

Determining Your Value Inside Your Company

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“Just pay me what I’m *really* worth!” That, of course, is not what you would say to a current or prospective employer, but it is what everyone is thinking—especially when asked, “What are your salary expectations if we offer you this job?” New job or possible promotion, it’s hard to take emotion and ego out of such matters; yet that’s exactly what you have to do in order to present yourself honestly when it comes to salary considerations. Your ability to be paid the salary you want depends entirely on your understanding how much value you bring to your employer—and how effectively you can communicate that value to the person who controls what you are to be paid.

Think of it this way: unless you possess some extremely rare and specialized skills, you are (to many, if not most, employers) part of the vast labor pool. Thus, many factors can affect your salary level—the experience you have, your communications skills, your confidence level—but it all starts with a true, objective self-assessment of what your worth is to your employer. Thus it’s important to think through and pin down questions such as the following:

- How can you accurately assess the true value of what you have to offer an employer?
- How does your organization pay its employees?
- Can you leverage the organization’s salary logic to your advantage?
- What other leverage do you have as a key contributor within your organization?

What You Need to Know

Aren’t salary structures a closely held secret?

In general, yes. Most organizations don’t like to broadcast their pay structures simply because their compensation and benefits plans can be a valuable competitive tool. However, there are ways of finding out your organization’s salary structure. First, you can check the posted salary ranges for jobs that are publicly announced or advertised. Such postings are rough benchmarks for the job you’re considering. Sometimes all it takes is simply to ask someone who does hiring and salary reviews for the company to explain the salary scales and the reasoning behind them.

If the company has a formal salary structure, doesn’t that limit my ability to negotiate a higher salary?

No. Those salary ranges are set based on the company’s research of the market’s supply and demand for people with abilities like yours. Beyond that, you can emphasize to the employer your special experience and institutional knowledge (how long you’ve been at the organization and how

much valuable information you have in your head). Remember that salary ranges are set for so-called “average” employees.

Will the organization always offer me a salary within the range that is assigned to my job?

A salary range is a pre-determined start point for a beginner at a certain job (someone with the barest qualifications to do the work assigned) and a seasoned pro. So your initial offer may be a figure that your employer thinks you will accept, not necessarily a figure that is “fair” in terms of the salary structure. Therefore, an initial offer to you could be well below the range that is officially assigned to your position or well below the level of your true competence within the range. Many managers will concede in private that setting salary levels is more art than science, despite all the charts and tables that often accompany pay decisions. Then again, it's important that everyone concerned know what *you* have to offer in comparison to anyone else who might be a candidate for the same job.

What to Do

So, What Do *You* Have to Offer?

The first thing to do is catalog your assets: They include your education, talents, track record for success (it helps to be able to quantify the financial value of your successes if you can), contacts, public recognition, and passions. This list shows your “fast-moving merchandise”—the goods that your employer already knows you have and routinely relies on for the value that they bring to the organization.

Make sure you stress the assets you possess that aren't being used to their fullest potential at present. Then create another list of ideas you have had to benefit the organization's future, as well as interests and skills you have that could be put to organizational advantage even though they're not necessarily applied in your current job. This list represents your upward mobility, either within your existing range or into an entirely different range.

Stress Behaviors, Skills, and Knowledge Sets That Your Organization Most Values

Every company has “star” employees, people who are considered standouts in their work. Look around you and observe how these stars work and behave. There you will find a clue to the informal, unwritten values in your company. Basic skills and knowledge are often what set the beginning criteria for selecting someone for a job; however, in reality, the company may prize such behaviors as happily working late or going to official receptions—and, if you're willing to do such things, stressing

that will help you get noticed by the key decision makers who decide what job is right for you. Keep in mind that it's never too early to start preparing yourself for the next job you might want. That means that seeking out job assignments and/or signing up for formal training may provide your résumé a critical boost a year from now when you're seeking a promotion.

Understand the Organization's Salary Structure

If you are already employed inside a company, then you have indirect access (and, perhaps, direct access) to the salary structure the company uses for pay decisions. The salary structure is not public knowledge, so you must ask around. Someone you know will know how the compensation is arranged within the organization. If you are considering a new job in a new part of the company, ask frankly where the offer falls within the range assigned to your job title. Expect an answer somewhere around the midpoint of the range. If the answer is vague or dismissive, that could be a sign that you are being offered a salary not within your range at all. And that's exactly when you need to negotiate in earnest.

Hitch Your Wagon To An Organizational Star

Your prospects are limited (or expanded!) by the prospects of your boss. Again, unless you possess some unique and hard-to-find skills, you typically will not make more than your supervisor earns. Find a positive, respectful, successful, and supportive boss, and your own career boat will rise with theirs. If, by contrast, you are stuck with a boss who is out of favor or in a department that is routinely underfunded, your own perceived value could diminish by association. In such cases, being loyal to your existing boss maybe admirable, but it won't be advantageous to your career prospects.

Think Outside the Company

Don't limit your research and expectations just to the company you currently work for. Trade and professional associations conduct salary surveys that reflect both local and national trends, and salary computation tools are available online. Develop a network of peers and associates, people you know and trust. It would be tacky to ask point blank for a specific figure ("How much do you make?"), but talk in terms of ranges of salaries paid by other organizations for jobs like yours. Collect enough range information from enough people, and you will begin to get a picture of how much you could be making in the wider marketplace.

Write Your Own Job Description

Job descriptions may seem like humdrum language assembled by Human Resource gnomes, but don't discount them. Such humdrum is often the root of the system that sets everyone's paycheck. So, any time you're asked to create a job description for the job you're doing (or the job you want), it's an opportunity. Seize it. The more strategic the role that you create for yourself, the higher you will be placed within your range—you might even be bumped up a grade. The key is, as always, don't stretch the truth. If you advertise that you're doing special work, adding special value, or possessing special knowledge—and then don't deliver, your chances for promotion and higher pay will evaporate.

Don't Forget These Four Traits

Over time, what you will earn inside a company often comes down to whether you are:

- Well-liked and trusted as a team player who is both productive and cooperative
- An acknowledged performer among all the others who hold, or who have held, your job
- Hard to replace because you possess unique skills, talents, contacts, or reputation in your industry
- Successful—your track record is superior to those of your peers and colleagues

What to Avoid

You Assume You're Powerless

Everyone in the workplace is a package of skills and behaviors. You can almost always increase your salary, either by elevating your stature, boosting your perceived and real worth, and increasing the respect you hold within the organization. Then again, you can usually increase your salary by changing employers altogether. If you choose to stay with the same employer, you may have to wait for regularly scheduled increases. But when the time comes, you can take a proactive role in determining what your increase will be.

You Take Things Too Personally

Don't confuse your perceived worth to the organization with your intrinsic value as a human being. If you are dissatisfied with your salary, reflect calmly and systematically on the ways better-paid employees managed to attract higher incomes. Then follow their lead.

You Overlook Non-financial Compensation

Every job is more than a paycheck. Remember that there are other valuable ways of being compensated: the opportunity to work with a prestigious or cutting-edge organization, the chance to do something that is meaningful and important to your personal set of values, access to tuition reimbursement while you are studying for an advanced degree or paid sabbaticals, and the chance to learn important skills that will position you for accelerated career progression later. In the last analysis, the person who most determines what you are paid—is you.

Where to Learn More

Books:

Souldancer. Pay Me What I'm Worth. Lulu.com, 2006.

Chapman, Jack. Negotiating Your Salary: How To Make \$1,000 A Minute. Ten Speed Press, 2006.

Web Sites:

Payscale: www.payscale.com

Monster.com Salary Center: <http://salary.monster.com>