ASK ELLEN – just started a new job, called for an interview with dream employer

12/4/12

Q: Obviously, when looking for jobs, people apply to a number of positions. What do you do if you get an offer and take a position, and then in a week or two another potential employer (that you’re more excited to work for) calls for an interview? Is there a polite/acceptable way to tell your employer that you have an interview for a position that you’d prefer, and you need a few hours on whatever day…? Do you lie and say you have a dentist’s appointment? Do you forgo the potential dream job in order to maintain the financial security of the job you’ve already taken?

A: This does happen, and in itself it is not a bad thing – getting an interview is difficult – but you are right to expect that it must be handled carefully. As for whether to accept the job if it is offered, that is a much bigger decision.

Re: the interview, I wouldn’t lie; that is never a good idea and if you are found out there will be unpleasant consequences. I also would not tell the current employer that you are interviewing for another job, especially as you are a brand-new employee. If you do, they will likely see you as disloyal or flighty (or even dishonest) and will assume from that point on that you have one foot out the door.

I would ask for the morning (or afternoon, or whatever) off, without specifying what it is for, or perhaps saying it is “for personal reasons”. If you get the time off, great. If that’s not possible, then you have a choice, as you said: risk what you have for what you might get. Only you can make that choice, and you’d have to consider how much the job attracts you, and what chance you think you have of getting it.

Whether or not getting the time off is a challenge, if you accept the other job, your current employer is going to be unhappy that you are resigning after such a short period of time. It takes staff time and energy to hire and train someone, and if you leave, they have to go through the whole process again. People outside of the situation may see the job you held posted again after just a few weeks and assume there is a problem at that workplace, which makes the employer look bad. The judgment of the person who decided to hire you may be questioned. Others in the profession may hear about your departure and be wary of hiring you in the future. The possible damage to your reputation is not a risk to be taken lightly, especially with the job market the way it is right now.

Some other questions to ask yourself: what if the “dream” job looks like a dream from the outside but is very different when you are working there? What if the situation at the second job is unstable and you find yourself laid off and job hunting again in six months or a year?
If you decide to leave the first job, emphasize to your supervisor/employer/HR that you have made this decision following careful thought and with an understanding that you are putting them in a bad spot. I would give two weeks’ notice, but under the circumstances, they may want you to leave right away. No matter what you do or say, it is very unlikely that you’ll be able to avoid burning bridges with that employer. They will probably regret hiring you.

If you have such a decision to make, it is crucial give it a lot of thought before making a move, and to decide with a full understanding of what the various consequences may be.

Bonus tip: If you are only taking part of the day off for the interview, I would not wear a suit to work that day unless a suit is your usual attire at your job. If you’re unusually dressed up and taking part of the day off, you might as well just announce that you have an interview!

See also: Question 5 of this blog entry on AskAManager: http://www.askamanager.org/2012/11/4893.html

Added 1/14/13: http://www.askamanager.org/2013/01/stop-thinking-youre-applying-for-your-dream-job.html

Thank you and good luck!

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