

# Women Engineers in Demand

In today's economy, it is entirely possible to receive multiple job offers. Finding your way among the possibilities and discerning the best opportunity becomes a bit easier when you know what to ask.

By Sandra Guy, SWE Contributor



Gail Meneley, career coach and co-founder and principal of the Chicago firm Shields Meneley Partners



Shala Ball, director of talent, initiatives, and recruiting at the Women's Job Search Network



Stefanie Mockler, leadership consultant and coach, Vantage Leadership Consulting



Karel Czanderna, Ph.D., currently serves exclusively on company boards. She is a previous CEO of half-billion-dollar furniture manufacturer Flexsteel Industries Inc.

Women engineers enjoying multiple job offers amid today's 49-year-low unemployment rate must focus on details and challenges to find an inviting workplace culture, career experts say.

Lorraine M. Martin, a former executive vice president and 30-year veteran of Lockheed Martin who ran its F-35 stealth aircraft group, says a key goal should be to choose a job opportunity "that will really stretch you, one that relies on the experience that you bring and asks more of you."

"If you are not drowning for the first six months, you're not going to learn," she said. "You're not going to grow."

When considering multiple job offers, Martin said it's better in the long run to ask questions that may seem counterintuitive to engineers who look for familiar roles. Instead, she suggested questions such as:

- Which of these (job offers) am I uncertain I'm going to get my arms around?
- Are there pieces of this job descrip-

tion I've never done?

"My advice is to have the courage and the fortitude to say, 'That's the right job for me,'" Martin said. Though engineering fields are becoming more specialized, Martin said you shouldn't expect that you have to stay in one specific field for your entire career. "The challenges presented along a career are not always contained in your chosen domain or technological specialty; they will call on your analysis, teamwork, and problem-solving skills — the ones that engineers always bring," she said.

## THE MANY MANIFESTATIONS OF EMPLOYER CULTURE

Gail Meneley, a career coach and co-founder and principal of the Chicago firm Shields Meneley Partners, says a key insight into a potential employer's culture is pay. "If compensation is not equitable, the whole effort is undermined Day One," she said.

Your goal is to keep your relationship with the hiring company positive, so questions on salary might be phrased as,

"Help me understand ... " For example, "Can you share the range of compensation for this level and who is represented at the highest levels?"

Another detail to consider: If the company's human resources department is made up solely of women, and that's not the result of some strategic initiative, is it instead a sign of inherent bias?

Early career decisions, particularly, are about succeeding in the workplace culture, Meneley said. So it's worth asking for a walk-around and using your eyes and your guts, she advised. You're looking for answers to questions such as:

- How are work teams constructed?
- Is this (initiative) a serious commitment, and how is it reflected in the organization?
- May I speak with a high-ranking corporate officer in my specialty?

Crediting her success to a corporate culture that encouraged personal growth, Karel Czanderna, Ph.D., rose from a research scientist at Eastman Kodak Co. to CEO of half-billion-dollar

furniture manufacturer Flexsteel Industries Inc. Her first employer — Kodak, based in Rochester, New York — moved her from the research lab into management and leadership roles, even though she was one of only 25 women with doctoral degrees at the company in 1984. At the time, Eastman employed about 1,000 Ph.D.s and 80,000 people at its Rochester operations.

She said her background in materials science and engineering, including her specialty in surface science (how gases and metals interact to do useful things in our lives), enabled her to look at opportunities in unique ways. Dr. Czanderna, one of three women among 27 physics majors when she was graduated from Clarkson College of Technology (now Clarkson University), went on to supervise 900 engineers

run [away],” she added. “As CEO of Flexsteel, I set up a process so that I’d get routine feedback from the board on what was working and what could have gone better.” Dr. Czanderna also advises:

- Be clear on what’s important to you. Look at the company’s location, environment, co-workers, and the salary versus cost of living.
- Find out about the company’s reputation. Are there growth opportunities? Will you be proud to tell people you work there? Do they hire people like you?
- How easily could you relate to the supervisor?

Additional considerations include whether it is a team-based environment or focused more on individual contributions. Also, discern what are the stated and the actual hours people put in; if

doctorate in industrial-organizational psychology at DePaul University while raising her 16-year-old son.

