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Outplacement Job Advice: Should You Take It or Leave It?

By Rebecca Theim

Summoned to the main conference room, I opened the door to encounter the CEO and vice president of human resources. The grim news wasn't really a surprise. The company was struggling. More than a third of the work force had been eliminated in the past four years. My boss had been avoiding me for the past three months. I was being downsized.

However, one thing was different from the first layoff I endured five years earlier: this time I would be offered outplacement.

Once the exclusive purview of senior executives, outplacement is now often offered for a broader array of employees, in some cases on down to administrative assistants.

Getting Better Help



Before accepting the help you've been offered, see these [tips for finding an outplacement firm](#) that best serves your needs.

Depending on employee's pecking order in the corporate structure, outplacement lasts anywhere from two days to two years and can include psychological and financial counseling, administrative support and office space, job-search and networking workshops and an overhaul of that essential job-search tool, the resume.

I was offered the mid-to-upper-management variety, which included several hours of personal and career assessment, a substantial revision to my resume and an intensive three-day personal coaching session that was expanded by a day after I complained that I needed more help. Some of the advice I was offered made sense and was helpful. But I -- and other career experts whose guidance I sought during my job search -- questioned the wisdom and motivation of other tips I received. Read on for my perspective on what advice you should take -- and what you should leave behind.

Advice: Have your resume professionally re-written

Verdict: Take It

I never thought I needed a professional resume-writing service -- I was a professional communicator, after all -- until I read my new resume created by the outplacement firm's experts. They know the latest and greatest business buzz words companies scan resumes for. They also can play up transferable skills.

Advice: Do "everything ethically acceptable" to get a job offer, even if it's a job you're not sure you want.

Verdict: Leave It

It happens: you get deep into the interview process with a prospective employer and you realize the position or company is not for you. When this happened to me, one of my outplacement counselors strongly advised me to stay in the hunt, even if doing so involved time-consuming travel and interviews for a position I knew I'd never accept. She counseled that getting an offer would be a huge boost to my self-confidence. I disagreed. Wasting my time and the time of the recruiter and prospective hiring manager seemed wrong. And, I didn't need an offer for a job I'd never accept to boost my self confidence.

Advice: Land the job first; find out about it later. Do not ask a lot of questions. Let them tell you about the job in their own way and in their own time.

Verdict: Leave It

This advice is verbatim from printed materials given to me by the outplacement company. Consider the outplacement agency's motivations: to get you re-employed as quickly as possible. Yes, your motivation is also to get re-employed as quickly as possible, but you want to be re-employed in the right job. You must be professional and respectful during the interview process, but you're also interviewing the company, assessing your fit and compatibility with its employees and culture. You need to sell yourself, but you also need to be a prepared and inquisitive candidate and find the best fit for you.

Advice: Don't bother with job postings on the Web.

Verdict: Leave It

A successful job search is supposed to be almost exclusively about one-on-one networking. However, many companies -- including powerhouses Boeing and Nike, to name just two -- require candidates to apply through their Web sites. A professional colleague at Boeing even told me that corporate policy prohibited her from personally referring me for opportunities within the company. Online job boards certainly aren't the only place candidates should be looking for a new job, but I secured numerous substantive interviews through job board applications, including one that seemed sure to lead to a six-figure offer with a well-known information-services company. (For more on online job boards, see "[Why It's Time to Broaden Your Job Search Beyond the Big Boards.](#)")



Rebecca Theim

Advice: Respond professionally to headhunters, but never forget they work for the hiring company, not for you.

Verdict: Take It

I like headhunters. But headhunters are paid by the company that's searching for the new employee and the best headhunters are retained, meaning they're paid to exclusively find and present the candidate the company will ultimately hire. The very best headhunters develop relationships with quality candidates. They may even place them in more than one job over the course of the candidate's career. However, you'll be one of many candidates a headhunter will talk to for each position he fills.

Advice: Never talk salary until the company is about to extend an offer.

Verdict: Leave It -- with some exceptions

Everyone -- not just outplacement counselors -- tells you this, and I admit in a perfect world, it may be preferable. However, today's recruiters are quite aggressive when it comes to learning a candidate's salary expectations, and with good reason. I had a dynamite interview for what a mid-level position with a Fortune 30 company, only to learn that the company was looking to pay about half what I previously was earning. Learning that cost the company about \$1,000 in travel expenses and several hours to interview me, and cost me even more travel and preparation time. Instead, try one of these approaches. Know what you're worth and reference that. I knew from reviewing salary surveys and talking to peers that my previous salary was on the low side. Such a response served me better than citing my previous, below-market salary, and also let the hiring company know what its competitors were paying.

Advice: Forsake part-time, freelance or consulting work so that you can stay 100% focused on your job search.

Verdict: Leave It

This advice may make sense for the first three months you're in the job search, but if you look longer than that, companies want to know what you've been doing with yourself. Consulting can pay the bills, promote the peace at home (if you're depending on your spouse for support during this difficult time) and keep your hand in the work world. And it sometimes can lead to a permanent position, which was the case on an earlier job I landed.

Advice: Resolve outstanding issues with the employer that's downsizing you as quickly and amicably as possible.

Verdict: Take It -- most of the time

There's much to be said for closure and putting the traumatic experience of a lay off behind you. However, if you feel you're being treated unfairly or deserve more, push for what you deserve. If at first you're told "no," approach someone higher up the corporate food chain.

-- After two corporate downsizings, more interviews than she cares to count and job offers aborted by pending acquisitions and other corporate machinations, Ms. Theim is now principal in Chicago-based Tipitina Communications Inc.