

What are you worth?

Salary negotiations need not be mysterious

Question:

My employer is going to move its corporate headquarters out of state, and I have chosen to stay. After eight wonderful years of employment, I find myself in a job transition. How should I handle negotiating salary?

Response:

The questions about salary and compensation may arise, sometimes unexpectedly, during each stage of the interview process. For example, a prospective employer may ask about your salary history and/or expectations during your initial phone interview. You must be prepared, so you don't inadvertently present a figure that is less than you deserve.

While your resume conveys your qualifications and gets you in the door, it's during the interview when you confirm your value, and value is what determines your salary.

The biggest mistake people make when negotiating salary is they don't have the slightest idea of what they are worth, what they have the right to ask for, or the value of the benefits and perks. As a result, they undermine their earning potential.

Begin your preparation by assessing your strengths and strategic contributions. Understand how these have improved your previous employers' businesses. For example, if you are an administratively organized person who takes action and gets results, be prepared to list several examples of complex projects you worked on, how you met the

deadline in spite of difficult circumstances and the value the company achieved as a result. Understanding how you have helped to advance your previous employer's strategic initiatives provides you with a great platform for positioning yourself throughout the interview process.

Be sure to do your homework about prevailing salaries in your field.

You set the stage for the salary discussion at the first contact and during every subsequent interview. Follow these five strategies to lay the right foundation:

1. Focus on your major strengths and accomplishments:

Stress your most important skills, strengths and accomplishments. Prospective employers are interested in hiring people who get results and don't require a great deal of management intervention. Quantify your responses with illustrations, statistics, comparisons, or testimonials whenever possible. You will stand out if you can tell a prospective employer how you increased the productivity of your department by 7 percent, as opposed to just telling them that you are a great manager.

2. Turn negatives into positives:

Inevitably, you will be asked, "What are your greatest weaknesses?" Responding with, "I'm not a morning person and my brain doesn't really kick-in until I've downed two Starbucks" will probably raise red flags about your productivity quotient. A better answer would be, "I often get so absorbed with my work that I chew into family time so I need to better balance my professional and personal lives."

3. Listen intently: The more information you gain about the company, its culture, the scope of the position and their expectations, the easier it is for you to assign a salary range to the position.

4. Answer and ask questions directly and in detail: When asked a question, it is appropriate to pause and think

about your answer. You want to be thoughtful, focused and deliberate with your answers. An interviewer is interested in knowing how you will contribute and solve their problems. While it is helpful to read books on interviewing, stay away from memorizing stock answers. You never want to sound rehearsed or similar to the last five interviewees.

5. Help the interviewer: Contrary to popular belief, most interviewers are not good at conducting job interviews. Rarely have they been trained and most don't take time to properly prepare.

If you are in a situation in which the interviewer has concluded their questions and you have accomplishments pertinent to this position that haven't been discussed, when asked if you have any questions, say "Yes," and then add, "But first I'd like to share with you some accomplishments we haven't talked about yet that may help you in your decision process."

With this groundwork in place, you are in a viable position to talk salary. You want to learn as much as possible about the position before stating your salary range because it's very difficult to shift gears once you've taken a position.

As a general rule, it is always to your advantage to wait until the employer initiates this conversation, hopefully near the end of the interview. In a perfect world, the employer would tell you the salary range upfront. Unfortunately, few employers are this forthcoming. Instead, they may prompt you to reveal your position early on by asking, "What are your salary expectations?"

When you are prematurely asked for your salary expectations simply respond, "I would be delighted to give you a specific answer once I have had an opportunity to learn about the specific job responsibilities and performance expectations. At this point, I have many more questions to ask. However, I am confident we can reach a mutual

agreement once I understand the position.”

Be prepared with your questions. You might find these helpful:

- What are the specific responsibilities assigned to this position?
- Could you describe the team I would be working with? How long have they been with the company?
- What is their attitude toward the company and toward each other?
- Could you describe my supervisor’s management style? Describe the ideal relationship he/she would have with the person who fills this position.
- If I were to accept this position, how could I immediately make a positive difference to the company’s bottom line?
- What issues, if any, did the previous individual who had this position encounter? Under what terms did the person who last filled this position leave?
- How does the performance appraisal process operate? Is compensation linked to performance? Is it based on individual performance, team performance, company performance or some combination of these?

- How does your company structure its pay system? What criteria are promotions based on? Are rewards or bonuses a part of the compensation plan for this position?

By asking these or similar strategic questions, you demonstrate that your interest is in finding the right position, not just an available position.

Finally, when the time comes to talk salary, summarize the job responsibilities and skills required to achieve the stated goals, and then ask how the position contributes to the overall strategic goals.

To illustrate you might say:

“It’s my understanding that I would report to the vice president of operations and would have the performance responsibility for three managers; one in Black Falls, one in Halifax, and one in Oregon. My operating budget would be \$250,000. To be successful, you need someone who is administratively organized, is a great communicator, handles resistance well, is a

strategic thinker, and juggles many projects simultaneously – without breaking a sweat. I would be expected to improve the overall efficiencies of the systems and as a result improve the team’s productivity. If I do the job well, you expect this would translate into a 3 to 5 percent savings in the first year.”

Additional vacation time, signing bonuses, moving expenses, etc. are often negotiated items in the incentive package.

Remember, salary isn’t king. Loving what you do and who you work with is critical to your overall happiness. Determining up front what’s really important to you in terms of salary and what constitutes a good quality of life is necessary for pinpointing the right position.



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