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## **Avoid These Common Salary Negotiation Mistakes**

Discussing compensation is uncomfortable for most people, and, not surprisingly, many job candidates fare poorly during salary negotiations. Even legal professionals who are experienced at interviewing often make mistakes at this phase of their job search.

The negotiating process is rife with the potential for missteps. Because of anxiety or nervousness, certain ill-advised behaviors often become more evident during compensation discussions. For instance, a candidate who is determined to convey confidence might go too far and come across as arrogant. Conversely, an introverted job seeker may seem overly timid and lacking in managerial qualities.

With so many potential pitfalls, it is easy to make a wrong turn at this critical juncture. Here are some common mistakes candidates make during salary discussions that you'll want to avoid:

**Overstating accomplishments.** As every reputable job seeker knows, lying or intentionally misrepresenting one's background is never acceptable. But, sometimes, candidates unintentionally over-embellish their accomplishments, usually in their zeal to put their best foot forward. Although job seekers are expected to present their skills and experience in the most favorable light, take care not to exaggerate your qualifications in an effort to appear more marketable.

If discovered, even the slightest overstatement of your credentials could cast serious doubts on your credibility. This, in turn, can weaken your negotiating position and may cause you to lose out on an employment opportunity altogether.

**Seeming arrogant.** Even if your qualifications are impeccable and your salary expectations completely justified, be careful not to come across as overly confident or demanding. In a survey of executives by Robert Half International (RHI), 50 percent of respondents said that being arrogant was the worst mistake a candidate can make when interviewing for a management-level position.

Know how to draw the line between conveying confidence and appearing self-important. Especially when discussing salary, projecting an attitude of entitlement can backfire and doom your employment prospects. Keep in mind that the hiring manager and other prospective colleagues you meet during the interview process are not only evaluating your qualifications, but also trying to determine if they will enjoy working with you. And even if you're perceived as highly qualified, you may be eliminated from consideration if you seem to have an inflated sense of self-worth.

**Not being assertive enough.** On the flip side, some job seekers, especially those who are natural introverts, simply do not feel comfortable touting their accomplishments and asking for the top of the salary range.

If you're uneasy with interviewing and negotiating, seek guidance from others who are more adept in this area. For instance, you might be able to engage the services of a career coach to help you hone your skills in this area. Or, if you're working with a recruiter, he or she may be able to help you polish your negotiating strategy. Understand that even if your qualifications should speak for themselves, you still need to present your accomplishments and salary expectations in an assertive, confident manner if you're to receive the best possible offer.

**Laying your cards on the table too soon.** Negotiation experts generally agree that it is to the job seeker's advantage to delay discussing compensation for as long as possible. Their reasoning is that, as discussions continue, an employer becomes increasingly committed to hiring you. It then becomes more likely that the employer will offer you what it takes to reach a mutually satisfying agreement.

With this in mind, keep the focus on selling your skills and experience. Avoid discussing compensation until you're confident that the employer wants to hire you. When the inevitable salary discussion comes up, try to deflect questions about your salary expectations by instead asking the interviewer about the budgeted salary range for the position. If you're pressed to offer a number first, give an acceptable range rather than a specific figure. Sources such as the annual *Robert Half Legal Salary Guide*, professional recruiters, the Association of Legal Administrators and online career sites such as Salary.com, can help you establish salary ranges for a variety of positions within the legal field.

By offering a salary range, you provide a starting point for discussion, which is what the hiring manager is looking for, while leaving yourself plenty of room to negotiate.

**Ignoring other aspects of an offer.** Job seekers sometimes become so fixated on a target salary figure that they neglect to consider other elements of a job offer that may be equally valuable. An appealing corporate culture, a generous bonus structure, floating holidays and a short commute are factors that may compensate for receiving a little less in base pay.

One legal administrator almost made the mistake of turning down a job offer at a small firm because the base salary was about \$2,000 less than her goal. The firm's revenues were growing by double digits, however, and she became eligible to participate in the annual bonus plan after her first year of employment. As it turned out, her first bonus surpassed the amount of base salary she had sacrificed to accept the job. Moreover, the firm's steady growth suggested that future bonuses would be increasingly lucrative.

**Drawing a line in the sand.** Even if an employer's offer is not as competitive as you were expecting, remain professional, open-minded and committed to pursuing a mutually

acceptable agreement. Although you may have a clear idea of your minimum salary requirements, issuing an ultimatum is usually counterproductive and may cause negotiations to fall apart.

Keep in mind that the employer thinks you're the best person for the job and wants to hire you, so there's no reason to assume an adversarial stance. In addition, how you conduct yourself during the negotiation process is a key factor in your ability to get what you want. Your demeanor also sets the tone for your employment with the firm. Why not get the relationship off to the best possible start by remaining gracious?

Although many professionals approach the salary negotiation process with trepidation, it doesn't have to be a nerve-wracking experience if you observe the basic rules of engagement. By coming across as confident but not arrogant, delaying compensation discussions, being honest and open-minded and remaining professional, you can feel more confident and comfortable with salary discussions while improving your odds of reaching a satisfying agreement.