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AN OFFER YOU CAN REFUSE

By Patricia Kitchen

BEFORE TAKING THAT JOB, MAKE SURE IT'S THE BEST FIT FOR YOU.

So, you have a job offer - maybe two. The question now is deciding which, if either, to accept. Of course, that question is unfortunately easier to answer if you are financially destitute. But, let's assume you do have a little wiggle room.

Many peers - maybe relatives, too - will advise you to look to salary as the determining factor for accepting or declining an offer. But career coaches suggest you also strongly consider the degree to which offers are good fits with your own interests, skills, personality, work style and ultimate career goals.

So, the best way to proceed is to create a list of pros and cons, ranking each in the order of importance, says Nancy Friedberg, a career coach in Manhattan. While intuition and gut feelings do play a role, there's also a value to what she calls that "concrete, rational, logical process." Ask yourself to what degree this job would allow you to learn from a smart boss, develop key skills, or work in an environment conducive to your success.

That process helped Zainab Syed, 23, take a leap away from the "comfort zone" of the corporate jobs she was being offered last spring as she was graduating with an operations management degree from Pace University. Out of the blue came the chance to work as director of operations for a far smaller employer - Sandra Carter Productions, a Manhattan-based television production firm.

Making that leap was "the scariest thing I ever did," she says, but it was eased by analyzing all facets of the offer, including the pros and cons of working for a smaller firm. Having done that homework, plus having "faith in myself," allowed her to set the worry aside.

She says she's now in career bliss - traveling around the world, meeting television bigwigs and developing skills in all kinds of areas, such as sales and directing.

To further help sort things out, it's also wise to consult with mentors and savvy networking contacts who can help you do what Jim Malone suggests: "Get out of your own immediate space, rise up above yourself and look at the path ahead." He's director of career counseling at the Web site ReadyMinds.com. Such advisors can help you think strategically about your choices.

For instance, choosing an offer from a larger firm can give your career a boost - even to those who are entrepreneurially minded, says Friedberg. Sure, you might get "frustrated with bureaucracy where things move slower," she says, but you still can learn the best management practices for your own endeavor - and will be clued in when it comes to selling products or services to the big guys.

But if you're looking to advance quickly, a smaller firm may be the way to go, says Barry Miller, a career coach at Pace University. Why? Because you learn a number of different jobs, have more visibility and "it may be easier to rise up the ranks by not having to compete with 30 others."

Whatever your goals, you need to get the clearest picture possible of what the job will do for you before you accept. That may even mean asking for yet another conversation with your prospective boss, says Tory Johnson, chief executive of Women for Hire, a Manhattan-based firm that puts on career fairs.

Especially if there's another offer in the picture, you can tell the company contact, "I feel so fortunate to have two offers, and I would love another conversation with the person I would be reporting to so I could have a clearer understanding of XYZ."

If you have a respectful tone, she says employers are highly unlikely to freak out. It's in their own best interests that you make the right decision. Otherwise they face the prospect of spending the time and money to replace you.

As mentioned earlier, there may be times when you have to accept a job you really don't want. And, in that case, it's important to manage your resentment or lack of interest. You do that, says Friedberg, by reminding yourself frequently what this unsavory job is doing for you - helping you pay down your college loans; providing tuition reimbursement for that degree that hopefully will lead you to something better; giving you an entrée into the industry even though it is an undesirable function.

"Don't take a job and lament how much you don't like it," she says. "Stay focused on your goals - ask, 'What do I want to achieve and how is this job helping me do that?'"