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FORTUNE

Before You Say "Yes" to a Job Offer

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Check Out the New Boss and the New Culture

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Over the last two years in my private practice as a Five O'Clock Club coach, I have had the pleasure of working with more than two hundred talented managers and executives who are looking for new jobs. I have noticed an alarming theme in their stories about how their jobs ended—or are about to end. About 60 percent of these individuals have told me that, *had they known more* about their future bosses and the corporate culture,

they would have *never* accepted the last job. What was missing in the process of checking out a new position—*before* accepting the offer? There were big gaps in the due diligence.

As I work with clients who are *considering* offers—hoping to move on to the next great position—here are some of the questions that come to mind, to help improve the due diligence:

- How much time did you actually spend with your future boss?
- Did you spend any time with your boss's boss?
- Did you meet with your some or all of your peers?
- Did you interview or meet with your potential subordinates?
- Did you speak with the key players *outside* your area, people who would be critical to your success?
- Did you talk to anyone who *used to* work for the company?

- Did you talk to anyone who had worked for your future boss within the last few years?
- If the position involves sales or marketing, did you talk to any customers?

Managers and executives looking for a job are not spending enough time talking with the boss's boss, peers, subordinates and others.

The answers to these questions from the 60-percent-unhappy crowd were unsettling. The average time spent with the boss was less than three hours. Most had not spent any quality time with the boss's boss, a few had met one or two peers, a few had talked to their subordinates, almost no one had talked to anyone outside their functional area, no one had reached out to former employees of the company. Nobody had bothered to talk to customers.

Based on my work with executives during the last few years, I can identify three primary reasons why jobs deteriorate to the point of resignation or termination:

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- ◆ Key Attributes of Leaders

You need to know if the manager is able to describe success in quantifiable outcomes.

- Who has the boss or manager successfully mentored—and how was it done?
- Here’s a really tough one: ask to see the boss’s résumé. Seeing the résumé will help you understand his or her track record. If you don’t feel comfortable asking for the résumé, you can at least say, “Do you have a bio that I can review?”
- Check references! Obviously, most of us wince at the very thought of asking a future boss for references. But *asking* is not the only way to check references. If you’ve hired people, you know that you can consult the industry grapevine: you ask around, you call people who are in the know. You can track down prior direct reports and even prior board members if your boss will be the CEO. You can also try to find your predecessor. His or her opinion might have to be weighed very carefully, depending on the circumstances. But the person who left the job may be able to shed light on what awaits you.

The basic idea is to *do research* on your potential new boss or bosses. The Internet is right there at your fingertips, e.g., Google and www.zoominfo.com are good places to start. Search trade and industry publications for articles by or about the people you might be working for; these days the Internet is your primary tool for this.

- Find out *what the turnover is*—by area, especially sales, leadership positions, and IT.
- Check to see if there is a blog on the company. There are often real pearls in blogs.

The easiest way to do this is type the company name and the word ‘blog’ in Google or use Google’s Blog search.

When you’ve determined that you really want a position, or to work for a particular company, Five O’Clock Club coaches recommend that you “surround the hiring manager”—which means

winning friends among the influencers.

Don’t forget that there are usually a lot of people who surround the hiring managers, at various levels and in various functions. And these can be sources of information and insight. They can play key advocacy roles, of course, but they can also help to provide information to help make an informed decision.

Don’t Forget All the Other People to Interview

Here are some of the people who can help you with thorough due diligence:

1. Talk to your potential peers. These are possible questions—depending on your sense of what is appropriate:

- “What are the boss’s strengths and weaknesses?”
- “How do you deal with his or her quirks?”
- “How does the team deal with crisis or short-term performance failures?”
- “What do you see as the top three priorities for the person who’s going to be hired?”
- “What do you see as the company’s biggest challenges?”

2. Interview the boss’s boss. After having heard so many horror stories, I would be tempted to say that this is a *must*. Whether it will always be *possible...well*, do your best to try to make it happen. You need to know if everyone is on the same page; so ask the boss’s boss:

- “What does he or she see as your major challenges and priorities?”
- “What are the company’s top three priorities?”
- “What will constitute outstanding performance in your first six months? First year?” Again, performance should be described in terms of quantifiable outcomes.

3. Interview your key *internal customers*. A few examples:

- If you’re in marketing, you need to interview some of the people on the

sales team.

- If you’re in sales, interview some folks in marketing.
- If your role is in HR or Finance, meet with the heads of key departments.

4. Interview several major customers of the company. This can be invaluable on two fronts: it gives you some real world business perspectives, and, if you accept the position, you have already begun to build important relationships.

As I look forward to coaching hundreds more executives in the years ahead, I hope I won’t see as many who’ve gotten burned. I don’t like to hear: “I wish I hadn’t taken that job. I wish I’d known.” Even if you can carry out only some of the due diligence I’ve suggested, the odds of making a poor decision drop considerably. Even if you’ve uncovered enough to make you nervous—and your back is against the wall (“an offer is an offer!”)—you’ll know where the skeletons are. You’ll be going in fully aware of the biggest challenges.

By the way, interviewing like a consultant—asking all the right people all the right questions—will put you head and shoulders above the competition. Very few candidates are this thorough, and high-performing organizations truly appreciate potential employees who know what it means to do due diligence. ●

Bill has 30 years of senior management and human resources experience, with more than 10 years at the Vice President level. He has headed the human resource function for fast-paced companies in a variety of industries, including high tech, medical cost containment, consumer products, office products and financial information. A unique aspect of Bill’s background: He was a successful sales rep and sales manager at Xerox before starting his human resources career. He is an expert in executive and career coaching, employee selection and retention, executive recruiting, and management training. Bill has been with the Club since 2002 and runs a senior executive Insider group.