



# How to Make Smarter Job Offers: Taking an Individualized Approach

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*“What am I doing wrong?”* I hear this question all the time. Clients come to me baffled. They’ve been trying to fill a role for months, extending multiple job offers and losing the candidate every time.

Five years ago, extending a standard job offer was enough to close the deal. That’s no longer the case. In today’s hot job market, candidates can afford to be picky. Job growth is booming and many hot skill sets are in short supply.

In May 2017, [US employment](#) declined to 4.3 percent, a 16-year low. Employers and recruiters have to work hard to lure candidates into interviewing. And once you have gotten the candidate on the hook, it is even harder to reel them in. Top candidates are fielding counter-offers and competing offers left and right.

The biggest mistake I see employers make is taking a one-size-fits-all approach to the process. Part of my role as a recruiter is to keep clients focused on what matters to the individual candidates they are interested in hiring. From the moment the candidate has an initial phone interview with their prospective new employer through to onboarding, it is critical to customize the process per the candidate’s unique profile.

Customizing your offer to a candidate’s individual priorities means rethinking the way you approach the interview process. A traditional job interview is very formal in nature. The interviewer asks questions about the interviewee’s qualifications and experience. They may throw in a few questions about personal priorities but it tends to yield canned answers about seeking challenging work and growth opportunities – the “right” answer but often not the real one. To get the real answer, you need the candidate to trust you. The interview process becomes an exercise in relationship building.

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## The Role of the Recruiter

As the candidate’s most regular point of contact, the recruiter (internal or external) plays a critical role. Early in the process I not only ask candidates what matters to them, but also how they would rank the things that matter to them and how much weight they put on each one. After each interview, I come back to that list – “You told me you want X. After talking to Interviewer A, do you think the role fulfills that?” Each time I come back to the list I get a little more information about what the candidate cares about. I get a better sense of how upcoming interviewers can adjust their approach. I prepare my clients by arming them with this information so they can court the candidates based on



their needs. And I begin to piece together the perfect offer – one that captures the individual’s unique concerns and priorities and makes them feel like it’s an exceptional offer they simply can’t refuse.

Although every candidate is unique, over my 11 years as an executive recruiter, I have seen certain themes emerge. There are four primary buckets that candidate priorities fall into: Culture, Lifestyle, Career Growth and Compensation.

## **CANDIDATE TYPE ONE: Culture**

### ***Who is the Culture candidate?***

The majority of my candidates say that Culture is their number one priority when considering new employers. The Culture candidate prioritizes the people they work with and the environment they do it in over the specifics of the role. They’re willing to bend on other factors to be a part of a company and team they love. The office is a home away from home, a place they look to for a sense of belonging and identity.

### ***How to spot them***

Culture candidates often reveal themselves when you ask about their current position and why they’re exploring other opportunities. They’ll speak to “fit” or a recent change in who they’re working with/for. They might talk about seeking a company with particular values that they think are missing. Listen for the sense that their current role doesn’t “feel” quite right because it’s a feeling that you need to sell them.

### ***How to close them***

When you’re trying to close a Culture candidate, don’t rush the interview process. Make sure they meet employees of various seniority levels that they are likely to work with both directly and indirectly. If particular employees have a great rapport with one another, try having them do a joint interview so that the candidate can observe the camaraderie. Don’t keep the candidate in one room and rotate the interviewers; show the candidate the office or give them a tour of the facility.

Prime interviewers to talk not only about the position’s day-to-day requirements, but also about the broader experience of working at this company. Culture candidates are very tuned into employer brand. If they’re sitting in the room with you, they are probably already attracted to the type of employer they perceive you to be. They need confirmation of their preconceived notions. What that means can vary wildly. Someone who is attracted to the innovative employer brand of Google is looking for something different than the female empowerment-focused employer brand of Avon. Speak to that employer brand and how it comes to life in your day-to-day experience.

You need to feel out these candidates a bit. I found the perfect candidate for a client recently after a very long search process and we didn’t want to lose her. The cultural piece was by far her biggest concern and it ended up being a three-month-long courtship. We couldn’t rush the process because she needed to be in the right headspace when we delivered the offer. We were very thoughtful about who she interviewed with and what they focused on in each one. I had the hiring manager have a more casual, “off-line” conversation with her over dinner as a final interview. By the time we extended the offer, she accepted with no questions asked.



