABOTAGE

By VIRGINIA BACKAITIS

YOU'VE just slam-dunked the final interview for your dream job. The big boss himself walks you toward the company's front door.

"We're looking forward to having you onboard," he says. He extends his hand for a shake; you meet it with a firm grip.

"Our recruiter will be in touch with an offer you shortly," he says.

"If you have any questions, feel free to give me a call."

You refrain from shouting "Yes!" and performing what's known as the "victory fist pump" until he's out of earshot.

You fight the urge to do a touchdown dance right there in the lobby.

You want to ask strangers for high-fives as soon as your feet hit the street - but instead you pull out your cellphone and start speed-dialing your buddies. Each one is eager to provide you with "expert" guidance as to what you need to do score a strong offer.

"Beware," says executive search consultant Stuart Zeh, "Tales about 'How clever I was when I negotiated my job offer' are often as intricate and exaggerated as those about the fish that got away."

As savvy and crafty as the advice you're given might seem, remember companies want to hire a reasonable and honest individual.

Keep in mind that the company staffing department is busy doing due diligence, making sure that the person they met and the information provided during the interview process is real.

If a discrepancy is discovered - in facts or behavior - and the disparity's significant, the right of refusing an offer may not even be yours for the taking.

Zeh cites the story of Jenny, a database administrator, who was offered a 20 percent increase to move from one large investment bank to another.

"I told her it was an extremely generous offer," he says, "but she disagreed, claiming that two of her friends had told her that the market was hot and that she shouldn't accept anything less than a 30 percent bump."

Zeh wasn't convinced, and for good reason - as coincidence had it, he had proffered each of their offers. "Thirty percent is that what your friends got?" Zeh asked her. She said yes. Rules of confidentiality prevented Zeh from exposing the truth - that her friends got 11 percent and 17

percent raises (which are significant in any market). Jenny ended up side-stepping Zeh and calling the offering company's staffing manager to ask why she was being low-balled. The manager was so appalled by her gall and lack of judgment that he withdrew the offer.

"A little bit of misinformation and bad advice turned what could have been a win-win relationship into an unfortunate affair," says Zeh.

Jenny ended up accepting a lesser offer from a smaller firm a few months later.

"I don't know where some candidates get their poor advice," says Sue Piller, staffing officer at Park Bank. As an example, she cites "salary puffing" - overstating how much you earned at your former job. Since most salary offers for experienced professionals are based on their current earnings, the idea is that the more you claim to earn, the bigger your offer will be.

### **DON'T PUFF, DADDY**

"Don't puff," recruiters advise. For one thing, you're likely to get caught. Like many staffing professionals, Piller verifies the compensation information a candidate provides by requesting a recent W-2, or by confirming it with the current employer once an offer has been accepted.

"I make it clear that any offer is contingent on that final verification," she says. And even though candidates agree to this - often even in writing - there are still those who lie. On a few occasions, when Piller has confronted such individuals, they've offered her explanations such as, "The salary I wrote down included my benefits, my mileage, my next increase, my bonus that I should have gotten, etc.

Many employers withdraw offers, as a matter of policy, as soon as they discover that a potential employee has misrepresented herself or himself. And in cases where a lie is discovered and the offer doesn't get withdrawn, "it still isn't pretty" says Zeh. "Starting a new job with a questionable reputation is no way to start."

Another problem that resume-puffers may fail to consider is that inflating their salaries might preclude them from getting offers at all. "Let's put it this way," says Jim Varriale, president of QUANTster, The Quantitative Finance Job Market Daily, "If a person appears to be overqualified or overcompensated, the conversation doesn't go very far."

Demanding early reviews with guaranteed increases can also be problematic. Carolyn Mitchell, a recruiter at BlueCross BlueShield, had a candidate insist that a 6 percent merit increase be written into an offer letter.

"I obviously couldn't do that," she says. What Mitchell could do was to "verbally convey the range of a merit increase she would be eligible for after her first performance review."

### **THE WHOLE PACKAGE**

There are times, of course, when a company is able to meet a candidate's request for greater pay. When this happens, Lisa Kaminski, director of human resources at FSCreations, a learning and testing solutions firm, suggests accepting the offer immediately.

"Don't ask for a significant increase and then after receiving it say, 'Now I need to think about it,' or come back to negotiate minutiae."

Once salary is in place, negotiating vacation, expenses and perks can still create problems. Recruiter Josie Erent recalls the time she had someone insist on eight weeks of vacation.

"The company was offering a very attractive salary package," Erent says, "so when the candidate wouldn't back off of the vacation demand, the company came to the conclusion that the person was 'very inflexible and would not be suitable for a management position.' "

There are vacation alternatives that can sometimes be won.

Recruiter Zahira Vargas found a way to compensate a candidate for the paid time off he'd be losing when changing jobs by negotiating an increase in his salary. The candidate was able to retain his current number of vacation days by taking a week of nonpaid vacation each year.

### **STICK WITH THE PLAN**

Job seekers should recognize that benefit and retirement plans are seldom liquid. "Don't try to negotiate benefits that have plan documents," says Kaminski - like demanding to participate in a 401(k) immediately when the plan doesn't allow it. Staffing professionals are regularly confronted by candidates whose acquaintances have told them that plans and policies can be changed if the desire is there. This is simply not true, and having different policies for different employees can even have legal implications.

Finally, should your job require relocation, be reasonable when negotiating the details. Executive search consultant Kelley Hekowczyk once had a candidate demand that her husband be hired by the company, as well.

"We didn't have a job open in his area," she says, "and the candidate's insistence made the whole offer process uncomfortable."

In another situation that required relocation, a candidate Hekowczyk wanted to hire demanded that her wardrobe be insured for three times its value for the move.

"The insurance for the clothing cost more than the entire move," she says. "We should have known this woman was wacky; we had to fire her within the year."

Whether you're an experienced job-changer or not, it's a good idea to get a third-party recruiter working on your behalf. This type of recruiter is considered to be neutral and objective; they know what is customary and acceptable and what is not, and they can save you a lot of grief and embarrassment. If you don't have the benefit of such a recruiter, then, "be mindful of the fact that you're flying without a net," says Zeh. "Trust but verify is the rule of the sky. And as Jackie Mason says, 'Don't be a sch---.' "

**TRUST** the interview process. Sell your experience, your skills and your ability to meet the company's needs. Your value to a potential employer will be largely determined by your success in communicating this.

Remember that offers of employment are business proposals. Evaluate them in black and white. It's nice to like the people you work with, but both you and your employer need to be able to pay your bills.

Understand that employers seek win/win relationships with their employees. They want you to feel like you're getting a fair day's pay for your work. If you feel that you're being paid too little, employers know that you're likely to leave when a more lucrative opportunity presents itself. If

they feel like you're being paid too much, you may be the first to be let go when they need to get lean.

State the truth about your education, dates of employment and compensation. Chances are all of these will be verified before you start your new job.

Tell your recruiter or hiring manager what stands in between you and your ability to accept an offer. They can't attempt to fill the gaps they can't see.