

# Choosing Between Job Offers

The first question many of your friends will ask when you receive a job offer is, What does it pay? For many college graduates this consideration is near the top of the list, which is not surprising. Most students have invested thousands of dollars in their education, often racking up high student loan balances. Most graduates are looking forward to paying off debt instead of accruing it. Also, the value of a salary is easy to understand; the more zeroes after the first digit, the better.

In order to evaluate a salary offer you need to know what the average pay scale is for your degree and industry. The National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE) is a good source of salary information for entry-level college graduates. Their annual Salary Survey should be available in your campus career center. Make sure you factor cost-of-living differences when considering salary offers. For example, after taking cost-of-living into consideration, you would need an offer of \$76,000 in San Francisco to equal an offer of \$40,000 in Huntsville, Ala.

Bonuses and commissions are considered part of your salary, so take them into consideration when evaluating a salary offer. It is also important to have a good understanding of an employer's policies concerning raises. Be sure to never make your decision on salary alone. Students tend to overemphasize salary when considering job offers. Money is important, but it is more important that you like your job. If you like it, chances are you will be good at it. And if you're good at your job, eventually you will be financially rewarded.

## Factor in Benefits

Of course, salary is only one way in which employers financially compensate their employees. Ask anybody with a long work history and they will tell you how important benefits are. When most people think of employer benefits, they think of things like health insurance, vacation time and retirement savings. But employers are continually coming up with more and more creative ways to compensate their workers, from health club memberships to flextime. The value of a benefits plan depends on your own plans and needs. A company gym or membership at a health club won't be of much value to you if you don't like to sweat. And if you don't have or plan on having children, free childcare won't be worth much to you either.

## Who's the Boss?

Who you work for can have as much bearing on your overall job satisfaction as how much you earn and what you do. First, analyze how stable the potential employer is. If the company is for-profit, what were its earnings last year? What are its projections for growth? If the job is with a government agency or a non-profit, what type of funding does it have? How long has the employer been around? You could receive the best job offer in the world, but if the job is cut in six months, it won't do you much good.

Also, consider the purpose and mission of the employer. Are they compatible with your own? Is this an organization you can feel good working for? It is easy to work for an employer that you believe in, but if you don't agree with many of its policies, mission or central purpose, no amount of compensation will make you look forward to going to work.

## Corporate Culture

There are three aspects to a work environment: 1) the physical workspace, 2) the corporate culture of the employer, and 3) fellow co-workers. Don't underestimate the importance of a good workspace. If you are a private person, you probably will not be able to do your best working in a cluster of cubicles. If you are an extrovert, you won't be happy shut in an office for hours on end.

Corporate culture comprises the attitudes, experiences, beliefs and values of an organization. What is the hierarchy of the organization? Is there a dress code? Is overtime expected? Do they value creativity or is it more important that you follow protocol? Whenever possible, you should talk to current or previous employees to get a sense of the corporate culture. You may also be able to get a sense of the environment during the interview or by meeting your potential boss and co-workers during the interview process. Ask yourself if the corporate culture is compatible with your own attitudes, beliefs and values.

Your boss and fellow co-workers make up the last part of the work environment. Hopefully, you will like the people you work with. But even if you don't like them personally, you need to be able to work well with them professionally. You may not be able to get a good sense of your potential co-workers or boss during the interview process. But if you do develop strong feelings one way or the other, be sure to take them into consideration when making your final decision.

## Like What You Do

Of course, a great work environment and a compatible boss won't mean much if you don't like the job. Recent college graduates are seldom able to land their dream jobs right out of school, but it is still important that you at least like what you do. Before accepting a job offer, make sure you have a very good sense of what your day-to-day duties will be. What are your responsibilities? Will you be primarily working in teams or working alone? Will your job tasks be repetitive or varied? Will your work be challenging? What level of stress can you expect with the position?

## Location, Location, Location

Climate, proximity to friends and family and local population (i.e., urban vs. rural) should all be evaluated against your desires and preferences. If you are considering a job far away from your current address, will the employer pay for part or all of your moving expenses? Even if you are looking at a local job, location can be important especially as it relates to travel time. A long commute will cost you time, money and probably more than a little frustration. Even a one-way twenty-minute commute will take more than three hours of your time in a given week. Make sure the tradeoff is worth it.

## Time is on Your Side

It is acceptable to request two or three days to consider a job offer. And depending on the employer and the position, even a week of consideration time can be acceptable. If you've already received another offer or expect to hear back from another employer soon, make sure you have time to consider both offers. But don't ask for too much time to consider. Like all of us, employers don't like uncertainty. Make sure you give them an answer one way or another as soon as you can.

## It's Your Call

Once you make a decision, act quickly. If you are accepting a position, notify the hiring manager by phone followed by a confirmation letter or an email. Keep the letter short and state the agreed upon salary and the start date. When rejecting an offer, make sure to thank the employer for their time and interest. It always pays to be polite in your correspondence. You never know where your career path will take you and it might just take you back to an employer you initially rejected.

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