It's always a best practice to deliver job offers by phone but it's especially important for these candidates who want to experience your genuine excitement to have them join the team. Then keep the connection going as they consider the offer. Have one or two people that got along with the candidate especially well call to follow up, conveying their desire for the candidate to join them and offering to answer any questions.

## **CANDIDATE TYPE TWO: Lifestyle**

### ***Who is the Lifestyle candidate?***

Lifestyle candidates are concerned with their work-life balance. This is common with many younger millennials who have a strong preference for flexible work schedules. But it's also something we see with older millennials and Gen Xers who have spouses and children to consider as well as deep roots they would have to pull up if you want them to relocate. While devoted to their work, these candidates have other priorities they put a tremendous amount of weight on. Without accommodating those priorities, you're very likely to see your offer countered or rejected.

### ***How to spot them***

It's [illegal to ask many of the questions about family](#) that are essential to understanding lifestyle candidates. By building trust and rapport, however, these candidates often become comfortable enough to share the lifestyle factors that are major considerations in their career decisions. Take the time to engage in small talk and let them get to know YOU. The more your relationship develops, the more likely they are to open up about the more personal factors that could lead them to accept or reject a job offer.

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### ***How to close them***

Unlike Culture candidates, the key to lifestyle candidates lies as much in the terms of the offer as in the courtship.

It's really important to get the offer right on the first try with these candidates because they don't want their employer to grudgingly accommodate them. They want their priorities to be respected. Any indication that they aren't could lead to rejection.

For example, I helped place a candidate who due to unique factors in her personal life would need two weeks off during what would have been her first six weeks at the company – not an easy pill for an employer to swallow. Having an employer that would be flexible with her needs was far more important to her than money. Most companies would either not allow that time off or would allow it off but without pay. Instead, I advised the company to give her the time off fully paid to show their flexibility and respect for her work/life balance needs. That gesture is what clinched the deal.

Depending on your company's policies, you may or may not have wiggle room. But, if you're able, paid time off, work from home options, and flexible hours are all options to consider. When you really want someone, get creative. For one sought-after senior candidate, a company not only agreed to have him commute to the office during the week and fly home to where his family was based each weekend – an arrangement many companies aren't comfortable with – they offered to pay for the flights.



I'm also seeing clients get savvy about the way they roll out the red carpet for candidates they want to relocate. They've realized you don't just have to sell the candidate; you have to sell the spouse. They'll fly out the whole family and do a full realtor tour before extending the offer. The goal is to figure out what is important to the family and show them the location in a way that highlights the things they care about, including schools for the kids. If it's a dual-career family they often offer out-placement services to the trailing spouse. Finally, they'll provide a firm to handle the relocation logistics.

During the interview process and while extending the offer, don't forget to emphasize standard benefits that these candidates might appreciate as well. Childcare services, maternity/paternity leave and high quality healthcare plans are offerings that demonstrate your company's respect for the workforce's personal needs and augment the candidate's perceived value of your offer.

## **CANDIDATE TYPE THREE: Career Growth**

### ***Who is the Career Growth candidate?***

The Career Growth candidate is all about their ambition. They want responsibility, a path for rising quickly and are looking for the best opportunity to drive their career forward. Paying dues isn't in the cards for these folks. They want to work hard and rise on their merit, not time served. They want to have their talent recognized, respected and rewarded.

### ***How to spot them***

Career growth candidates wear it on their sleeve so they won't leave you guessing. They'll have lots of pointed questions about career path, promotion timelines and management responsibility. They're go getters and they don't hide it.

### ***How to close them***

A big part of selling career growth candidates is placing emphasis on your company's culture of merit-based advancement.

Talk is cheap so let them see what's possible by selecting interviewers carefully. Put them in front of people that have advanced quickly within the company. Let them see young people in management roles. Make sure each interviewer emphasizes the importance of the role you want them in and the impact they can have on the overall organization.

Career Growth candidates thrive on feedback and look forward to being reviewed. Receiving constructive feedback allows them to track their progress towards their goals. Formal reviews may only happen once or twice a year but you can offer more frequent, informal reviews. If possible, include promotion opportunities on an accelerated schedule in the offer.

They also see enormous value in mentorship, so highlight formal and informal mentorship opportunities available at your company. The opportunity to have someone especially desirable or senior as a mentor is highly prized access that could help clinch the deal in your favor.



