

The Art of Negotiating

NEGOTIATING A JOB OFFER

An area of the job search that receives too little attention is negotiating. Once you have been offered a job you have an opportunity to discuss the terms of employment. Negotiating doesn't have to be an uncomfortable experience. Rather than a win-lose proposition, negotiating is about each party understanding what's most important to the other and finding common ground.

WHAT'S NEGOTIABLE

For an entry-level position there are limits on what's negotiable. Benefits packages are usually fixed according to a position's classification level. That includes health care and other insurance options, retirement plans, the number of days allotted for vacation and the rate of accrual. The terms aren't usually negotiable. Advancement opportunities may also be structured so that employees must first complete trainings, rotational programs, or a series of benchmarks before being considered for the next level. But the following items may be open for discussion.

Start date. This is usually the most negotiable issue with the exception of training program requirements. Employers understand that you are transitioning into a new life stage and need time to wrap up commitments. Even if there is a mandatory start date for training, it may be possible to arrange unpaid leave time after training concludes.

Support for professional development. This is sometimes included in the hiring package. But if it's not, inquire about it. Membership in professional associations, conference attendance, and certifications related to the job are perquisites an employer may be willing to cover, especially if it's clear how it will enhance performance.

Signing bonus. A signing bonus is one-time money paid to a recent hire to help offset moving expenses, wardrobe, transportation, or other necessities of a new job. Not all employers award them, but it doesn't hurt to ask.

Base salary. This is the most difficult item to negotiate over and the most important for the candidate. Raises are calculated on base salaries, so small increments add up significantly over time. As with signing bonuses, not all employers are willing to negotiate on starting salaries. Those that do will probably not budge more than 5% from the original offer. But if your own estimates suggest a higher offer, you need to consider negotiating. Once hired you will have significantly less latitude to alter your base salary.

HOW TO NEGOTIATE

Negotiating requires a deliberate process and a strategy. Each step needs to be executed with sensitivity to how the employer may respond. The best advice: Don't negotiate without talking to someone. Call the career center and ask for an individual appointment. If they know you're on a tight timeframe they will often slot you in quickly.

1. **Buy time.** After receiving an offer ask how soon the employer will need a response. Hopefully you will have more than a few days. This will give you a chance to fully evaluate the job and decide if you want to negotiate.
2. **Find out if it's possible to negotiate.** It's a good idea to allow a day to pass before posing this question back to the employer. Why? You'll want the employer to know you've thoroughly reviewed the offer before taking this step. Otherwise it may seem like you're just haggling to get as much as you can. If the employer is open to negotiating, explain that you will respond quickly with some thoughts.
3. **Research the offer.** Find out more about the entry-level salary norms for your field (multiple sources: www.nacweb.org, www.salary.com, www.glassdoor.com). Also find out the cost of living index (www.money.cnn.com/calculator/pf/cost-of-living). The career center may have salary data pertinent to your interest area. Keep in mind that more substantial benefits packages counter-balance a slightly lower salary.
4. **Determine a strategy.** Under what terms would you accept the offer? As stated, which means you would still accept if the employer doesn't budge (and suggests you might not want to negotiate at all)? With some incremental increase (which might be less than you actually ask for)? Know where you stand for every possible response.
5. **Compose a thoughtful counter offer.** In an email, spell out your thinking on why you are asking for a higher salary or other allowance. Share the calculations for how you arrived at the figure and the sources for your reasoning. "Bookend" the note with affirmations of the opportunity; that is, begin the note with words that express how excited you were to get the offer and finish with how great it's going to be joining the team. Frame the negotiation as the only item you need to resolve in order to say "yes." IMPORTANT: send the email before the deadline you were originally given.
6. **Follow up with a phone call.** A few hours later or the next morning. Negotiations are personal and need to be done with lots of sensitivity. Your emailed counter offer gave the employer a chance to understand your priorities and concerns before a conversation occurs. But you will talk through the negotiation.
7. **Conclude with poise and tact.** If the employer agrees to your terms, express excitement and gratitude. If the employer meets you halfway—and that's enough for you to say yes—express excitement and gratitude. If the employer doesn't move far enough or says no, express gratitude and indicate that you still need some time to consider the offer. Follow up the next day with a phone call and politely decline. Again, express gratitude for the offer. [You never know when your paths will cross again.]

As stated above, don't tackle the negotiation process on your own. Get advice from a career professional so that you can make informed, objective decisions.

*Written by Kelley Bishop, Director,
University Career Center & The President's Promise
University of Maryland, College Park*