

Don't Make These 8 Mistakes When Negotiating Salary

Jan. 15, 2014, at 9:50 a.m. + More



Alison Green

Everyone loves getting a job offer, but few job seekers like [negotiating salary](#). The process is fraught with worries that you'll ask for a number that's too low or too high, that the employer will try to lowball you in their offer or that you won't even know how to evaluate their offer effectively. But salary negotiation doesn't have to be so tricky. Avoid these eight mistakes and you'll be significantly better off than most salary negotiators.

1. Being unprepared. At some point, nearly every employer will ask what salary range you're looking for and this could happen as soon as their very first phone call to you. You want to be prepared for this in advance, because if you're caught off-guard, you risk low-balling yourself or otherwise saying something that will harm you in negotiations later. Be sure to do your homework ahead of time so that you're ready with an answer when the question comes up.

2. Letting the employer base their offer on your past salary history. Your salary history is no one's business and employers are perfectly capable of figuring out what your work would be worth to them without needing to know what you've been paid previously. To avoid having future offers tied to past ones, consider declining to discuss your previous salary altogether. If you can't do that, try pointing out that you took a lower salary previously because you were working for a mission you cared about, or learning new skills that would make you more marketable in the future or whatever other context you can provide. Instead, keep the focus on [what you want to earn](#) now and why you think you're worth that. But if you ignore this piece of advice, don't make the next mistake on our list.

3. Lying about your past salary. Job seekers sometimes claim that they're currently earning more than they really are, figuring that will help them get a higher offer from a new employer. But this can backfire because plenty of employers verify salary history, either by asking to see a recent pay stub or W-2, or by checking with the previous employer directly. And even worse, it's common to do this after you've already accepted a job offer, which means that you risk having the offer pulled over the lie, even after you've already accepted it and resigned your previous job.

4. Not verifying your research. While online salary sites can seem like the most obvious way to figure out what to ask for, the reality is that these sites are often unreliable, partly because the job titles they list often represent vastly different scopes of responsibility – and besides, salary can vary widely by geography.

Professional associations in your industry might do more reliable salary surveys, but an even better option is to talk to people in your field and bounce figures off of them.

5. [Giving a salary range](#) when you'll be disappointed if you're offered the lowest end of it. If you give a wide range like "\$40,000 to \$55,000," don't be surprised if you're offered \$40,000, because that's what you told the employer you'd accept. Instead, choose your range carefully, realizing that the employer may only focus on the lower end of it. (This isn't too different from candidates who focus only on the high end of a range given by an employer and are then disappointed when they're offered the lower end of it.)

6. Playing games. While job search experts used to advise absolutely refusing to name a salary figure first, even if pressed, that advice often doesn't work today and can hurt your chances. If an employer is asking you directly what salary range you're looking for and you categorically refuse to answer, the employer is likely to just move on the next candidate, someone who might be willing to have a more open conversation.

7. Worrying that if you negotiate, the employer will pull the offer entirely. As long as you're pleasant and professional and aren't adversarial in your manner, a reasonable employer isn't going to pull your offer just because you [try to negotiate](#). That's not to say that there aren't unreasonable employers out there who do pull offers, but it's rare and the sign of such a dysfunctional employer that you're typically better off not working with them. Sane employers understand that people negotiate.

8. Not considering factors other than salary. Obviously everyone has a bottom-line number that they won't go below, but it's a mistake not to factor in things other than salary. A generous retirement or health care contribution might mean that less of your paycheck needs to go to savings or health insurance. Conversely, a job where you'll be miserable might not be worth even a significant bump in salary.

***Alison Green** writes the popular [Ask a Manager](#) blog, where she dispenses advice on career, job search, and management issues. She's also the co-author of *Managing to Change the World: The Nonprofit Manager's Guide to Getting Results*, and former chief of staff of a successful nonprofit organization, where she oversaw day-to-day staff management, hiring, firing, and employee development.*