NEGOTIATING JOB OFFERS

Finding The Information You Need

The process of determining what is important to your employment decision involves your proactive approach to finding the answers. You must take charge of this data gathering. A passive expectation that the information will be presented to you as you proceed through interviews will leave you short-handed and ill prepared for making decisions that can alter the course of your professional life.

In addition to the standard fare on compensation packages provided by most company websites and recruiters, a vast number of resources are available in print and on-line that can help you formulate realistic expectations for you. It is logical for you to first decide what compensation you really need.

Before engaging in any salary communications with employers you should explore the possibilities and consider a number of scenarios. For this exercise, most job seekers like to start with the highest salary they think they can ask for without turning off prospective employers. In the actual process, this tends to result in candidates feeling that they are compromising more than they wanted to, which can lead to disappointment.

A healthier tactic would be to start your thinking with your bottom line – the lowest you can possibly accept – and work your way upward through the options till you reach a target figure that is reasonable for an employer to consider.

Basic to this exercise is some financial planning and the development of a personal budget. An excellent on-line tool to assist you with this activity is the Post-college Budget Guide developed by Edfund. You can calculate prospective budget scenarios and find a comprehensive checklist of expenses you should take into account as well.

Now don't move too fast! Before you set your sights on that target, you need to take stock in your own value in the marketplace you are entering. It is time to be as objective as possible in totaling the worth of your credentials, your professional qualities, and your potential to deliver a prompt return on an employer's investment. While this version of self-assessment is necessary, it cannot be done outside the context of your chosen employment field. So you must also gain an understanding of current compensation benchmarks for your general level of experience, your discipline, and your job and industry choices.

Typically your campus career center will be the best source of collective salary data and compensation trends. Most career centers identify resources that cover pertinent employment categories, levels, and geographic regions for their particular graduates. In fact, your own
browsing of job postings on various web sites will reveal a great deal of information about the range of current salaries by position type and level. Here are a few references that are widely recognized for their comprehensive salary data:


Nearly all of these sources have print and on-line versions of their data, but the Salary Wizard (at www.salary.com) and the Salary Calculator (at www.homefair.com) are two of the most popular Internet sites for researching salaries. If your employment decision involves relocating, these and several other web-based tools can be useful to determining how your salary will translate into another region. You can easily access an array of these sites through most any generic on-line search engine.

Finally, it is important to offer some context for the area in which you are seeking employment. A soft job market weakens negotiation options, particularly at the entry level, as employers are confident they can fill their positions from an abundant applicant pool at prescribed salaries. Conversely, a robust labor market is accompanied by complexities that entry-level job seekers don't typically deal with. The competition for fresh, new talent, when fierce, brings a multitude of extras to the bargaining table, as firms are eager to make their offers more attractive than their competitors'.

Signing bonuses, stock or equity options, personal computing hardware and wireless phones, company vehicles, and assistance with home mortgages are just some of the items brought to the table for certain entry level candidates in the hottest fields. New web sites and resources emerge on an almost daily basis that assists with this type of recruitment flurry. If you find you are inundated with options that you did not prepare for, your best bet is to seek the advice of a career counselor. They can often reveal additional insight and references that will assist you with understanding these types of options.

WINNING COMMUNICATIONS IN THE NEGOTIATION PROCESS

So now you have done your homework and have a clear idea of what you are worth, what you need, and what you want in a job offer. You are confident with your knowledge and comfortable because you are organized.

The ball is in the employer's court when it comes to initiating compensation discussions. You should not bring it up before the employer does, and it is better for you if the employer does not request your salary expectations or history at the onset. This happens, however, so no matter what you do, be honest. You know what you are worth to this prospective organization –
so phrase your salary interests in a wide corresponding range, with a positive, open communication style.

This stage of the job search process produces some anxiety for many job seekers, but common sense should prevail because both you and the employer want this to work. Never forget that this organization wants to hire you! You and the employer mutually share the goal that you become a satisfied employee with his/her firm.

Now is the time to put your knowledge, confidence, and communications skills into gear. Be pragmatic and stay collected. If you receive a verbal offer, indicate that you would like it in writing so that you can review it carefully. This will eliminate any risk that either party misconstrued the specific terms of the offer. At this juncture it is a good idea to consult with a mentor, trusted members of your job search network, and/or your career counselor. A critical question you must ask yourself before engaging in any form of negotiation with a company is, "If they accommodate my requests, am I prepared to accept the position?" You should never pursue negotiations with an organization for a position that you are not sure you really want.

Upon closer review you may need some clarification or more specifications on particular points. Without delay, contact the employer and ask for the additional information. You are not the only one who wants you to be confident about your decision to accept or decline an offer – the employer wants to know that if you join his/her firm, you haven't assumed anything that may lead to an unexpected surprise after you're on the job. If you need more time to consider the offer, or you wish to buy some time to learn the results of other interviews you've had, simply request an extension of time before you must respond. These types of requests can be handled by phone, but you should always follow up on any change in the negotiations process with an e-mail confirming the details of the change.

You should remain positive and open during discussions about salary, and you should expect to compromise. This may be disappointing, but it should not lead to an adversarial situation. Focus your side of the discussions on your positive traits and skills – your potential value to the company. Refrain from conversation about what you need, or about budget planning with a constrained salary. Keep in mind that it is your responsibility to articulate why you are worth the added investment you seek from the employer. Lastly, once you determine that the employer has reached a limit on the salary offer, suggest alternative benefits that you previously identified as desirable.

Do not hesitate to present something that is not in the company's portfolio of options. Look to the future – can they promise an early performance review with consideration of a raise at that time? You have nothing to lose by demonstrating your creativity and good faith efforts to attaining a mutually rewarding contract.
During this decision stage, you will be using the process of elimination and will decide to decline certain offers at different times. It is both prudent and professional to notify the employers as soon as possible to render your decision. Whether you initially make this contact by phone or in writing is usually predicated on the nature of your communications with the employer up to this point.

You should ultimately confirm that you've declined an offer in writing (e-mail or print is acceptable.) Be polite, concise, and express gratitude for their interest and efforts to accommodate you during negotiations. You may find that sometime down the road, you will have business or perhaps even employment relationships with these organizations – an extra measure of good communications at the onset of your career will serve you well in the future.

Remember to notify your career center about the offers you received, declined and accepted. This is how they will assist next year's job seekers as they research compensation packages.

One of the your most rewarding moments should be when you accept that first professional position with the organization that will launch your career! You've negotiated a mutually beneficial contract for employment and all you have to do is let your new employer know. Again, the type of communications you and the employer have been utilizing all along will determine whether this is via phone, in person, or in writing, but the acceptance should always be confirmed in writing. Congratulations!

CONCLUSION
Remember that your ultimate goal in the job search process is to accept a job offer with confidence and enthusiasm. The activities associated with decision-making and negotiation can be enjoyable and rewarding experiences if you follow these fundamental guidelines:

- Develop and understand your own baseline criteria. Know what you want.
- Systematically track the critical factors for each offer as you gather them. Be organized and thorough.
- Anticipate that you will need more information than the companies will provide in extending their offers. Exploit every source of data you can access.
- Adopt a common sense approach to your communications with the firms that have extended offers to you. Be genuine; be positive, open and flexible.

Across industries, most entry-level professional positions fall within a narrow range of compensation options that can be easily identified through a myriad of resources. As you acquire more employment experience, with each job transition you make, the band of compensation options broadens and diversifies. A strong foundation in recognizing and assessing these factors of compensation in your first search for professional employment will provide dividends throughout your career as you face each new employment decision.

Based on an article written by Kathy Simms, Director of University of California, Los Angeles.