

How to Build Chemistry Before Taking the job

As seen on CareerJournal.com

"I ignored every sign that I saw, and I was miserable from day one," says Peggy Alexander, a publisher with John Wiley and Sons Inc. in New York City. "I wanted to be near my parents and that clouded my judgment."

Ms. Alexander ignored her instincts after interviewing with a California publishing company so she could move from the East Coast to the West Coast. Everything she saw when she met with the hiring manager for the editorial position at the company made her want to run. The prospective boss was vague and spoke in aphorisms about the job. He didn't respect physical boundaries and stood too close. He wasn't sure if Ms. Alexander would work for him or someone else. Still, she was eager to live in California, and publishing opportunities were limited there, so she accepted the post. "I knew it wasn't the right thing to do, but I thought I'd make it work," she says.

As her interviewer had implied, Ms. Alexander was soon assigned to another boss. Yet she liked many things about the job. She traveled and worked with authors she enjoyed. Gradually, things got worse. While Ms. Alexander and her new boss were visiting a prestigious university, the boss took out nail clippers and gave herself an impromptu manicure in the hall.

Finally, the scales tipped too far in the wrong direction, and after four years with the company, Ms. Alexander joined another California-based publisher. "The things I liked about the job were overshadowed by a bad manager," she says.

Can you work for someone you don't like? It depends on, among other things, your ability to tolerate defects in others, how much you need the job and the extent to which you dislike the manager. If you're faced with this dilemma, recognize the warning signs that you and your boss may not get along and use these tips to help make your decision.

Question your first impression.

If you dislike the interviewer, but like the company, job and the job content, try to determine what's bothering you, says Janet Jones-Parker, managing director of Jones-Parker/Star, a retained search firm in Chapel Hill, N.C. You owe it to yourself to think unemotionally about the situation and consider all facets of the opportunity. Just as you don't accept jobs for a single reason, it may not be wise to walk away for a single reason, Ms. Jones-Parker says. "You have to question your first impression," she says. "If the job has the content and career advancement you're looking for, it's worth going back to calibrate your initial impression. It's possible that the interviewer had a bad day."

Think analytically and dispassionately. Ask yourself what exactly turned you off. Was the interviewer demanding, uptight, negative or unfocused? Was there something about you that caused the problem? Before pulling out of the interview process, seek the perspective of uninvolved outsiders, such as a recruiter, outplacement counselor, other company employees, friends and family.

Calibrate your needs with the available job.

Write a description of your ideal job and its most important components and determine how many of them match the opportunity, says Leslie Bonagura, managing consultant in Stamford, Conn., for Drake Beam Morin Inc., a Boston-based outplacement company.

Price Kellar, an attorney in Springfield, Mo., once interviewed with a prospective boss he disliked. The attorney was self-centered and oblivious to his poor interviewing style. "I didn't like him because he talked the entire time about what he needed," says Mr. Kellar. "At no point, did we discuss my credentials, strengths and how they might match his vision. It was a horrible interview. He was so humble that I wondered how he could be in business." What Mr. Kellar learned about the firm also wasn't encouraging. The position was open because four lawyers had just quit, taking a chunk of business with them. During the interview, the office phone rang constantly, but wasn't answered. The prospective boss had been advertising heavily and the ringing phone likely meant business.

"I can't pay you a salary," said the company owner, "but you can have that desk over there as long as you're willing to answer the phone." Mr. Kellar says he wasn't sure whether the gamble was worth it.

Mr. Kellar weighed the facts about the law firm. While the owner's interview style was irritating, he worked in another city three hours away, which meant Mr. Kellar would have autonomy. And asking questions showed that the four lawyers had quit because their portfolios had increased. Mr. Kellar's confidence and the potential for new business outweighed the warning signs, and he took the job. "Believe it or not," he says, "it was one of the best jobs I ever had. In a few months I had a salary and got tied to cases where I had incentives."

Heed your gut reaction.

When deciding whether to accept a job offer, "it's all about odds" and how you can increase them, says Bill Jordan, senior vice president of business development for iUniverse.com, a digital publishing and infrastructure company in Campbell, Ca. Heeding your gut or inner voice is one way to improve the odds, he says.

"I can remember several occasions in my career when I didn't listen to that little voice which said, 'take it' or 'don't take it' and I got in trouble," he says. At other times, though, he paid attention to his instincts. For instance, when interviewing with a software company, Mr. Jordan asked how the company could afford to honor a clause in its customer agreement. "We don't take contracts that seriously," the hiring manager responded. His lack of ethics made Mr. Jordan uneasy, and he declined the offer.

During another interview, the hiring manager spoke disparagingly of people in other departments. To Mr. Jordan, this showed there were "deeper issues at the company." Another way to improve your odds is to listen between the lines, says David Secan, a workplace development consultant in Elkins Park, Pa. Noticing the interviewer's true meaning requires total awareness, he says.

A manager who keeps looking at his watch, answering the phone, glancing at the door or seems preoccupied may be under the gun to finish a project. Instead of dismissing the interviewer as rude, you could say, "It looks as though things are very active today for you. I'd be happy to take a break or come back on a day when you have more time." Bailey Bilt-Kravitz, a senior engineer in Austin, Texas, says he learned several years ago to listen for subtle cues during interviews. At one company, he met with a manager who told him he was worried about his own job. "That was great information," says Mr. Bilt-Kravitz, who didn't take the job. "You had to really listen to what he was saying."

Continue researching until you're sure.

Conduct thorough due diligence about the company, says Brian Clapp, a managing principal for Right Management Consultants, a Philadelphia-based outplacement firm. Don't short circuit the process because you didn't connect with the interviewer, he says. "Until you have a job offer, track it through," he says. "The interview process is an artificial process. It's a forced interaction. You aren't seeing the whole person, and that can go both ways."

Network with others and ask for their impressions. "Describe the situation to a friend who knows you well and will ask you questions from a different point of view," says Ms. Bonagura. David Knowles, an executive search consultant with Professional Alternatives in Houston, interviewed with another recruiting firm in Houston before taking his current job. He liked everyone and everything he heard until the third and final interview with the owner.

The principal showed up late without explaining why or apologizing. He hadn't prepared for the session, nor had he studied Mr. Knowles' resume. Throughout the interview, he interrupted Mr. Knowles and used profanity. Eventually, he told the candidate, "Listen, you can keep giving me these canned answers all day long but that won't get us to the nitty gritty."

That settled it for Mr. Knowles. While he wouldn't be working directly for the owner, it was a husband-wife ownership situation without a chain of command, and if something went wrong, Mr. Knowles felt he would have no one to go to. He opted not to take the job.

"We tell candidates that they may have one shot," he says. "Sometimes companies do, too."

Exit interviews show that one of the most common reasons for employees leaving a company is a "disconnect with their boss," says Mr. Clapp. Determine before you accept the job whether your disconnect with the interviewer is a one-time event or will exacerbate over time.