

The Proper Way to Resign

Congratulations. You've accepted a new job.

Now take a deep breath and prepare yourself for the challenge ahead. Even though you may be floating on cloud nine now, there are a lot of emotional and logistical hurdles yet to clear.

As you've already learned, the job-changing process arouses all sorts of feelings. During the transitional phase that begins with your acceptance of an offer and ends a month or two after you've started your new position, the emotional limbo you'll experience will be especially acute.

Why? Because suddenly, the reality kicks in. After a little time, the changes you've been contemplating are actually going to happen.

This jolting realization will be followed by a sense of guilt. Oh, my God, you tell yourself. I've been cheating on my present employer. Having an affair is one thing - but divorce? I never knew it would come to this!

Then the fear of reprisal begins. My boss is gonna kill me, I just know it. He's really gonna make me suffer.

And if the fear of guilt and reprisal don't give you enough to worry about, consider the buyer's remorse you'll probably feel, What if I made a mistake? You ask yourself. I'm gonna ruin my life. Aaaauggghh!

Don't Let the Demons Get You Down

Relax. Everyone who changes jobs is plagued by these demons, to a greater or lesser degree. It's only natural.

But rather than dwell on the past, imagine for a moment that you're in your new job. Isn't this great? Think of all the changes you're making, and how your new life is a huge improvement compared to what you had before. Think of the new people you're meeting, the new skills you're acquiring, and the new opportunities you have to advance your career.

Now, are you going to let your fears unravel everything you've accomplished in the way of self-evaluation, planning, resume writing, interviewing, and putting a deal together? No way. You're not the type of person who's going to allow cold feet to put the chill on changing jobs. You're a person of action, and you seize the moment. You know that those who back away from golden opportunities may never get another chance. Self-affirmations like these can do wonders for maintaining your positive energy and high self-esteem. And by projecting all the beneficial aspects of your new job into the present tense, you'll ward off the demons that can distort your judgment, and make you vulnerable to a counteroffer attempt.

Considering the Counteroffer

Of course, if your motivation for getting a job offer was to position yourself for a counteroffer, then you're in the catbird's seat - you can't lose either way. Or can you? Some employment experts point out that accepting a counteroffer is the equivalent of career suicide.

According to Paul Hawkinson, publisher of The Forgyce Letter, your acceptance of a counteroffer could very well blow up in your face. Here's how. Let's say you announce your plans to leave your current job. This, in effect, blackmails your boss, who makes you a counteroffer only to keep you until he can find your replacement, at which point you're dropped like a hot potato. In the meantime, the trusting relationship you've enjoyed with your current supervisors and peers abruptly ends, and your loyalty becomes forever suspect.

Is this sort of scenario accurate? I guess it depends . My experience has been mixed. That is, some of the candidates I've known who've accepted counteroffers have remained at their old jobs for years, and have smoothed over whatever difficulties caused their split in the first place.

It's precisely for this reason that I'm so cautious when I work with currently employed job seekers. I want to feel confident that their motives are pure before we both invest a lot of time and energy in testing the market. However, there's a lot of evidence to support the theory that candidates who accept counteroffers become damaged goods once they've been herded back into the fold.

Here Come the Three Stages

If your intention to make a change is sincere, and a counteroffer by your current company won't change your decision to leave, you should still keep up your guard. A counteroffer attempt can be potentially devastating, both on a personal and professional level. Unless you know how to diffuse your current employer's retaliation against your resignation, you may end up psychologically wounded, or right back at the job you wanted to leave. The best way to shield yourself from the inevitable mixture of emotions surrounding the act of submitting your resignation is to remember that employers follow a predictable, three-stage pattern when faced with a resignation:

- They'll be in shock. "You sure picked a fine time to leave! Who's going to finish the project we started?" The implication is that you're irreplaceable. They might as well ask, "How will we ever get the work done without you?" To answer this assertion, you can reply, "If I were run over by a truck on my way to work tomorrow, I feel that somehow, this company would survive."
- They'll start to probe. "Who's the new company? What sort of position did you accept? What are they paying you?" Here you must be careful not to disclose too much information, or appear too enthusiastic. Otherwise, you run the risk of feeding your current employer with ammunition he can use against you later, such as, "I've heard some pretty terrible things about your new company" or, "They'll make everything look great until you actually get there. Then you'll see what a sweat shop that place really is."

- They'll make you an offer to try and keep you from leaving. "You know that raise you and I were talking about a few months back? I forgot to tell you: We were just getting it processed yesterday." To this you can respond, "Gee, today you seem pretty concerned about my happiness and well-being. Where were you yesterday, before I announced my intention to resign?"

It may take several days for the three stages to run their course, but believe me, sooner or later, you'll find yourself engaged in conversations similar to these. More than once, candidates have called me after they've resigned, to tell me that their old company followed the three-stage pattern exactly as I described it. Not only were they prepared to diffuse the counteroffer attempt, they found the whole sequence to be almost comical in its predictability.

How to Tactfully Resign

The first thing you need to consider is the timing of your resignation. Since two weeks' notice is considered the norm, make sure your resignation properly coincides with your start date at the new company.

You should always try to avoid an extended start date. Even if your new job begins in 10 weeks, don't give 10 weeks' notice; wait eight weeks and then give two weeks' notice. This way, you'll protect yourself from disaster; in the unlikely event your new company announces a hiring freeze a month before you come onboard. And by staying at your old job for only two weeks after you've announced your resignation, you won't be subjected to the envy, scorn, or feelings of professional impotence that may result from your new role as a lame-duck employee.

