

Here's how to make the salary expectations question work for you

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During the job interview process, you should have three ideas about compensation clear in your mind before you get the [salary expectations question](#): what's realistically at the upper end of your range, an amount that you'd accept, and a pay level that you'd decline. You should write these down for your own reference early in the process before the heat of salary negotiations begins to warp your expectations in ways you might not expect.

It is becoming increasingly illegal in the United States for employers to ask for current salary in a [job interview](#), which creates an interesting dynamic that is to your advantage. Ideally, you'd like your future employer to reveal their number first. If it's your high-end number, you could take the offer right away. If it's below your low-end, you can reject out of hand. And if it's around your attractive number you may very well consider moving or staying as the situation suits you.

Using the salary expectations question to turn the tables

"What are your salary expectations?" is a terrific chance for you to turn the tables. You don't need to answer the question and shouldn't. Instead, you should get a range from the recruiter or HR person before going in ("in the interest of saving everyone's time, I would need to know what range this position is budgeted for, before considering") and side-step the grilling about your current compensation ("my understanding is that we're talking about a future position at your company and what my skills and talents would be worth in that regard, not what I've been paid in the past for a different role, with different responsibilities, at a different company — am I correct in assuming that or am I off-base?")

Don't bring it up in interviews until after they know how excited they are about working with you, because that's when they're most likely to get excited about paying you more.

How recruiters get you to crack on the compensation question

Be warned that experienced recruiters can usually get you to crack. Using pregnant pauses and social engineering or peer pressure, they often ask something like "having carefully considered your career and future, what are your salary expectations and why?"

Without willpower, and practice at negotiating in high stakes situations, most candidates give up the requested information here. Try not to, even if they guilt you for it.

You might use evasive techniques such as asking "Oh, I know that question, asking what my current salary is, was being phased out for a reason," or "are you sure we're allowed to talk about that?," or "oh, I'm paid fine, but I'm open to jobs that pay more, what's this one pay?," or "I'm canvassing the market to see what rates are."

What to do with the salary number

When you get the number from them, hold it tight. You can decide later what you want to do with it. If you don't tell them what your current number is, it can only go up. Sometimes by a lot. But the key is to not share any of your confidential information prematurely (or ever, to be honest). You can always come back with your counter-offer later.

When it comes to compensation negotiations, try to get everything on the table at once — benefits, perks, pay, retirement, vacation, meals, car, etc. Let them know that you very methodically want to compare job duties and perks between all outstanding offers.

Throughout the process, when asked, it's best to indicate you are considering other roles, most or all of which are similar to the present one in most respects and leave it at that. If some of them are very far afield, in wildly different industries or cities, do not share that with your interviewers, as these data points can confuse. Why, they might ask, are you interviewing for this job? Is it for fun, out of curiosity, or because you're actually interested in filling my role, right now? It's sufficient to indicate that there are alternatives and demur on the specificity.

This is when to signal interest in the job

It's also best for you to communicate that you want the job, should the pay, conditions, and work be right for you. That leaves a ton of wiggle room, but also keeps the company interested. Displaying ambivalence about the role, or uncertainty about your interest, is never the best way to negotiate the most attractive offer. Ideally, you're able to convey a blazing enthusiasm for all things about your prospective employer and the only remaining issue is the tiny matter of pay. If they can get that detail out of the way, you are ready to jump in and get going right now.

When it's no longer true that you're interested in the job, it's best to be explicit and let the company know. The road is long and professional courtesy does pay off.

This article is adapted from [Ladders 2018 Interviews Guide: 74 Questions That Will Land You the Job \(Ladders 2018 Guide\)](#). Purchase the Kindle Single for immediate download [here](#).