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Salary Negotiation Basics

What is salary negotiation?

Salary negotiation is simply the process through which a prospective employee (That's you!) and employer to come to an agreement regarding a compensation package. The goal is for the agreement to meet the needs of both the prospective employee and the employer.

Why is salary negotiation important?

Salary negotiation is particularly important when applying for and accepting a new position. There are two key reasons for this.

- Once you are already in a job, it is difficult to get significant pay increases without a promotion.
- Once you already in a job, your pay increases are likely to be offered as a percentage of your current pay.

Therefore, you can see why makes sense to try to negotiate for the best salary before accepting a position.

Example:

Jessie is offered a \$50,000 salary for a position at Company X. She happily accepts the position, without negotiating. After all, it was her first choice position. A year into the job, she is offered a pay increase of 5%, or \$2500. Her new salary is \$52,500. The following year, Jessie receives another 5% pay increase, or \$2625, bringing her salary to \$55,125. Once again, the year after that, Jessie gets another 5%, or \$2756, and her salary rises to \$57,881. On her fourth anniversary with the company, Jessie is offered a promotion with much more responsibility and a 15% increase in pay. Her new pay is \$66,563.

Regina also is offered \$50,000 in the same position at Company X. Like Jessie, it is her first choice job. Unlike Jessie, Regina decides to negotiate her salary. After negotiating, the company increases its initial offer to \$53,000. Through the years, Regina receives all the same pay increases and promotions as Jessie. Let's see how the difference in their starting salaries translates over time:

	Jessie	Regina
Starting salary	\$50,000	\$53,000
Year 1 anniversary: 5% increase	\$52,500	\$55,650
Year 2 anniversary: 5% increase	\$55,125	\$58,432
Year 3 anniversary: 5% increase	\$57,881	\$61,353
Year 4 anniversary promotion: 15% increase	\$66,563	\$70,555

If we assume Jessie and Regina work for one more year at their final salaries, over the course of 5 years, Regina would have earned a total of \$16,921 more than Jessie for the same job.

Why does salary negotiation sometimes feel uncomfortable?

For many people, discussing salary is anxiety-provoking. Some common worries job-seekers have when it comes to negotiating salary include:

- Fear of offending the employer.
- Fear of having the offer rescinded by asking for more.
- Fear of appearing greedy and possibly not excited about the job itself.

However, know this: **most employers expect a salary negotiation, and they are unlikely to be offended, to rescind the offer or to think you are greedy if you negotiate in a reasonable, tactful and realistic manner.** In fact, oftentimes the salary an employer offers you falls in the lower end of a certain range they may be willing to pay.

If hearing that sounds a little bit comforting, yet you *still* feel anxious, know that your feelings are normal. After all, salaries are not something we discuss openly in our society, and “money talk” is often considered taboo. You probably are unaccustomed to salary conversations. Take heart, however, because knowledge, preparation and practice can help to ease your nerves.

When is the time to negotiate salary?

The best time to negotiate a salary is **when the employer has made you an offer.** At this point, you are in the best negotiating position because the employer has already decided that out of all the candidates it saw, you are the one it wants.

Bringing up salary requirements before this point is not recommended because you do not have as much power prior to the job offer. Moreover, you may turn off an employer if you initiate salary conversations earlier. So try to hold off on that until you are in the more advantageous position of being pursued by the employer.

Plus, you want to try your best not to be the first one to state a number. You are in a more advantageous position if you can respond to a number given to you by an employer. This way you can avoid asking for too much (and therefore potentially taking yourself out of consideration) or too little (and therefore low-balling yourself).

Still, since you may be asked about salary in the first interview, you’ll want to do salary research before ever speaking with the employer. For more information on handling salary questions early in the process, see the questions toward the end of this guide.

How to Negotiate Salary

An employer offered me a position with a specific salary. Now what?

A job offer feels wonderful, and it is something to celebrate! But before getting caught up in the excitement and accepting on the spot, take a moment to remember that now is your opportunity to negotiate. To start the negotiating process, **you'll need to ask for some time to consider the offer**. Note that **employers generally expect you to take at least a little bit of time to consider an offer**. Even if you were not going to try to negotiate your salary, it is professional to take a bit of time so that you can review the offer and be certain you do not have any outstanding questions before accepting or rejecting the offer.

