

By DANIEL BINSTOCK

Play the Waiting Game

As an offer slowly winds its way through the proper channels, it's best to keep your cool.

Career Advice

You're finishing your second round of interviews. You really enjoyed all the people you met, and can start to see yourself working at this new firm. The excitement is building. As you are ending the interview and approaching the elevator to leave, the final interviewer shakes your hand and says, "It's been a pleasure meeting you. You'll be hearing from us in the near future."

As the elevator doors close, your brain starts running a mile a minute: "Near future?" What does "near future" mean? If they liked me, wouldn't they say "very soon" or "We want to give you an offer right now"? Uh oh, maybe they didn't really like me as much as I like them. You suddenly flash back to high school dating, when you would go home, stew, and wait for the phone to ring.

If you've had this feeling after an interview, you are certainly among the many. Because so many attorneys are highly career-focused and a good portion of their identities are defined by their careers, a potential offer is given monumental importance. As a legal recruiter, I spend at least 15 to 30 minutes each day coaching attorneys through the "waiting period," which is—hands down, without a doubt—the toughest part of the process. This applies to all levels of attorneys—from associates with as little as one year of experience, to partners with as much as 30 years. While there is certainly the niche of high-demand attorneys who are accustomed to having multiple and competing offers, most attorneys find themselves having to play the dreaded waiting game.

KEEPING YOUR COOL

Here are a few things to keep in mind and suggestions to help keep cool during this unavoidably nerve-wracking process.

1. *Understand that time moves slowly for you but flies on the law firm's side.*

After an interview, one day of waiting for an offer seems like a week. For the firm, one week of deciding on an offer seems like one day. Most candidates don't fully appreciate how much "red tape" must be cut through before an offer can be made,

regardless of how much a firm wants to give you an offer. For example, if you interview on Monday, it usually takes one to two days for the recruiting coordinator to receive all the evaluation forms. Then, once the evaluations are reviewed and processed, another meeting (typically between the recruiting coordinator and the practice group leader) needs to be scheduled so they can discuss the evaluations and decide whether to make an offer immediately, or whether more candidates should be interviewed, etc.

Even assuming the practice group leader gives the okay to make an offer, some firms require that the hiring committee also approve the offer, which can further prolong the process. This can take even longer if you are interviewing in a satellite office, and the firm's policy requires that all offers come from the main office. Now, even if the hiring committee has approved the offer, you can tuck on another day or so (sometimes up to a week or longer) for the offer letter to be processed and signed by the hiring partner.

As you see, a number of different people typically become involved in the process after you have finished your interview. Given how busy most attorneys are with clients and active schedules, and considering how hard they are to pin down, it is not surprising that this process takes time and involves a lot of administrative navigating.

2. *Try not to view an offer as "winning" and a rejection as "failing." Rather, view the process as trying to find the ideal match for both sides.*

Many attorneys place their entire self-worth as a human being on the line when they await an offer, which only adds to the anxiety. While you can certainly influence the likelihood of getting an offer by the way you conduct yourself during the interview, there are often a number of factors that are largely out of your control, such as your experience and credentials. More important, you cannot control the experience and credentials of the other candidates.

Some people perform beautifully on an interview and have fabulous credentials, but do not get offers because they are

overqualified for a position or because of a concern that they would decline an offer for an even better opportunity or would not stay for a long time if hired. Indeed, in these circumstances, one would be hard-pressed to explain how not receiving an offer is a “failure.”

Try to keep in mind that this process is about finding a match. If a firm does not ultimately make an offer, there is probably a good reason why they did not believe it was meant to be, at the time. Chalk it up simply as a “mismatch” and be thankful that a likely mismatch has been eliminated. Keeping this in mind during the process will help keep things in perspective.

3. *Even though you may be feeling like a nervous wreck, don't try to “force” an offer.*

If you have ever anxiously awaited a job offer, you no doubt have spent time obsessively checking your e-mail account or waiting for “that call.” While this is certainly normal, do not let your anxiety get the best of you and cause you to dig your own grave.

If you saw the movie “Swingers,” you’ll remember the classic answering-machine scene. In it, Jon Favreau’s character has a crush on a woman he just met, his anxiety gets the best of him, and he leaves a series of painfully obsessive messages on her answering machine within a few minutes. She eventually picks up while he is leaving yet another message and demands that he leave her alone.

The reason this scene was so memorable (and uncomfortable to watch) is because so many people could secretly relate to his need to appease his anxiety, and see that the harder he tried to quell his anxiety, the deeper he dug himself into a hole.

While it is certainly appropriate to let a firm know of your

interest in a potential offer, the worst thing you can do is try to alleviate your anxiety by seeking to “force” an offer (which, at the time, seems like the most logical way to make your anxiety go away). Do not come on too strong by following up with the attorneys or the recruiting coordinator too frequently. Like the character in “Swingers,” this is a surefire way to appear overly desperate, cast doubt on your judgment and confidence, and undermine a potential offer.

If you are feeling like you can’t control your hand from sending the “please advise me of the status” e-mail or picking up the phone to call the partner who kindly said, “Call if you have any questions,” this is a sign that you are not in the appropriate frame of mind to be making critical decisions that could affect your career.

Ask yourself: Is there anything to be gained by following up, other than trying to ease my nerves? If the answer is no, it’s time to switch gears. Whether it means leaving your office, getting a snack, calling a good friend, or taking a walk, just change gears and remove yourself from the situation. I promise that 15 minutes later, you will be thankful that you didn’t send the e-mail or make that call.

Remember, just because you are anxious about an offer does not mean you are any less likely to get one. Just be sure that your nervousness does not get in the way and undermine a potential offer that is just winding its way through the proper channels and may be right over the horizon.

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