

Evaluating Employment Offers

Evaluating a job offer may seem as difficult and time consuming as uncovering the job leads themselves. If you have recently received a job offer, you've probably begun to ask yourself many questions like, "How will I know if this is the right job for me?" "Are the salary and benefits competitive?" and "How should I evaluate this offer?"

There are several steps that you can take to make this process more manageable and less stressful. Evaluating a job offer involves more than just getting the right salary; it means making the most of your next opportunity to grow and manage your career.

Begin with a Self-Assessment

Take time to evaluate your priorities, interests, values and goals. This self-assessment will help ensure that you accept the position that is the best fit for you. Consider these questions:

- What are your priorities and obligations (both personal and financial)?
- Does this position match your interests? Are you interested in the company's products, services, or the types of clients they work with?
- Does the position and the company meet your personal standards and values?
- What are your career goals? Does the position meet your short and/or long term goals?
- Will this position help you to develop new skills and/or strengthen existing ones?
- What are your expectations (salary, benefits, work environment, etc.)? Are your expectations realistic?

Evaluate the Position, Company and Location

Hopefully, you thoroughly researched the company prior to your interview. Now you need to research the position you've been offered, evaluate the company's standing and learn as much as you can about their geographic location. Here are some points to consider:

The Position

Promotion potential
Intellectual stimulation
Personality/management style of supervisor
Variety of work assignments
Co-workers
Social significance of job
Training provided

Overtime required
Pace of work
Decision making opportunities
Working conditions
Flexibility of hours
Travel/relocation requirements

The Company

Financial health
Relocation possibilities
Stability
Corporate culture
Large vs. small company
Commitment to continuing education

International vs. national scope
Professional development opportunities
Past, present and future priorities
Reputation
Work schedule options
Community involvement

The Location

Cost of living
Rural vs. metropolitan setting
Colleges or universities in the area

Commuting time and cost
Cultural and sports activities available
Safety

Offer Letters and Deadlines

First things first. Never accept a verbal offer--always get it in writing. Your offer letter should include a job description, a mention of who you'll report to, a location you've been assigned to and detailed information about your salary and benefits. Once you have received a written offer from a company, determine how much time you have to evaluate their offer. Two weeks is often considered the unwritten minimum amount of time to consider an offer, however, an employer may extend a deadline if presented with extenuating circumstances.

If you need more time, ask for it. Let your contact know you are flattered by their offer, but that you do not have enough information to make a decision by their deadline. Be sure you are genuinely interested in the offer and the company before seeking an extension. Remember, it is in both parties best interest that you have enough information and time to make your decision. If a company is putting unreasonable pressure on you to make a decision, ask yourself, "Why are they doing this, why do they appear so desperate?" You may want to seek the advice of a counselor in The Center if you find yourself being backed into a corner. Be sure you have read all of your offer information thoroughly and that you have all the information you need to make your decision.

Salary and Bonuses

Do not accept or reject a position based solely on the salary being offered. If the salary is lower than you expected, there may be room for negotiation. Ask about the timeline for performance appraisals and raises. If the company has other bonuses, incentive programs, or even profit sharing, your base salary may be increased substantially. If the salary is higher than expected, don't be wooed into accepting the offer immediately unless you are comfortable with the total package. Read everything.

If a company offers you a signing bonus, keep in mind that that is a one-time only incentive to entice you to accept with the company and will not be a lasting benefit. Other common types of bonuses include yearly bonuses (often tied to an individual or team accomplishment) and commissions.

Understanding Your Benefits Package

You've just received your offer letter and with it you find tons of documents that you are probably finding a bit complicated. Welcome to your benefits package! It is tough to know where to begin. A first step should be to review the contents of your benefits package to become familiar with everything that has been sent to you. The most common elements of a benefits package are:

Healthcare - Assess your own health insurance needs and research your choices before selecting a health care plan. Ask other employees which plan they have chosen, why, and if they are satisfied. Note: You may only be able to switch to a different health plan once a year.

You may have the option of choosing a Health Maintenance Organization (HMO) or a Preferred Provider Organization (PPO). An HMO requires members to select a primary care physician who provides basic medical services and makes referrals to other health care providers when needed. Under HMO's, health care providers receive a fixed premium which is deducted from your paycheck. A predetermined co-payment is often required at the time services are rendered. PPO's are similar to HMO's with many of the same features. However, PPO's require fee for services with preferred providers who, in turn, offer services at discounted rates.