When asking for time to consider an offer, be sure to:

- Express **enthusiasm** and **thanks**.
- Ask for **all the details** of the compensation package (including benefits like health insurance, vacation days, tuition reimbursement, etc.).
- Ask for the offer **in writing**.
- Ask for a **reasonable amount of time** to consider the offer. A reasonable amount of time is usually a few days, but perhaps up to a week, depending on the employer.

Below is an example of how this first conversation might look.

Employer: "I have good news. We'd like to extend you an offer to be a Program Associate at Company X. We are offering you a salary of \$40,000, and it comes with benefits."

Job Seeker: "Thank you so much. That really is great news. I am very excited by the offer and opportunity. I'm wondering if you could please give me information about the benefits package so I understand the total compensation package? In particular, could you let me know about health insurance, retirement benefits and paid time off?"

Employer: "Yes, of course. We offer three health insurance plans, and you'd be eligible to enroll on the first of the month after you start. Your contribution varies depending on which plan you choose. In terms of retirement, we offer a 401K with 3% matching. You can sign up for the 401K immediately, but matching starts after one year of employment with us. Also, there is a vesting schedule for the matched funds whereby you would be fully vested after 5 years. Regarding time off, we offer 10 paid days off in your first year, 10 sick days and 9 holidays."

Job Seeker: "That sounds great. I wonder if you'd be able to put this in writing for me? I'd like to see the entire offer in writing so I can determine if I have any further questions before responding to your offer. I'd also like to see more information about the different health insurance plans."

- Employer: "Of course. I will email the offer and insurance information to you by tomorrow morning."*
- Job Seeker: "Great. I look forward to receiving it and getting back to you after I have had some time to review it. Would it be okay if I got back to you within 2 days of receiving your written offer?"*
- Employer: "Yes, that sounds reasonable. I should have the paperwork to you by Tuesday. It would be great if you could call me back by Thursday. Please also feel free to email or call before then if you have any questions."*
- Job Seeker: "Wonderful. And thank you, again, for the great news. I am very excited."*

After this conversation, it is a good idea to **follow up with an email** to the person with whom you just spoke. In the email, you again should express your thanks and enthusiasm and state that you look forward to receiving the offer in writing. When you receive the written offer, be sure to send another email to acknowledge its receipt and, once again, to thank the employer.

An employer agreed to give me a few days to consider the offer. How do I use the time to prepare for a salary negotiation?

To effectively negotiate your salary, you'll need to prepare with some key pieces of information. Some of this information will come from external sources, while some of it will come from internal reflection to consider your unique wants and needs. Listed below are some key steps in the preparation process for salary negotiation.

- **Determine an appropriate salary range for your position/experience that coincides with a fair market rate.** This is an important step, and you'll need to take a lot of factors into account. Some factors that are likely to affect what may be an appropriate salary range include: occupational sector; geographic location of organization; size of organization; type of organization (non-profit, for profit, government); organizational budget / financial health; your level of experience; your educational level.
 - **Websites** are a good starting place to conduct research. Many offer research and tools like salary calculators, and you can rely on several different sources to get a good idea of a probable salary range for the position. Note that some organizations like universities and the federal government utilize standardized pay grades. Be sure to check if a graded system like that exists. Good websites to conduct salary information include:
 - www.salary.com
 - www.payscale.com
 - www.glassdoor.com
 - www.naceweb.org
 - www.careeronestop.org
 - www.bls.gov/oco/home.htm

