

Help! Save My Career!

by Donald Asher, America's Job Search Guru

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Dear Guru Don:

I fly USAirways all the time, and I always check your column. You promised a few months ago to cover salary negotiations in a coming issue. When's that coming out? I think I'm going to need that advice soon. I am a 36-year-old female executive, and everyone would agree that I am the top performer in my office. I don't want to say what we do, but I will say the industry is transportation and no, it's not airlines. I earn \$78,000 per year, and here's the problem. I just learned that this guy in my office is earning \$142,000 for doing the same job as me! Yes, he started before me, and he's six years older than me, but I do the same job and do it better. Now I hate my employer. I can't believe they would take advantage of me like this. I have one foot out the door, and I need your advice on how to make sure this doesn't ever happen to me again. I'm not staying. That decision is already made. I want to know how to negotiate for salary in the next position that I get, hopefully with a more progressive employer.

Sign me,

Betrayed in San Francisco

Dear Betrayed:

First let me say that I am sorry you had this experience. When are organizations going to wise up and realize that if they underpay their top performers, they will lose their best talent? I dunno.

BUBBLE GOES RIGHT HERE: Aside: For all you readers who manage key staff, you'd better wise up. The Department of Labor says that the pendulum of demographic trends is headed in the wrong way. By 2010 there will be 10,000,000 more jobs than people, which means position requisitions are going to be very, very hard to fill, *in particular for highly skilled management and executive positions*. If your pay is not fair and market-based, you're going to lose all your best people. The deadwood will stay, of course.

First of all, you should have known what that guy was making all along. One of your jobs in career management is to find out what others make in your company, and at the other companies in your industry.

Companies have "no tell" policies for a reason: It helps them take advantage of somebody. In this case it was certainly you. There's an old saying in poker: If you look around the table and can't figure out who the sucker is, it's you.

You might not want to be brazen about getting this information. You say things like, “Gosh, those European sales execs sure dress like they make a million bucks. Do you think they really make more than us, or just get to go to better stores?” Or, “Jane just got promoted to v.p. I bet that was a big bump in her paycheck.” If the person you are talking to knows the info and is prone to share it, you’re going to get numbers.

You can’t ask someone straight out, “What do you earn?” but there are tasteful ways to get the scoop. Here are some lines to use with friends, people you meet at trade shows, and complete strangers. “Gosh, that sounds like a fascinating job. What would something like that pay, industry-wide?” Or, “What could a person expect to make in a position like that?”

I readily admit this is against social norms, but so what? Do you ever again want to find out that someone next to you is earning \$64,000 more than you for doing the same job? I think not. Be subtle, but get the job done.

Now when it comes to negotiating salary, I need to teach you three principles that apply to all forms of negotiating:

1. Never negotiate until the other person is ready to make the deal.
2. The first person to name an exact figure has lost competitive advantage.
3. If you can’t walk away from the deal, you’re not negotiating. You’re begging.

Never negotiate until the other person is ready to make the deal. In job search terms this means you never negotiate until the employer is actually offering you a job. Why? Because, simply put, that’s the only time you have power in this relationship.

The boss has all the power during the interview process, and the boss has all the power once you are hired, but for those magic minutes or hours or days after she offers you a job and before you say yes or no, *you have the power*. Only negotiate when you have the power.

So how do you deflect this issue if it comes up before you get a firm job offer? Easy. Use lines like these: “Salary is not my first concern. I’m really more interested in the opportunity, the people I’ll be working with, the resources I’ll have to do my job, and where this might lead in your organization. I’m sure this won’t be a problem for us. Can we come back to this issue later?”

If it comes up again, just answer a question with a question: “I know you have a salary range in mind for this position. What is it?” Then, no matter what she says, you say, “Well, that seems a little low for what I know I could do for you, but we’re in the same ballpark. I’m sure this won’t be a problem for us.” Then, ask a question about something totally different.

If it comes up again, say, “You know Jennifer, you seem a little nervous about the salary for this position. *This is the third time you’ve brought it up*. Is there any reason you won’t

be able to make a competitive offer?” She will assure that the offer will be competitive. Then you say, “Great. As long as you can make a competitive offer, I am sure this won’t be a problem for us.” Then ask a question about something totally different.

If you have to offer a number yourself, throw out a ridiculously wide range, saying something like this: “From my research on positions with this title, it seems that the pay is all over the map, from \$30,000 to \$90,000. Do you think this position will fall within that range?” They will assure that it will, and you say, “Great. Well, as long as you can make a competitive offer I am sure this won’t be a problem for us.” Then ask a question about something totally different.

Or you can just counter with this question: “Are you offering me the position?” If they say no, you can say, “Well, it seems a little premature to be negotiating the terms of an offer you’re not ready to make. When you’re ready to make the offer, I’m sure this won’t be a problem for us.” If they say, “Yes. We are ready to offer you the position,” you say, “That’s great! What are the terms of the offer?”

It takes practice, but I can do this all day.

INSERT BUBBLE:

Salary Web Sites

jobstar.org/tools/salary

www.salary.com

www.payscale.com

www.salaryexpert.com

INSERT ANOTHER BUBBLE:

Relocation & Cost of Living Sites

www.bankrate.com

www.quintcareers.com/relocation_resources

www.homefair.com

www.bekinsmoving.com

Then, when it comes to actually negotiating the terms, be nice but be firm. Appeal to market rates, which you know from your prior research. Here’s the issue: The pertinent number is not what you earned before, but what it would cost them to hire someone else besides you. That’s the market rate.

Remember, employers expect you to negotiate for salary, and are surprised if you don’t. Use inclusive, win-win language, such as “I really had in mind more than this. What can we do?” Or, “I really like this company, and it seems like a great opportunity. How can we move these two numbers closer together?” That puts you both on the same side of the table, trying to solve the problem together.

There’s certainly more to learn about this, but this will get you started.

My best wishes for your continued success, and don't work for companies that underpay women,

Donald Asher

Send your career emergency to don@donaldasher.com, and watch this space for Asher's response.

BIO: Donald Asher is a nationally known writer and speaker on careers and higher education. He is the author of eleven books, including *Cracking the Hidden Job Market*; *How to Get Any Job: Life Launch and Re-Launch for Everyone Under 30*; *Graduate Admissions Essays*, the best-selling guide to the graduate admissions process; *Asher's Bible of Executive Resumes*; *Cool Colleges for the Hyper-Intelligent, Self-Directed, Late Blooming*, and *Just Plain Different*; and *Who Gets Promoted, Who Doesn't, and Why* (named Business Book of the Year 2008 by national career columnist Joyce Lain Kennedy). Asher speaks over 100 days a year from coast to coast, to college and corporate audiences. He is eager to hear your career emergency.