

Saying "No"

The best part about the hiring process is extending an offer to a terrific candidate and taking him or her out to a celebratory lunch when the offer is accepted. But what about contacting the candidates that you did not choose? And on the candidate's side, while saying yes is easy and fun, turning down an offer, especially after a fairly in-depth interviewing process, can be both difficult and awkward.

"People are often conflict averse, and it's hard to say no," noted Kathleen Yazbak, Director of Talent and Recruiting at Bridgestar. But saying "no" well – whether you're an employer, a search professional, or a job seeker – makes the difference between burning a bridge and maintaining a relationship.

Being able to say "no" effectively begins with good practices early in the recruiting process. "Often people interview for a role, and along the way have some hesitation – maybe about geographic location, or travel requirements – but keep it to themselves until they get an offer," said Randi Bussin, career and business coach with Aspire!. "But no employer wants to get caught blindsided by hearing these concerns for the first time after the offer has been made. Individuals need to bring up these hesitations, especially any deal-breakers, earlier in the process. Not in the first interview of course, but definitely once they are on the short list."

Yazbak agreed. "Employers should be getting a sense of candidates' potential deal-breakers along the way, learning about individuals' expectations and concerns during the interview process. And they should also be clear about concerns they have about candidates, especially experience gaps or other issues that might put them out of the running. This way, candidates won't be taken by surprise if and when they are turned down for the job."

Karen DeMay, Regional Director of Recruiting at Bridgestar, added: "There are specific questions you can ask to get these issues out in the open. Candidates can ask, 'Are there concerns you have about me or my experience that make you question whether I'm right for the role?' Organizations can ask, "Do you need any clarification about the role or what it would be like to work here? Are there any specific questions or concerns on your mind?"

Clarifying the terms of an offer before saying no (or yes) is also important. "There is some room for negotiation in most offers," notes Janet Albert, Regional Director of Recruiting at Bridgestar. "Any big issues should have been discussed earlier in the process, so a candidate might say something like, 'We talked about a salary range, and given my experience and qualifications I thought you would offer

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something on the higher end of that range,’ or ‘Can we formalize in the offer what we had talked about in terms of a 4-day work week?,’ but shouldn’t suddenly try to negotiate out of a geographic move that had always been discussed as an integral part of the position.”

But say you’ve been open throughout the process, there are no specific points to negotiate in the offer, and the time comes to say no. Are there good and bad ways to do a turn-down? Yazbak, DeMay, Albert, and Bussin all say yes, and share some practical tips for both employers and individuals.

Tips for employers:

Be timely. “It’s a big mistake to leave people hanging,” said Yazbak. “Avoiding calling a candidate to let them know they are no longer in the running just puts a bad taste in people’s mouths about you.” This is true both for candidates who don’t make the screen early in the process and for those who are in the running through the final rounds.

Have the process manager make the call. The person who has been managing the process should be the one to make the call, whether that is the executive search firm, an HR manager, or the hiring manager. In the early rounds it is common practice to simply leave a short voicemail if you don’t reach someone, or even an email, but short list candidates deserve the opportunity for a voice-to-voice conversation.

Be clear and succinct in your explanation. “This is of course much easier if the reason you didn’t choose the candidate has to do with a skill or experience gap, rather than a personality or ‘fit’ issue,” said DeMay. In general, she advises employers to put the turndown in the context of the person who did receive the offer. For example: “Though we were impressed by your commitment to the organization and strong management background, the final candidate had significantly more experience in running multi-site organizations, and that was really important to us.”

Keep your second-choice candidate viable. Do not turn down your second choice candidate until your first choice says yes, unless you are positive you wouldn’t extend them an offer if things fell through. Yazbak noted, “I’ve seen clients whose first choice hems and haws, and finally turns down an offer. Meanwhile, the second choice candidate becomes very enthusiastic when given an offer, and the contrast in responses shows that the second choice was in fact a better fit, making both candidate and employer much happier at the end of the day.”

Let everyone know whom you selected. Share the final result with all candidates (from all stages of the process) as well as those involved in the search, and emphasize why the new employee is a great fit. In doing this, search firms typically email everyone involved in the search

when the results are official, and personally call those on the short list. Employers managing their own searches can do the same.

Tips for job-seekers turning down an offer:

Be gracious. When you receive an offer, be gracious and enthusiastic, and let the hiring organization know that you need a day or two to think things through.

Be prompt. Once you are sure that you want to decline the offer, be prompt in contacting the organization. In general, this should not take longer than a week after the offer was extended, barring extenuating circumstances.

Communicate with the offer-maker. In terms of tactics, call whoever extended the offer to turn it down live. If the person managing the process was in the HR department or part of a search firm, you might also call the hiring manager, especially if he or she spent significant time with you. Once the calls are made, follow up in writing.

Be succinct and be honest. “Especially in writing, you should keep the reasoning short and to the point,” advised Bussin. Refer to an issue that had been discussed earlier in the interview process, such as compensation or travel, or say something along the lines of “this position is not the best fit for me right now, given my career development goals.”

Reach out to those you met along the way. To maintain relationships you developed during the process, it is often a good idea to drop notes to others you got to know through the process and would like to keep in your network, to express appreciation for their time and insight.

Tips for job-seekers who have been turned-down:

Be mature and be gracious. Your reaction to the turn-down tells a lot about you, so be mature and gracious. You want an employer and/or a search professional to think of you in a positive light for future searches. Yazbak commented, “As search professionals we’re always looking for good candidates and often contact short-list candidates from one search for a similar position elsewhere. However, if you handle a turn-down poorly (i.e., get angry or critical), we may question your judgment and be hesitant to reach out to you again.”

Learn from the experience. If you get turned down and were truly surprised and/or disappointed, it is fine to ask for feedback, as long as you do it thoughtfully, non-defensively, and without malice. Bussin commented, “Feedback can help you position yourself better, and can give you insight into which skills to emphasize and ways to improve your interviewing skills. As long as you go into it with the attitude of ‘I want to learn from this experience,’ rather than ‘how could you

turn me down,' employers may be willing to give constructive feedback.” She shared the story of one short-list candidate who asked for feedback from a company he was very interested in. The company was impressed with how he handled himself, he got good feedback on his interview style, and several months later he interviewed for another position at the same company. The result? He got the offer and took the job.

Bridgestar (www.bridgestar.org), an initiative of the Bridgespan Group, provides a nonprofit management job board, content, and tools designed to help nonprofit organizations build strong leadership teams and individuals pursue career paths as nonprofit leaders.