- **People** are another great source of information to learn more about market rate salaries for the position you are considering. In particular, you might want to speak with professionals that you know in the field (e.g., alumni, professors, former colleagues) to gain further insight.
- **Other job postings** are an additional resource. Sometimes competing organizations include in their job postings the salary range of the positions. Try to find postings that are as comparable as possible to the position you are considering.
- **Consider the non-salary components of the compensation package.** Non-salary compensation includes benefits like paid time off, health insurance, retirement plan matching, continuing education benefits, transit benefits, moving expenses and bonuses. When you receive your job offer, you'll want to ask about the benefits package. If you are not told about them, call the HR manager for more information. This is important because benefits can add up considerably and change how attractive a compensation package may seem. For example, a position that offers a lower salary plus health insurance, in fact, may turn out to offer greater total compensation than the one with a higher salary and no health insurance.
- **Think about other factors about the position.** In addition to salary and benefits, you also will want to consider non-quantifiable benefits that a position offers. This may affect what you are or are not willing to accept in terms of compensation. For example, are there flexible hours? Do you have to be available around the clock? Do you need to travel often? What is the dress code? Are there opportunities for advancement? How long is the commute? Are you excited by the job? Do you like the organizational values and culture? Do you enjoy the people who will be your co-workers? Think about what matters to you, and then ask yourself the appropriate questions.
- **Assess your own salary needs and wants.** You'll need to determine where salary fits into the equation for you. For example, does your absolute dream job pay less than you want, but you are still able to pay your bills and make it work? If so, is the lower pay worth it to you for the experience and doors it might open? Or is there another job that pays much more that may, for example, allow you to pay off your student loans faster or take care of other financial obligations you have? Look at the whole picture and think how the salary affects your life today and in the future.

I've done my research, and I am ready to speak with the employer to negotiate. How does this work? What do I say?

It is important that you enter this conversation as calmly and positively as possible. You don't want your nerves get the best of you. Try to remember that you are simply having a conversation with another human being in which you are attempting to get what you want by asking for what you think is reasonable, and making a case for it as needed.

In fact, before speaking with the employer, remember these two things:

- **Most employers expect you to negotiate after the first offer is made.** Except for certain positions where the salary is an absolute fixed number, there often is at least a

little bit of wiggle room in the numbers.

- **This is the time when you have the most power** – you have been offered a job and the employer is waiting to see if you accept it. Remember, the employer had to review many resumes and cover letters and then conduct interviews with multiple people. It was a lot of work to find you! So it is definitely possible the employer may be willing to work with you to encourage you to come on board.

So how do you actually have this conversation? There are a few key points to keep in mind when entering the discussion:

- **The employer is likely to negotiate, too. This means you will need to ask for more than you actually want, knowing that the company is more likely to counter-offer than give you exactly what you are asking for.** Be careful not to ask for too much more than you want, but ensure some wiggle room. For example, if you were offered a salary of \$40,000 but would like \$45,000, you might ask for \$50,000. This way the employer can counteroffer and possibly meet you in the middle at your desired \$45,000.
- **Provide some rationale / support for your increased salary request.** You'll need to include some convincing reasons as to why you deserve more than they offered you. The reason could be something about the job, such as the frequent travel or myriad responsibilities. Or the rationale could focus on your experience, like your specialty or the number of years you have worked in the field. Your rationale might focus on the market rate of similar jobs. Perhaps you discover, in the course of your research, that the market rate is higher than what you are being offered. Finally, you may have been offered more money for a job with a different employer that you are considering. You could let the employer know that you are speaking with other employers who are offering you more. However, if you say that, be sure that it is true, and be prepared to walk away from the offer you are negotiating.
- **Pay attention to how you phrase your request.** You might want to use the word “we” instead of “I” to suggest that you are on the same team, and that you believe that you both can work together to find a solution. Also, you may want to use terminology like “closer to” that suggests you are not making an absolute demand, but rather that you are in negotiating mode.

Let's see what a typical discussion might look. Imagine the scenario of the Job Seeker from earlier who was offered \$40,000 to be a Program Associate at Company X. Through her research, she discovers that while \$40,000 is a fair salary, it is on the lower end of what positions like hers in similar organizations are being paid. She believes \$45,000 would be a reasonable starting salary that would make her happy. Since she is happy with the benefits package offered to her, she is not going to ask for anything in that realm. **If there are aspects of the benefits package with which you are displeased and want to negotiate, be sure to include these into your negotiation so your initial request includes all aspects you would like the employer to reconsider.**

Here is what the Job Seeker's request might look like:

Job Seeker: "Thank you, again, for giving me the time to consider your offer. I am very excited by the prospect of being a Program Associate at Company X. Given the many responsibilities of the job and the extensive experience and education I bring to it, I am wondering if we might be able to get the salary closer to \$50,000?"

Employer: "Hmm. I'll have to check on that and get back to you. Can I call you later today?"