Some companies will make your exit plans for you. I placed a candidate once whose employer had the security guard escort him out of the building the moment he announced his intention to go to work for a direct competitor. Fortunately, he was still given two weeks' pay.

Your resignation should be handled in person, preferably on a Friday afternoon. Ask your direct supervisor if you can speak with him privately in his office. When you announce your intention to resign, you should also hand your supervisor a letter, which states your last date of employment with the company. Let him know that you've enjoyed working with him, but that an opportunity came along that you couldn't pass up, and that your decision to leave was made carefully, and doesn't reflect any negative feelings you have toward the company or the staff.

You should also add that your decision is final, and that you would prefer not to be made a counteroffer, since you wouldn't want your refusal to accept more money to appear as a personal affront. Let your supervisor know that you appreciate all the company's done for you; and that you'll do everything in your power to make your departure as smooth and painless as possible. Finally, ask if there's anything you can do during the transition period over the next two weeks, such as help train your successor, tie up loose ends, or delegate tasks.

Keep your resignation letter short, simple, and to the point. There's no need to go into detail about your new job, or what led to your decision to leave. If these issues are important to your old employer, he'll schedule an exit interview for you, at which time you can hash out your differences ad infinitum.

Make sure to provide a carbon copy or photocopy of your resignation letter for your company's personnel file. This way, the circumstances surrounding your resignation will be well documented for future reference. In all likelihood, the human resource staff will want to meet with you to process your departure papers, or cover any questions you may have concerning the transfer of your medical insurance or retirement benefits.

Relocation Specialists

Now that you've gotten your resignation out of the way, you need to shift your attention to the new company.

If relocation is required, and you haven't done your house hunting, let me make a suggestion. Work with a relocation specialist, to give you a hand in finding a place to live in your new city or town. Relocation specialists are brokers who make their living by matching candidates and locations, similar to the way recruiters match candidates and employers.

Relocation specialists will interview you and your spouse (or significant other). Once they discover your housing and lifestyle needs, they'll refer you to Realtors who are familiar with the local communities that satisfy your needs. Relocation specialists receive a commission or finder's fee from the Realtor, once a property is sold. There's no charge to you or your new employer. Often, relocation specialists will be able to prequalify you for a mortgage loan, or refer you to an amenable mortgage broker or lending institution.

Relocation specialists can also be good at handling unusual situations.

For example, a relocation specialist I was working with a few years ago was able to help a candidate's wife transfer her teaching credential from California to Michigan. Without the transfer, the candidate wouldn't have been able to accept my client company's offer.

In another instance, a relocation specialist was able to pinpoint the exact housing needs of a candidate and his wife, show them the perfect property, qualify them, and arrange a 5-percent down mortgage loan with a bank - all in one morning. That afternoon, the candidate went to his final interview with my client company and accepted their offer, secure in the knowledge that his relocation wouldn't be a problem.

If your new company has a relocation specialist on staff, fine. If not, ask for a recommendation. Your relocation is too important to leave to chance, or entrust to a randomly selected real estate agent. In the event you're unable to find an independent relocation specialist, you can probably hook up with a Realtor who works mainly with executive corporate transfers. Century 21, for example, does an outstanding job of matching out-of-town buyers with desirable, local properties.

Culture Shock and Task Clarity

At last, you've arrived! Welcome aboard.

In the beginning, your new job may seem over-whelming. After all, there are new people to meet, new systems to learn, new schedules to keep, and new personalities to adjust to. In many ways, culture shock might be the best way to describe your first week. The real key to early success with your new company boils down to the issue of task clarity. Task clarity refers not to your ability to do a certain job, but to your understanding of how the job's defined. Task clarity is dependent upon the quality of communication between you and the person assigning the task. Any breakdown of task clarity will result in frustration or poor performance, or worse.

To illustrate, let me tell you the story of John, a technical writer I placed with a high tech client company in California. Three weeks after John started in his new position, I called to ask him how everything was going.

"Fine" he answered. "They love me here. I've completed the documentation on everything they've assigned me."

Later that day, I placed a call to John's boss, expecting him to heap praise on me for my recruiting genius. Boy, was I in for a surprise!

"Bill, I'm afraid I have some bad news for you," said the manager. "I'm going to fire John this afternoon. It looks like we'll have to start the search all over again."

"Really?" I was stunned. "What seems to be the problem?"

John hasn't produced any of the documentation we need for our customers, and we have to get the work done to meet our deadline. If John can't do the work, I'll have to find someone who can."

"That's odd," I said. "I talked to John this morning and he's under the impression that the documentation he's producing is exactly what you asked for. When was the last time the two of you sat down to discuss his assignment?"

"Oh gosh," replied the manager, "it must have been about three weeks ago, right after he started to work here."

"Well then, let me make a suggestion. The two of you should talk this through, because there's obviously been a communication breakdown. As far as John's concerned, he's doing a terrific job based on his perception of the assignment."

Changing Jobs: A New Beginning

A simple failure to communicate the task clearly in the beginning had almost resulted in John's termination three weeks after he started his new job. Fortunately, we were all able to dodge a bullet. After my call to the employer, John and his boss sat down to discuss the project. The assignment was quickly clarified, and John went on to complete the documentation needed to meet the deadline. John was lucky that my intervention helped save his job. If you're working with a recruiter, make sure he or she keeps in touch with the company, to monitor your progress.

You owe it to your career to sharpen your task clarity. Ask for a weekly review for the first month or so of your employment, and try not to let things get set on automatic pilot, especially in the beginning.

With a little bit of planning, it's possible to make a smooth transition
from one job to the next.