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How to Be an Ace Salary Negotiator (Even if You Hate Conflict)

Here's how to fight for a better salary when you loathe uncomfortable conversations.

By A.C. Shilton

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In every book, blog or conference about freelancing, you'll find the same piece of advice: Negotiate the fee on every assignment.

This is great advice. Or so I imagine; I wouldn't know.

In my 10 years of freelancing, I've never negotiated for a heftier fee. Not once. If a fee is too low, I'll simply decline the assignment and move on.

I might be paying for these financial transgressions for years — and salaried employees might be, too. Not negotiating the salary of your first job can cost you hundreds of thousands of dollars over the course of your career, according to Linda Babcock, an economics professor at Carnegie Mellon University and author of "Ask for It: How Women Can Use the Power of Negotiation to Get What They Really Want."

I've always pinned my poor negotiation skills on my aversion to conflict. But that's just an excuse; the truth is, I was just looking at negotiations from the wrong perspective. Here's how to stand up for your worth and walk away with more money.

Conflict-averse doesn't mean negotiation-averse

When I explained my struggles to Dr. Babcock, her immediate response was: "Why are you thinking of a negotiation as a conflict?" She added that a negotiation should be a conversation, not a confrontation.

"If you see it as a conflict, and you're conflict-averse and avoid it, that's not going to serve you well," she said. "Try seeing it as a conversation that needs to be managed."

Plus, unlike a true, every-person-for-themselves conflict, when done properly, both parties get what they want out of a negotiation. You get more money, and the other party receives quality work from an employee who isn't spending half the day tweaking her résumé.

Your boss expects this

You wouldn't buy a car without haggling, because it's a cultural norm, Dr. Babcock said. The same should be true when it comes to your salary and benefits package.

"In our culture, there are things where people are always supposed to negotiate, like cars or houses," she said. "These are really clear-cut situations. Everything else is more uncertain, and knowing what's negotiable or not is more complicated."

Employers generally have a salary range, and if you're at the point in the interview or hiring process where it's time to discuss salary, it's absolutely worth your time and emotional investment to prod about wiggle room.

"If they've offered you a job, they want you to take that job," said Kim Churches, chief executive of the American Association of University Women, adding that "H.R. costs for hiring new employees are high."

"Negotiating for your salary shouldn't change their decision," she said. However, this has other implications for women.

Negotiating is gendered, so plan accordingly

Much of Dr. Babcock's research has focused on whether women are penalized when they ask for more. Unfortunately, the answer is yes.

"The style that a woman uses to negotiate can backfire and can create backlash, but using a cooperative style can get you what you want and help you avoid the backlash," she said, adding that women should be aware that negotiating forcefully can have repercussions. Is this unfair? Yes, but this is the sad reality women must contend with.

Here's the other kicker: Managing your approach is important regardless of your manager's gender.

"It's not just men to blame for this; women do this too," Dr. Babcock said. She cites research she published in *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision* in 2007, showing that both men and women penalized female employees when they initiated salary negotiations.

“Don’t be timid, but use the right inflection and wording choices,” Ms. Churches said, adding that paying close attention to the body language of the person you’re negotiating with is important, too. If your boss’s posture changes, tune in and adjust as needed.

Ms. Churches suggested adopting a collaborative approach, focusing on how you can help your company or organization grow. For example, suggest additional responsibilities you’d like to take on, or new skills you’d like to acquire. Focus on how you want to keep working with the organization and helping the company reach its goals.

What not to do: “Say I want X and 10 percent more a year after that, because I’m awesome and deserve it,” Dr. Babcock said. “You’ll be deemed as too aggressive.”

Deflect on your salary history

Many employers ask about salary history and base your offer upon those past numbers. Try your best not to fall for it: There is no obligation — legal or otherwise — to disclose this information, so your first move should be to parry this question to see if your potential employer will throw out the first number.

Still, read the room: Sometimes you’ll just have to cough it up.

When asked about your past compensation, she suggests a script like this one, which is available on the AAUW’s online Salary Skill Builder Workshop: “This position is not the same as my last job, I’d like to discuss what my responsibilities would be here and then determine a fair salary for that job.” Practice giving this response until it feels like second nature.

Have good numbers

If you do have to throw out the first number, you still have leveraging power, said Dr. Babcock.

“If you’re well-calibrated, you actually can have an advantage throwing out a number first,” she said. The trick here is knowing the market rate for your job.

“You can lose credibility if you’re way too high,” Dr. Babcock said. But being too low can set off alarm bells that you might lack experience or professionalism.

Finding that range is tricky, thanks in part to employers who discourage employees from talking to each other about their compensation.

However, thanks to the National Labor Relations Act, “that’s illegal in nearly all private sector workplaces,” according to Cynthia Estlund, a professor at the New York University School of Law. Certain types of managers, especially in the rail and airways industries, might be excluded from

the labor relations law, so do a touch of research before asking around. But the majority of American workers are free to speak about their wages, Ms. Estlund said — and don't be shy about it.

“There's this peculiar American aversion to talking about these things,” she said. But research has shown that salary transparency leads to greater “wage compression,” which Ms. Estlund said is another way of saying “equality.”

“It means there is less difference between the bottom wages and the top,” she said.

Sites like Glassdoor, PayScale and LinkedIn, as well as trade organizations, can also help you figure out where your salary should be. These sites, while not perfect, may be your best resource if your company actively bars employees from comparing notes on pay.

Follow a script

The AAUW website offers tools that will help you write your own script, but a basic outline for a salary negotiation goes like this:

- Start with why you love your job and are excited to help the company grow.
- Highlight your successes and additional skills you've acquired.
- Suggest some ways you may be able to take on more responsibility.
- Finally, ask about how you can ensure your compensation matches your skills and responsibilities.
- And don't forget to practice: Find a friend and ask them to poke holes in your résumé and push back in interview practice “so you're prepared for different scenarios,” Ms. Churches said.

You can't always get what you want

If you get what you want on the first try, congrats! But if your boss can't commit, you still have a few options.

“You can ask, ‘How close do you think you can come to my number?’ ” Dr. Babcock said. This puts the decision back on them. If they still balk, ask how you can gain the skills needed to take you to the next level. Dr. Babcock said letting a boss in on your lofty aspirational goals can help them see you as an employee worth investing in.

Whatever happens, don't keep picking and picking at the no.

“Listen to your gut on how much you can go back and forth, then make some decisions,” Ms. Churches said. “It takes two parties to negotiate,” and if the other party isn’t interested in keeping the dialogue going, you need to figure out how to move on. “You can do a Hail Mary and try one last time, or you can start looking elsewhere for employment.”

Whatever you do, according to Dr. Babcock, remember: “There’s no cost to being gracious, and if you’re colleagues, you’re in a long-term relationship with this person.”

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