Dental and Eye care - Some companies provide full or partial dental and eye care coverage, while others provide little or no coverage. If these are potentially important benefits for you and your family, read your benefits package carefully. Out of pocket dental expenses can be quite costly.

Vacation/Sick/Personal Time and Family Leave - Most employers provide vacation and sick time. However, the rate you accrue time is often dependent on years of service and the type of position you have. Before you accept an offer, find out how much vacation time you will accrue annually and when you may begin using your time. If possible, determine the company's vacation policy since some employers frown on taking vacation during peak business cycles. You might also want to ask about the company's policies regarding birth of a child, adoption, caring for an ill family member and elder care.

Retirement - Find out what your retirement savings options are and begin to set aside money beginning with your first paycheck. Determine the maximum percentage you are able to contribute annually. Many companies will match or exceed contributions you make to your own retirement plan which can help you to save even more.

In a Defined Contribution Retirement Plan, companies will predetermine how much (often a percentage of your salary) they will contribute towards your retirement fund annually. The 401(k), one of the most popular examples of this plan, allows employees to set aside part of their salary on a pre-tax basis. Examples of other Defined Contribution Retirement Plans include Profit-Sharing Plans, Stock Bonus Plans and Employee Stock Ownership Plans. Retirement plans available to employees of non-profit organizations include 403(b) and 401(a). In a Defined-Benefit Plan, (although rarely found now), the company determines an exact dollar amount that they will award you when you retire but their annual contributions will vary.

Additional Benefits - Added benefits that some companies offer include tuition reimbursement, spousal job search assistance, child care, elder care, use of recreational facilities, association memberships, professional subscriptions, relocation expenses, life insurance, disability insurance, and employee assistance programs.

The Art of Negotiating

Salary is not the only element within a benefits package that's negotiable. However, remember a company will only be willing to negotiate with you if they believe it is in their best interest, not yours, to do so. Carefully consider what you are seeking to negotiate and why you believe you have grounds to do so. If you are going to request to negotiate your salary or a benefit, you must do so BEFORE you accept the offer. Before attempting to negotiate on any point you (not anyone else), have to believe you deserve what you are asking for. Only seek to negotiate when it's for a position you really want. Be reasonable and realistic.

Next, arm yourself with information. If it's a higher salary you're seeking, obtain salary statistics from a variety of sources to support your request. With salaries, try not to state a specific figure, but rather an acceptable range. You must be willing and able to support all requests with facts. When ready, call your contact and ask if there is room for negotiation. Be confident and assertive, but remember to remain professional throughout your negotiations.

If your requests are met, be appreciative and ask to receive written confirmation of the negotiated changes. If your requests are not met, keep your poise, thank your contact and ask for more time to consider their offer.

For many recruits with little or no previous experience, salary is often the only negotiable item. For experienced candidates, other negotiable items might include additional vacation time, occasional work at home, a special title, flextime, office location, travel policy (1st class), and opportunities to attend special seminars, conferences and meetings, just to name a few.

Comparing Two Offers

A point-by-point comparison or a written pros/cons list can help you determine if there is one clear choice. Evaluate offers based on criteria that are important to you; try not to let others influence your decision. Clarify anything that is not clear. Evaluate the following for each offer:

Quality of work assignment	Location of work assignment
Company's position within the industry	Overtime requirements
Work schedule	Housing affordability
Challenge	Quality of life
Opportunity to learn new skills	Advanced education opportunities
Creativity	Work atmosphere
Salary and benefits	Chemistry with manager/colleagues
Potential for advancement	Travel opportunities

The Final Decision

You've made a decision, congratulations! First, call your employer to verbally accept your offer and then confirm all of the details of your offer in writing. Next, call all other companies you have received offers from or have had interviews with to withdraw yourself from their process or to turn down their offers. Be professional and appreciative. Remember though, you are not required to reveal any details about the offer you accepted. Last but not least, be sure to share your future plans with the Center for Career and Professional Development by completing the Future Plans Survey.

Congratulations on a job well done!