Note that when you ask for the higher salary, it is best just to be silent after you asked. Wait for a response. You don't want to "fill the silence" with anything that make detract from the power of your request.

The employer's response to your request may vary. The employer may agree to your request on the spot; in that case, you can accept on the spot but you still need to be sure to get the offer in writing. The employer also may state that its offer is final; in that case, you can remain professional and positive and ask to have a little more time, should you want it, to consider. Very often, however, the person with whom you are speaking will acknowledge your request and ask to get back to you shortly. When he or she gets back to you, the employer may: (1) give you what you want; (2) provide a counter-offer; (3) or stick with the original offer.

Let's look at each example.

- **First, let's imagine the Employer gives the Job Seeker what she asked for:**

Employer: "We've had a chance to discuss this internally and look at our budget, and we, in fact, can offer you \$50,000 to be a Program Associate at Company X."

Job Seeker: "That's great news! Thank you very much. I'd be happy to accept the job. I am very excited about it. Can you please send me the new offer in writing?"

In the above case, the Job Seeker is pleasantly surprised since she did not expect to get \$50,000. She accepts the job, and asks for it in writing. **Always ask for the new offer in writing.**

- **Now, let's imagine the Employer provides a counteroffer:**

Employer: "We've had a chance to discuss this internally and look at our budget, and we just are not able to go to \$50,000. We can offer you \$44,000 for the position."

Job Seeker: "Okay, in that case, I'd be happy to accept the offer. Thank you very much. I am very excited about the job. Can you please send me the new offer in writing?"

In this case, the Job Seeker is offered a new salary close to her target of \$45,000. **It is important to enter this conversation already knowing what you are willing to accept. This way, you will not be caught off guard.** In this case, the Job Seeker was aiming for \$45,000, but had decided before her phone call that if she was offered \$43,500 or higher, she would accept on the spot. She therefore accepts the job, and asks for it in writing.

But what if the Job Seeker was not willing to accept \$44,000, thinking it was too low? Before she turns it down, the Job Seeker would want, once again, to ask for a little time to consider the new offer. If you find yourself in a situation like this, you could use this time to consider what else you might want to negotiate at this point to make the overall compensation package more attractive. **Examples of what you might ask for include more vacation days; a salary review in six months instead of the standard 12 months; or continuing education benefits.** Consider every possible benefit when deciding what to ask for when you go back to the employer.

Let's imagine that the Job Seeker decides she is willing to take the \$44,000 but wants a salary review in six months as a way to try to get a higher salary sooner. Here's how she might ask:

Job Seeker: "Thank you very much for the new offer of \$44,000. I am still very excited about the position. I am wondering if it might be possible for us to agree to that salary, but to include in the offer a salary review after six months on the job?"

Imagine the Employer needs to check and get back to the Job Seeker, and this is the follow-up conversation:

Employer: "I've checked on my end, and we can indeed offer you \$44,000 with a salary review after six months. What do you think about that?"

Job Seeker: "Thank you, that is great. In that case, I'd love to accept the offer. Could you please send me the new offer in writing so that it reflects both the salary and agreed-upon salary review?"

Note that here, the Job Seeker, once again, is asking for everything in writing. This is especially important when negotiating benefits like extra vacation days or salary reviews.

- **Finally, let's imagine the Employer comes back to the Job Seeker with the same original offer:**

Employer: "I've checked with my end, and unfortunately we cannot go any higher than \$40,000. That is where the offer stands for the Program Associate position."

Job Seeker: "Okay, I understand. Thank you for trying. In that case, can I have a little more time to think it over?"

Here, the Job Seeker will need to weigh how badly she wants the job with how badly she wants or needs a higher salary. Similar to the scenario before this, the Job Seeker can come back to the Employer to see if she can negotiate other benefits. These may or may not be negotiable. Once she knows the total compensation package (after trying to negotiate other benefits), she will have to decide whether to take the position or to turn it down.

Tricky Situations

I know it is best to leave salary negotiations until after the job offer has been made. But what if an employer requests salary information as part of the job application?

Sometimes as part of the application or during the interview process, an employer will ask about your desired salary and/or salary history. This is not ideal because as the job seeker, you have the most power after you have been offered the job.

