The Art of Negotiating

A n area of the job search that often receives little atten-
tion is the art of negotiating. Once you have been
offered a job, you have the opportunity to discuss with
the employer the terms of your employment. Negotiations
may be uncomfortable or unsatisfying because we tend to
approach them with a winner-take-all attitude that is counter-
productive to the concept of negotiations.

Negotiating with your potential employer can make your
job one that best meets your own needs as well as those of
your employer. To ensure successful negotiations, it is important
to understand the basic components. The definition of negoti-
ation as it relates to employment is: a series of communications
(either oral or in writing) that reach a satisfying conclusion for
all concerned parties, most often between the new employee
and the hiring organization.

Negotiation is a planned series of events that requires
strategy, presentation and patience. Preparation is probably
the single most important part of successful negotiations. Any
good trial attorney will tell you the key to presenting a good
case in the courtroom is the hours of preparation that happen
beforehand. The same is true for negotiating. A good case will
literally present itself. What follows are some suggestions that
will help you prepare for successful negotiating.

Research

Gather as much factual information as you can to back up
the case you want to make. For example, if most entering
employees cannot negotiate salary, you may be jeopardizing
the offer by focusing on that aspect of the package. Turn your
attention to other parts of the offer such as their health plan,
dental plan, retirement package, the type of schedule you
prefer, etc.

Psychological Preparation

Chances are that you will not know the person with
whom you will be negotiating. If you are lucky enough to be
acquainted, spend some time reviewing what you know about
this person’s communication style and decision-making
behavior.

In most cases, however, this person will be a stranger.
Since most people find the unknown a bit scary, you’ll want
to ask yourself what approach to negotiating you find most
comfortable. How will you psyche yourself up to feel confident
enough to ask for what you want? How will you respond to
counteroffers? What are your alternatives? What’s your bottom
line? In short, plan your strategy.

Be sure you know exactly what you want. This does not
mean you will get exactly that, but having the information
clear in your head will help you determine what you are willing
to concede. Unless you know what you want, you won’t be
able to tell somebody else. Clarity improves communication,
which is the conduit for effective negotiations.

Practice

Rehearse the presentation in advance using another person
as the employer. If you make mistakes in rehearsal, chances are
that you will not repeat them during the actual negotiations. A
friend can critique your reasoning and help you prepare for
questions. If this all seems like a lot of work, remember that if
something is worth negotiating for, it is worth preparing for.

Dollars and Sense

Always begin by expressing genuine interest in the position
and the organization, emphasizing the areas of agreement
but allowing “wiggle room” to compromise on other areas. Be
prepared to support your points of disagreement, outlining the
parts you would like to alter, your suggestions on how this can
be done and why it would serve the company’s best interests to
accommodate your request.

Be prepared to defend your proposal. Back up your reasons
for wanting to change the offer with meaningful, work-related
skills and positive benefits to the employer. Requesting a
salary increase because you are a fast learner or have a high
GPA are usually not justifiable reasons in the eyes of the
employer. Meaningful work experience or internships that
have demonstrated or tested your professional skills are things
that will make an employer stop and take notice.

It is sometimes more comfortable for job-seekers to make
this initial request in writing and plan to meet later to hash out
the differences. You will need to be fairly direct and assertive
at this point even though you may feel extremely vulnerable.
Keep in mind that the employer has chosen you from a pool of
qualified applicants, so you are not as powerless as you think.

Sometimes the employer will bristle at the suggestion that
there is room to negotiate. Stand firm, but encourage the
employer to think about it for a day or two at which time you
will discuss the details of your proposal with him/her. Do not
rush the process because you are uncomfortable. The
employer may be counting on this discomfort and use it to
defail the negotiations. Remember, this is a series of volleys
and lobs, trade-offs and compromises that occur over a period
of time. It is a process—not a singular event!

Once you have reached a conclusion with which you are
both relatively comfortable, present in writing your interpre-
tation of the agreement so that if there is any question, it will
be addressed immediately. Negotiation, by definition, implies
that each side will give. Do not perceive it as an ultimatum.

If the employer chooses not to grant any of your
requests—and realistically, he or she can do that—you will
still have the option of accepting the original offer provided
you have maintained a positive, productive and friendly
atmosphere during your exchanges. You can always re-enter
negotiations after you have demonstrated your worth to the
organization.

Money Isn’t Everything

There are many things you can negotiate besides salary.
For example, benefits can add thousands of dollars to the com-
pensation package. Benefits can range from paid personal
leave to discounts on the company’s products and services.
They constitute more than just icing on the cake, they may be
better than the cake itself. Traditional benefits packages
include health insurance, paid vacation and personal/sick
days. Companies may offer such benefits as child care, elder
care or use of the company jet for family emergencies. Other
lucrative benefits could include disability and life insurance
and a variety of retirement plans. Some organizations offer
investment and stock options as well as relocation reimburse-
ment and tuition credits for continued education.

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