

Making a smooth entry past a revolving door

Before accepting an offer for a position with a high turnover rate, make sure to do as much research about the company as the company does about you.

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Does an office with a revolving door mean a risky career move or a golden opportunity?

As takeover activity quickens and investors' tolerance for poor corporate performance shrinks, more people are being offered jobs with high recent turnover. This summer, global ad-holding giant Interpublic Group hired its fourth chief financial officer in three years. Delta Air Lines tapped its fifth finance chief in seven years. And Symbol Technologies named its fifth chief executive officer in less than four years.

ASSESS THE SITUATION

Churn is chancy. But don't run for cover. An extensive appraisal of yourself and the proffered post will improve your eyes open – and outlasting the short-lived predecessors.

Your self-assessment should weigh whether you tolerate risk well, whether your talents match the position and whether the corporate culture suits your temperament. "If there has been a lot of turn-over, you'll want to understand the firm very well," says Greg Brenneman, who last year became Burger King's ninth CEO in 15 years. He suggests you also ask, "Can I make a real contribution to the business?"

Before you accept the offer, "do as much due diligence about the company does about you," urges Ed Dunn, president of a human resources consulting and search firm in St. Joseph, Mich.

As part of this effort, pose tough questions to key players inside and outside your potential employer: For how long has this job experience high turnover? Why? Does the top brass accept certain responsibility for the heavy exodus? What made past job holders a poor fit?

What other problems plague the organization? Who will have the greatest impact on my success there?

Contradictory answers "raise a red flag that you have to pursue further," warns Pete Warshaw, a vice president of executive-coaching firm RHR international in Wood Dale, Ill.

Search firms may supply fuller explanations than a hiring manager. Six months ago, Heidrick & Struggles International recruiter Kelvin Thompson landed a search for a chief information officer who would be a U.S. consumer technology concern's fourth in five years.

The prior three information chiefs told Thompson they largely blamed their departures on the chief executive. "He micromanages everybody, especially technology staffers because he feels passionate about technology, the recruiter recalls.

Thompson negotiated a solution. The newly hired information officer agreed to meet with the CEO every week during his first 100 days and to submit progress reports a day before they were discussed. The arrangement worked, the recruiter reports.

You should glean frank insights from predecessors, although be prepared for obstacles. Severance pacts often forbid individuals from making disparaging remarks about their former employer. Be diplomatic. To learn whether your boss-to-be meddles too much, for example, ask, "On a scale of one to ten, how much autonomy did you get?"

Also, look for hints of discomfort in the prior incumbents' answers. "Pay attention to the pauses and where they have to think slowly about the question," advises Laurence J. Stybel, co-founder of Stybel Peabody & Lincolnshire, a Boston career-management firm.

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TEST THE WATERS

It is a good idea to the cynicism level among likely subordinates. Before Brenneman joined the nation's second-largest hamburger chain, veteran Burger King workers saw leaders come and go so often they sometimes ignored the latest chief's orders because he wouldn't last long, one staff remembers.

Anyone stepping into a position with a revolving door should request an employment contract and include generous severance. If the would be employer balks at the formal accord, request an offer letter in which "key objectives and expected measurable results are clear and documented," proposes Gerald M. Groe, an organizational psychologist in Parish, Fla., and author of the book *Was Your Boss Raised by Wolves?*

CONSULT ADVISORS

Still unsure about whether to take a high-turnover job? Solicit feedback from personal advisors. About a year ago, one executive got an offer to relocate to become the fourth finance officer in six years for a Midwest manufacturer. He assembled "kitchen cabinet," consisting of an investment banker, a lawyer and his coach, Warshaw. They spent an entire day brainstorming with him on a lake side dock.

The trio helped the CFO finalist figure out how to flourish in a new position. He was able to analyze the company objectively rather than simply heed his instinct that he would succeed where others had failed, Warshaw says. "He made the decision with his eyes wide open rather than squinting," he adds.

The executive accepted the post – and soon flourished. Last spring, he advanced to chief executive