In fact, as a job seeker, you want to try to avoid giving a salary number first. You want to try to have the employer provide a salary first. The person who gives the first number is usually in the weaker negotiating position.

Employers that ask for your salary requirements and/or history are trying to use the information to screen you. If you state a salary history or requirement that is too high, an employer may not interview you because it will assume it cannot afford you. If you state salary information that is low, there is a chance an employer will offer you less than it may have been willing to pay someone for the job. So it's a tricky situation, but you have a few options.

- **If asked on an application for salary history, you can choose whether or not to provide it -- but always be honest.** An employer can, as part of a background check, determine your salary history. If you are caught in a lie, it can be grounds for rescinding a job offer. So while you must be truthful with your answer, you may have the option to simply leave the information off of your application. Some electronic applications, however, have required fields that you must complete in order to submit the application.

A common fear among job seekers is that if they share a salary history that is low, they will never get a higher salary. But that is not necessarily the case, as your qualifications and/or the job may be very different than what they were in the past. For example, you may now have a graduate degree that you did not have before. Or perhaps this position is at a for-profit company, while your former positions were at lower-paying non-for-profits. Or maybe this position has a lot more responsibility or job demands like travel or evening work that your previous positions did not require. In all of these instances, you would have a good argument to ask for a salary in a higher range than what you have earned previously.

- **If asked on an application for salary requirements, you have a few options for responding.** You can choose to:
 - **Leave the information out.** In this case, you do run the risk of not being considered as a candidate because you did not include the information, but every employer will respond differently.
 - **Include a vague response.** You can write “negotiable” under salary requirements, or include an explanation that says you are hesitant to provide requirements until you know more about the details of the position.

- **Provide a salary range.** If you want or need to give a number, try to give a range instead of a specific number. When doing so, you must realize that the employer may offer you the lowest number of the range you include. By putting that number down, you are essentially saying that salary could be acceptable to you. So think hard about the numbers you include in your range, and be sure that the lowest number you include is one you are okay accepting.

What if the request for salary information is part of an interview (in-person or phone), before the offer is made?

You sometimes may be asked about your salary requirements and/or salary history during a phone or in-person interview. While it may seem a bit more nerve-racking to be asked about salary directly from a person rather than through a computer screen, the good news is that you likely will have more latitude in terms of trying to get around the question, or – if really pressed – in explaining yourself in a way that leaves options open for you.

However, since you do not know how this conversation ultimately will go, it is crucial that you do your research and preparation ahead of time in case you are actually must give some numbers.

- **If asked about your salary history during an interview, try not to share, if possible.** Rather, you want to try to be vague. Here’s are some potential responses:

Employer: “What was your salary in your previous/current job?”

Job Seeker: “I’d prefer to have a more thorough understanding of the details of the job before getting into salary.”

Job seeker: “My understanding is that this position is very different from my former position. So I’d love to have a better understanding of the responsibilities of this job before discussing salary. I’m open to a reasonable offer, and I remain excited about the position.”

- **If the interviewer won’t let up, be thoughtful about what you are going to say.** You are not required to share your previous or current salary with a potential employer. Still, some employers may push you to answer the question, so you’ll need to handle it tactfully and professionally. You don’t want to seem inflexible and defensive. So you’ll need to find a way to answer that makes the most sense for your current situation.
- **If you believe you are being paid fairly in your current/previous position,** you can state your salary and simply explain that you are excited to gain more responsibility with the skills and experience you have gained.
- **If you believe you are being underpaid for your current/ previous position,** after stating your salary you may want to explain that you recognize it is below market rate, and perhaps offer an explanation as to why it was acceptable to you (e.g., to gain experience, because you were helping out the struggling family business, etc.) and explain that now you are seeking something more in line with what you offer.

Also note that if you are in a position that comes with extensive benefits that you can quantify, you may want to include those to come up with a total number that you share as your “total compensation package” rather than stating just the actual “salary.” You will need to word it correctly so as to remain honest, but this is particularly important if the benefits were a very large component of your overall compensation.