While things like the identity of a mentor can't be agreed to contractually, there is still value to putting them in writing – a gentleman's agreement if you will. Include with the offer a detailed description of not only the job responsibilities but the impact you are looking for them to have on a macro level and what you're offering to support their career growth.

One big warning - It's essential that you not promise anything you can't deliver because these candidates will bolt for greener pastures if the growth opportunity isn't what they were promised. Companies put a huge amount of investment into sourcing and training new employees, which is a sunk cost when employees aren't retained. If you don't think your company can satisfy this type of employee, it may be best to leave them be.

If you still want to pursue a career growth candidate but can't offer a fast rise in the ranks, there are more nuanced ways to make the sale. I work with a client who promotes very slowly in comparison to their competitors; they've found that their people get huge value out of spending more time in a role. That's not easy for an ambitious candidate to accept in a hot job market when competitors are promoting every year. But the promotions are much bigger as is the jump in responsibilities. And the flatter structure means more exposure to senior executives. In the medium to long term, there's a big payoff.

## **CANDIDATE TYPE FOUR: Compensation**

### ***Who is the Compensation candidate?***

The Compensation candidate is exactly what the name sounds like. Their number one priority is maximizing the monetary value of their offer. Other factors may play into their decision but they can generally be nabbed for the right number. It is very rare that a candidate rates compensation as their number one priority. If they do, it is a red flag to a recruiter because any counter-offer can immediately swing the candidate away from your company. If you end up working with this type of candidate, you have to make sure there is one other "bucket" that is a top priority as well. Otherwise, you will lose them at the offer stage.

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### ***How can you spot them?***

Savvy candidates try not to talk about money early in the interview process. That's because the further into the process money comes up, the more leverage the candidate tends to have. This is the reason many companies require a desired compensation number or compensation history to process applications. However, you won't have that luxury when you're the pursuer, not the pursued. Listen carefully for any signs that you have a Compensation candidate on your hands but you may not know what you're dealing with until you're close to making an offer.

Don't make the mistake of stereotyping based on age. A 2014 [Intelligence Group study](#) found that 64% of millennials said they would rather make \$40,000 a year at a job they love than \$100,000 a year at a job they think is boring. But with [53.5 million millennials](#) in the US force, that leaves a whole lot of millennials who care about the money more than other factors. Making assumptions about a candidate's offer based on their age is a huge risk.



### ***How to close them***

Money candidates are tough. What they want is straightforward, but they're also the easiest to lose to a counteroffer or competing offer.

This is a space where companies are actually getting really creative. Due to company policies, competing on base salary may not be an option but there are a lot of ways around that. You can offer a sign-on bonus or stock options. You can make them eligible for a pro-rated bonus to make up for money they're walking away from at their current company. You can guarantee a minimum bonus for their first year. You can make them eligible for a merit increase on an accelerated schedule. You can offer a company car or other transportation cost coverage.

The most interesting incentive I'm seeing is retention bonuses. Companies offering hefty sums that are awarded over time so the employee gets the money they're after and the company has an employee that is much harder for a competitor to entice away.

I had a financially motivated candidate who I advised to go ask her current boss for more money before looking elsewhere. They declined to raise her base but offered her a \$60k retention bonus - \$20k after a year and then another \$40k after two years. That's a very smart offer and a lot of money to walk away from.

When you present the offer, be sure to also lay out the monetary value of the company's benefits even if they are standard. Draw the candidate's attention to the value of the complete compensation package as opposed to the individual elements.

These are the situations with the greatest potential to turn into a back-and-forth negotiation. Don't get caught up in playing that game. If the candidate is money motivated, don't waste time—cut to the chase with the best offer possible. As the recruiter, I make sure the candidate knows that I've been negotiating on their behalf in the background so they aren't leaving money on the table.

### **Next Steps: Determining Your Approach and Making the Offer**

Companies have limited resources so you're not going to throw the kitchen sink at every candidate hoping that the magic bullet is in the mix. Figure out the 1-2 buckets your candidate most falls into. Then determine what your company can flex on within those buckets – it may be very little at the junior level but probably a whole lot at senior levels.

Put together an interview strategy based on the person's profile. After each interview, return to that strategy and adjust based on any new information acquired.

Finally, address the candidate's preferences in the offer to the greatest degree you're able.

In my experience, this individualized approach is much more likely to yield an acceptance than a one-size fits all approach, especially in this candidate-driven market. You will fill open roles more quickly and prevent candidates from slipping through your fingers.