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IT CAREER EXPERT

Negotiating salary -- do you dare?

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Congratulations! After several rounds of interviews, you've been offered a challenging role at a respected company. As you discuss the job details with the hiring manager, however, you learn the starting salary is not what you anticipated. You would like to negotiate for a higher amount, but do you dare in the current employment environment?

Even in an ideal job market, salary negotiation is one of the most difficult aspects of the interview process. The degree to which salary is negotiable typically depends on the job role, the manager, the organization and your perceived value. Add in today's uncertain business climate, and the propriety of negotiating salary isn't always clear. Considering the following factors, however, could help you decide how to approach the negotiating table.

Know your worth. Research the market to determine your market value, or what the skills and experience you possess are worth. By reviewing salary surveys in business and trade publications, talking to colleagues and recruiters, and checking salary comparison sites on online job boards, you'll have a better understanding of how workers with talents similar to yours are compensated. Keep in mind specific industries and geographic areas play a significant role in calculating job salaries. If you discover the offered package

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is considerably less than market-value, you may want to negotiate.

Research the company's financial position. Whether the firm is fiscally able to bargain is an extremely important factor to weigh before attempting any salary negotiation. If the prospective role is with a newly formed start-up, or a company that recently announced layoffs, they may not be in a position to bargain. In fact, they may be a bit put off if you try, because obviously you aren't familiar with the organization's situation. But many sectors and many businesses are prospering in today's economy, so it's worth your while to do some research. By reading business and industry publications, visiting the corporate Web site, and, if it is public, studying its earnings statements, you'll have a better sense whether to negotiate. If the firm isn't in a solid fiscal position, consider some alternatives to asking for higher salary.

Consider more than just money. Whenever you are offered a new position -- regardless of the economic climate -- make sure to review the "benefits" of the job itself. The work may offer more responsibilities, for example, or exposure to new technologies. Such aspects of the position are excellent opportunities for your long-term professional growth. Also take a look at your benefits package. In addition to health insurance and vacation time, the company may provide for extras such as industry group membership fees, tuition reimbursement, job-related courses, flex-time or gym memberships. While the amount of your gross salary should never be overlooked, these additional factors may be important in your decision to negotiate -- or what to negotiate for.

Don't dwell on the past. In the late 1990's, the demand for skilled IT workers pushed salary levels to unprecedented highs. But now that the Internet bubble has burst, compensation has normalized and the packages you may have been accustomed to in recent years may no longer be attainable. You should be prepared to readjust your expectations accordingly.

Show them your value. If you still feel the need to negotiate, be prepared to show how the company's investment in you will pay off. For example, you may "cost" X amount, but you'll return 2X due to technical know-how and business expertise you'll bring to the position. To improve your bargaining power, you may want to provide quantitative examples of your value. Instead of saying "I deserve an additional \$4,000 for my SAP skills," explain how your knowledge of the software could save the business 10 percent in vendor fees. Don't forget to be considerate in your negotiations and gracious regardless of the outcome.

The company may turn down your request to negotiate for myriad reasons. But you may want to ask if the subject could be addressed again in three to six months. In that time you'll be able to demonstrate your abilities and your excellent job performance will be a strong negotiating tool. If they agree, be sure to confirm the stipulation is detailed -- as well as the role's duties, perks and compensation package -- in your letter of agreement with the company. Best of luck in your new job!

Katherine Spencer Lee is executive director of Robert Half Technology, a leading provider of IT professionals for initiatives ranging from e-business development and multi-platform systems integration to network engineering and technical support. Robert Half Technology has more than 100 locations in the United States, Canada, Europe and Australia and offers online job search services at www.roberthalftechnology.com.

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