- **If you think you are being paid higher than market rate right now**, you’ll have to address that wisely, too. You may want to state your salary and then explain you are interested in the position and believe you can work out a compensation that would be agreeable to both sides. Remember, the goal is to get them to consider you so you can get the interview, and then the offer. Once the offer is made, you can negotiate in earnest.
- **Watch your tone:** Be aware of not just what you are saying, but how you are saying it. You do not want to come across as defensive or combative. Rather, try to come across as someone who is just calmly answering a question. Also be sure to remain enthusiastic and positive about the position, reiterating your interest in it
- **If asked about your salary requirements during an interview, here are some guidelines:**
 - **Try not to give any numbers:** Try to postpone your answer. Try to be vague. Or try to have the interviewer provide a number first. Below are some example responses you might give.

Employer: “What are your salary requirements?”

Job Seeker: “I’d prefer to discuss salary requirements once I learn more about the specific responsibilities of the job in more detail. I’m very excited by the job from what I know about it now, and I would consider any reasonable offer.”

Job seeker: “My salary requirements are negotiable, and I’d hope to be compensated in line with the experience and skills that I bring to your company.”

Job Seeker: “I’d like the best offer you feel you can give me.”

Job Seeker: “That’s a good question. I assume you have a range set aside for this position. Could you tell me what the range is?”
 - **If the interviewer will not let up, give a range.** Once you have done your research and preparation, you should have a good idea of a salary range to offer. The range can span \$10,000 – for example, \$40,000 to \$50,000. Be sure to provide a range that is on the higher end of the range you research. So if you think a job may pay between \$40,000 and \$50,000 and you would be happy with \$45,000, you may want to ask for \$45,000 to \$50,000.

Here's what that conversation might look like:

Employer: "Actually, I really need to know from you what your salary requirements are, and it is required to advance to the next step. We don't share our internal salary ranges with candidates."

Job Seeker: "Based on my experience and skills and what I know about the job requirements, I'm seeking in the range of \$45,000 to \$55,000 for this position."

- **Watch your tone.** Again, be sure to remain professional and tactful in delivery.

How do I handle salary negotiations when I am interviewing with a few potential employers at once?

It's great to be interviewing with multiple employers because that means there is a greater likelihood of being offered a job and finding a good fit. Still, it can feel stressful and challenging since multiple employers are unlikely to be working on the same timelines.

It is possible, for example, that you may receive an offer from your second-choice employer before hearing back from your first-choice. In such a scenario, you are presented with the dilemma about what to do. You may not have even broached the subject of salary yet with your first-choice employer, yet you'll need to respond to the second-choice employer.

In scenarios like this, you'd want to check in with the other employers from whom you are waiting to hear back. When you thank the first employer for the offer, ask if you can have a few days to consider the offer. During that time, you'll want to reach out to the other employers with whom you have interviewed. It is fine to let them know that you have received an offer from another place. You'll want to ask them where they are in their hiring process and if you are still being considered for the position. Below is an example of how you might phrase your inquiry.

Job Seeker: "I'm calling to check in to see where you are in the hiring process. I am still very interested in the position, but I have also just been offered another position. So before accepting anywhere else, I wanted to see what your timeline was and to know if I was still being considered for the position."

In response to your inquiry, the employer may tell you that they are still interviewing, that you are still being considered, or that you are no longer being considered. If their process is going to extend beyond the time when you will need to respond to the first employer, then you may have to make a decision about the first job before hearing back from the second employer. Sometimes, upon hearing that you have been offered another job, the second employer may try to get back to you more quickly with an offer, but that does not always happen. You can do your best to try to get answers from everyone so you know what all your options are, but this does not always happen. So you'll have to make the best decision you can with the information you have.

One important note: **It is very unprofessional to accept an offer from one employer and then change your mind if you hear back from a different employer.** You want to remain professional

and to not burn any bridges. You have a long career ahead of you and cannot predict when you will come in contact with people again in the future!

How do I accept or decline the offer?

The key to all business communications is to be tactful, professional and respectful. You never know when you may cross paths with people in the future, so always end on a good note.

If you choose to accept an offer, be sure to get everything in writing.

If you choose to decline an offer, you'll want to send a professional note expressing thanks for the offer, but that you have decided to go in a different direction.

What if I have other questions, or simply want to practice negotiating?

If you still have questions about salary negotiating or feel nervous and want to practice, please feel free to use SPHHS Career Services. We have a career consultant for students and a career consultant for alumni. Please go to our website, listed on the footer of this handout, for contact information.