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Calculated Risks: Making Sound Career Decisions

Some people are spending so much time quantifying their careers that they don't stop to qualify the steps they're taking on the way to improving their lives. What do you need to know to make the right decision when a headhunter calls you with the opportunity of a lifetime?

How do you know what kind of funding a company has? What successes the founding team has had? When the interviewer is finished with their questions, they will usually ask you if you have any questions to ask them. This is not the time to be coy about asking some straightforward questions about the company's financing.

"I asked to see the books," says Susan Ford, a Java programmer who was offered \$85,000 a year and 75,000 shares of stock in a startup to leave her job in IT at a Fortune 500 company where she had been for five years. "They had been very accommodating until that point - they arranged an interview on the weekend and let me bring my daughter with me because I couldn't make it during the week and I don't have a sitter on the weekends."

"The guy's face - the CEO - well, his chin dropped, I guess he had never been asked that before. He said that was confidential. I asked what round they were in. He said that was confidential. I asked to see the business plan, and he said that was also confidential. I told him I wasn't willing to leave my job without that information. I mean, what good is it making all that money and having all that stock if it's only for two months until the company goes belly-up? They had been referred by a good headhunting agency - one of the top in the country - but they didn't know anything about them except they were looking for someone with my qualifications and what fee they were getting if I took the job."

So what happens if that dream job seems too good to be real and the company is not willing to open its books to you? If you're able to invest some time to check out the company, you may have the answers you need to think out the job opportunity.

After all, for most companies it's standard to thoroughly check you out before making an offer. This process sometimes consists of:

- * A police background check (to look at warrants and arrests)
- * An educational background check (to make sure you do have those degrees, and that 4.0 really was your GPA)
- * A Social Security check (to see if the dates of company deposits match the dates on your resume)
- * A medical background check (to make sure you haven't been declared insane and to check local records to see if you have any outstanding lawsuits).

So why not check out the company you're risking your future on? You should consider doing the following:

- * Do research on publicly traded companies
- * Check their stock and history
- * Check search engines and company websites for annual reports and press releases

But what happens if the company has no history? Consider asking several things during the interview if you're concerned about what the company's future looks like. If the person you are speaking to is hesitant to tell you some of the more detailed information, offer to sign a nondisclosure. Gain their empathy by pointing out that you want to be sure you are making the right move.

Know who you are doing business with. In today's economy, knowledge is power and well within your grasp. Don't be the victim of a headhunter's call promising the opportunity of a lifetime. Make your career decisions based on facts.

Sally Richards

Freelance business and technology writer

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