Mockler, who works for Vantage Leadership Consulting, has this advice:

- Research the company’s policies, including maternity and paternity leave, on websites such as Glassdoor, InHerSight, Fairygodboss, Indeed, Vault, CareerBliss, kununu, RateMyEmployer, LookBeforeYou-Leap, Comparably, and Yelp, among others.
- Ask to speak to not only the direct boss, but also to women who are new to the company and those who’ve been there awhile. Have women in leadership roles been retained?
- Ask other women: What lessons have you learned here? What’s been your experience?
- Ask specifically: How are promotions given and decided?

“Research suggests when a panel of diverse people are involved in hiring and promotion decisions, there’s a much less likelihood of unconscious bias,” Mockler said.

Other questions should include:

- What specific opportunities exist for development? Is there a leadership development program that starts right away? Is there a coaching or mentoring program that starts early on?
- Are any lawsuits outstanding against the company? Any complaints registered with the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission? Any news headlines that reflect on diversity or lack of it?
- What policies and procedures are in place to ensure that employees have a voice?
- Is there an anonymous policy to report harassment? What happens when someone complains?
- What does the enforcement of anti-harassment rules look like? What kind of guidance or resources exist in the human resources department if

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– Lorraine M. Martin, former executive vice president, Lockheed Martin

when she was vice president of Whirlpool’s \$4 billion revenue-generating global refrigeration category.

Dr. Czanderna’s advice and insights regarding today’s job environment include:

- If you’re considering an opportunity outside your organization, it’s probably because you’re not being challenged or fulfilled in your current role. Have a quiet conversation with your supervisor about your future and opportunities to grow and learn. This is about your ability to make a larger contribution to the company.
- During an interview for a new job, ask questions such as “How will I know I’m doing well?”
- Is the employer clear about the role you’re filling? Are they interested in developing you?

“If there is no feedback process, I’d

they socialize after work; and, perhaps most importantly, is the role exciting and intellectually challenging?”

**SPECIFICALLY FOR WOMEN**

Stefanie Mockler, a Chicago-based leadership consultant and coach, conducts research on how best to advise and support women with children to avoid the “motherhood penalty” — the idea that, when women become mothers, they’re less likely to be promoted or given challenging assignments because of stereotypes they’ll be more devoted to their families than to work outside the home.

It’s also important to recognize what’s known as “the leaky pipeline,” Mockler said. It can occur when a company’s recruitment numbers for attracting women look awesome, but many of those women leave within five to 10 years, said Mockler, who is pursuing her

someone tells an inappropriate joke? “Leaders need to think about these topics and be part of the conversation,” Mockler said.

**MAKING THE BEST DECISION**

Theresa Payton, CEO of cybersecurity firm Fortalice Solutions and the first woman to serve as a chief intelligence officer at the White House (under George W. Bush), said it’s worth asking yourself questions, too.

These include:

- When you have a really good day, what made it a good day at work? Were you working individually, as a team, with hardware or software, or were you explaining something and getting people to understand it? What excites you about seeing your colleagues and working with them?
- What are the downers — those harder, tougher moments?

Ask the company questions that offer more insight into the culture, such as:

- What was the last big achievement and how did you celebrate?
- How do people dress at the office, in front of clients, and on the road? How do you like to dress?
- What type of benefits does the company offer that others might not? (One example might be a workplace counselor or a company mentor.)
- How do ideas move forward? Do people meet one on one with the CEO?
- How does the company give back to the community?
- How do problems get addressed within the company?

Shala Ball, director of talent, initiatives, and recruiting at the Women’s Job Search Network, said other questions to consider are:

- Is child care subsidized and/or of-

fered on-site? Will it be cost effective?

- What’s the daily commute? What are work-from-home options, if any?
- Ask to speak with two people outside of the job-interview team — a female colleague and someone on a cross-functional team who knows the team on which you’ll be working. Ask the women who, if anyone, they’ve sought as mentors.
- What drives the company? Sales or marketing and research?
- What accolades has the company achieved as an employer of choice?
- At which conferences does the company attend and have a presence? SWE? Anita Borg? Grace Hopper? “Where do you feel most wanted?”

Ball asked. “That’s usually where I’d want to go above and beyond. That’s where you’ll be more empowered than anywhere else.” ✨


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