CAREER ADVICE FROM THE SEARCH FRONT LINE

Should You Accept the Counter-Offer?

Before the relief, flattery and extra money cloud your judgment, ask what the offer is really solving - your career problem, or your employer's immediate problem.

By Tan Aik Seng | Mandated executive search consultant with almost 40 years' experience in international executive searches.

> **My advice in one sentence: do not accept a counter-offer merely because leaving suddenly feels uncomfortable. Accept it only if it resolves the real reasons you wanted to leave - immediately, credibly and in writing.**

For nearly four decades, I have been mandated by employers to headhunt leaders, engineers and professionals for positions where a hiring mistake is costly and the right appointment is mission-critical. I have also spent those years speaking with candidates before, during and after their resignations. That vantage point has shown me what usually happens behind the reassuring words, urgent meetings and sudden promises that follow a resignation.

A counter-offer can feel flattering. Your manager may tell you how valuable you are, promise a promotion, improve your salary or describe a future that was never discussed before. Some promises are sincere. But sincerity is not the same as certainty, and a reaction to your resignation is not automatically a sound career plan.

What the counter-offer is really solving

When a valued employee resigns, the employer immediately faces disruption: lost knowledge, delayed projects, pressure on the team, recruitment cost and a possible failure against the manager's own targets. The counter-offer may therefore be designed first to solve the employer's urgent continuity problem. Whether it solves your longer-term career problem is a separate question.

> ***Your employer's urgent need to retain you is not necessarily the same as a commitment to advance you.***

This does not make every employer dishonest. It does mean that you should assess a counter-offer with the same discipline you used to evaluate the new job. Gratitude, guilt and loyalty are emotions; they are not evidence that your working conditions will change.

Three lessons from real candidate situations

The following examples come from actual candidate situations. Identifying details have been withheld for confidentiality.

1. A future promise can quietly expire

One candidate was persuaded to stay after his boss promised a promotion within six months and sponsorship for an MBA. Six months later, neither promise had materialised. He called to ask whether the external role was still available. It had been filled long before. His employer had regained stability; he had lost the opportunity.

The lesson is not simply that promises may be broken. It is that a promise without a named decision-maker, written commitment, budget and delivery date leaves nearly all the risk with the employee.

2. More money cannot repair the wrong relationship

Another candidate was offered substantial career advancement by a competing firm. When she resigned, her partners pulled out all the stops. They promised change, painted a compelling future and persuaded her to remain. Months later, she returned to discuss new opportunities. Her explanation was direct: the partners may have wanted change, but the people she reported to were still the same.

> ***If the relationship is not transformed, money and platitudes will not change why you are unhappy.***

A salary adjustment can correct a salary problem. It cannot, by itself, correct poor leadership, limited authority, damaged trust, an unhealthy culture or work that no longer fits your strengths.

3. Your sponsor's promise may leave with your sponsor

A high-performing candidate once stayed because his boss shared an inspiring vision and assured him that he was central to the company's plans. Three months later, that boss accepted another opportunity and resigned. The candidate confronted him: why persuade me to stay when you were going to leave? The answer was brutally practical: at the time, the manager needed him.

This is why verbal assurances tied to one individual are fragile. Before relying on a manager's promise, ask whether the commitment will survive a restructuring, a change of leadership, a budget cut or that manager's departure.

Why accepting can change the relationship

Once you resign, both sides learn something that cannot be unlearned. Your employer learns that you are willing to leave; you learn what the organisation was prepared to offer only when faced with losing you. Even when everyone behaves professionally, the psychological contract has changed.

In some organisations, decision-makers may start succession planning because they now consider your retention risk higher. A counter-offer may buy time for the company while narrowing your alternatives. If you have already declined the external role, you may no longer have a credible exit route when old problems return.

Ask yourself a difficult but revealing question: if the company genuinely believed you deserved the new salary, title, development or authority, why did it require a resignation to begin the conversation?

When accepting may be reasonable

Counter-offers are not automatically wrong. Staying can be a rational decision when the original problem is narrow and genuinely fixable - for example, a clear market-pay discrepancy - and when the employment relationship remains strong. I would look for most of the following conditions:

- **The root cause is specific.** You can state exactly what was wrong and how the counter-offer corrects it.
- **The change is immediate.** The revised salary, title, reporting line, resources or scope begins now, rather than at an undefined future date.
- **The commitment is documented.** The terms, authority, milestones and effective dates are confirmed in writing by someone empowered to deliver them.
- **The sponsor is not the whole plan.** The arrangement can survive a change of manager or leadership.
- **Trust remains intact.** Neither party is using the situation to punish, manipulate or buy time.
- **You would still choose the role.** After setting aside guilt and the short-term pay rise, the work, leadership and future still fit your career.

Seven questions to ask before you say yes

Do not decide during the emotional peak of the resignation conversation. Ask for a short, defined period to consider the proposal, and answer these questions in writing for yourself:

1. **Why did I start looking?** List every reason - not only salary - and mark which ones the counter-offer actually removes.
2. **Why is the organisation acting only now?** Decide whether the response reflects a genuine correction or short-term damage control.
3. **What exactly changes, and on what date?** Replace phrases such as 'soon', 'when things settle' and 'in the next review' with specific commitments.
4. **Who owns delivery?** Confirm who has the authority, budget and accountability to honour each term.
5. **What happens if my sponsor leaves?** A durable career decision should not depend entirely on one person's continued presence.
6. **Would I stay without the extra money?** If the answer is no, the increase may be compensating you temporarily for a problem that still exists.
7. **Which choice gives me the stronger three-year future?** Compare learning, leadership exposure, scope, marketability, culture and values - not only next month's salary.

Protect your professional integrity

Do not use an external offer merely as leverage unless you are genuinely prepared to leave. It can damage trust with both organisations and with the search consultant who represented you. If you have formally accepted the new role, remember that another employer may already have stopped its search, rejected other candidates and begun planning around your arrival.

If you decide to stay, communicate promptly and take responsibility for the decision. If you decide to leave, decline the counter-offer respectfully. You can appreciate your employer's confidence without reopening a decision you reached for sound reasons.

My recommendation from the trenches

A counter-offer deserves analysis, not an automatic rejection. But the burden of proof should be high. The offer must resolve the original causes, not merely relieve the discomfort of resigning. It must be specific, immediate, authorised and durable.

> ***Do not exchange a well-considered career move for a comforting promise made under pressure.***

If the core issue is a damaged relationship, poor leadership, limited growth, conflicting values or repeated broken promises, more money rarely changes the ending. It usually postpones it.

Make the decision your future self is most likely to respect - not the decision that makes today's conversation easiest.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR
Tan Aik Seng is a mandated executive search consultant with almost 40 years of experience in international headhunting for mission-critical leadership, engineering and professional appointments. His advice is drawn from direct, confidential work with employers and candidates across the full hiring journey.