THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

FACULTY

On the Job Market? Don't Sell Yourself Short, Even Now

Fabrizio Costantini for The Chronicle

Ilana Blumberg, a scholar in the humanities who recently earned tenure at Michigan State U., says she didn't do a great job negotiating her job offer when she was first hired. Now she knows better.

By Audrey Williams June | NOVEMBER 27, 2011

Scholars who have been on the academic market in recent years know the competition for limited tenure-track jobs is fierce. But what they usually don't realize is that there is still room to negotiate if they are offered a position.

Too often, experts say, aspiring professors' relief at getting an offer in a tough economy undermines their will to ask for more money or their courage to press for other perks that would help pave the way for a successful career. But it shouldn't, seasoned academics say, and the decision not to bargain can cost a young faculty member for years, since starting salaries typically provide the base for raises and bonuses over time.

"If you've been identified as someone worthy of an offer, then you're in a position of power," says Katharine E. Stewart, an associate dean at the University of Arkansas for Medical Sciences' public-health college. "The economic environment has not changed the reality that institutions are hiring faculty who they want to be productive. They're as interested in your success as you are."

Ms. Stewart's view is widely backed by other experts in academic job negotiations. But the uneasiness some scholars feel with the job market, particularly in humanities fields, has led many of them to set aside much of what they've learned about negotiations to make sure they don't scare away potential employers.

"They're doing the best they can to get all the information that they can—and they're getting it," says Alford Young Jr., a professor of sociology and chair of the department at the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor. "But there's a sense of anxiety that's causing them not to act on it like they should."

At a time when many institutions are still weathering budget crunches, they are under pressure to use their resources wisely, especially when it comes to hiring faculty. For candidates, that means it's especially important to do the research needed to keep their requests, particularly those related to salary, largely in line with departmental norms. Candidates must also be prepared to clearly explain how what they're asking for—whether it is more start-up money, better lab space, or a graduate assistant—will help them be productive and, ultimately, earn tenure.

"Deans and department chairs are trying to save where they can, and they may be a little less willing to negotiate," Ms. Stewart says. "But you should ask for what you think is fair and reasonable."

It's How You Ask

Recent research on how professors and people in other fields negotiate salaries found that about one in four job seekers don't ask for more money. Crystal M. Harold, an assistant professor of human-resource management at Temple University, co-wrote a paper on the research that sets out to examine, in part, why some people get more than others when it comes to negotiating salary.

Ms. Harold studied 149 newly hired people in various professional jobs, with tenure-track professors making up about half of that sample. About three-quarters of the group negotiated the terms of their current job during the hiring process, while the rest avoided negotiations. The ones who asked for more money increased their starting salary by an average of $5,000, according to the paper, "Who Asks and Who Receives in Salary Negotiation," which was published this year in the *Journal of Organizational Behavior.*

The study also revealed that the people who succeeded in increasing their starting salaries tended to use one of two negotiating strategies. One of them, dubbed a

competitive approach, describes the most hard-core of negotiators, including those who use tactics such as threatening to withdraw from negotiations if the employer doesn't sweeten their offer. But aggressive salary negotiations can backfire, setting the stage for rocky relationships between a new hire and his or her colleagues.

"I do think as you negotiate that you have to maintain a degree of responsibility during the process," Mr. Young said. "If you don't, that's a sign of what kind of colleague you're going to be in the unit."

Ms. Harold says that a more-collaborative strategy—which also resulted in salary increases for many people in the study—would be a smart move in the current economy. "You lay out what you want and let them know that you understand that times are tough," Ms. Harold says. "Then the negotiator gives a little bit, and the organization gives a little bit. You feel better about the outcome, and so do they."

It also pays to prioritize needs, including nonmonetary benefits, before negotiations begin. "There's no downside to pushing for things that are important to you," says Michael Brotherton, an associate professor of astronomy at the University of Wyoming who has blogged about academic negotiating. "It may be that salary isn't as important to you, but some other thing might be."

When to Push, When to Budge

For one assistant professor recently on the job market, that "other thing" was getting his moving expenses paid. He and his partner had moved three times in as many years, and "it was such a financial drain to do that," says the professor, who didn't want to be named to keep his new employer from knowing his thoughts about their negotiation process. His overall approach to negotiating was colored by fresh memories of his first foray onto the academic market, in the fall of 2008—a year in which many tenure-track jobs were cut midsearch as a recession hit.

Like so many other new Ph.D's, his job search that year didn't yield a tenure-track position. So he continued working at a research center at the university where he earned his Ph.D., in higher education. After a short stint in another job, he decided last fall to apply for openings at two research universities that would put him near family

members.

When it became likely that one of the places he applied to would make him an offer, he contacted his mentors for advice. They told him that salary, teaching load, start-up money for his research, and moving expenses were among the items he should negotiate. Their advice was helpful, he says, but he remembers thinking that as "an assistant professor, in the market we're in, I wasn't in the place to make very specific requests." A more-seasoned academic, he thought, might be able to press for more.

When it was time to negotiate the offer he got from the university where he now works, as an assistant professor in a college of education, he had done his homework on his future department. "I made sure I knew everybody's salary, what people's course loads were, and who was teaching what classes," he says. "I asked around as much as I could to get a sense of how things were."

He also thought about "how strongly I wanted to make my requests and in what kind of tone," he says. "I didn't see it being to my benefit to be too demanding."

Once negotiations began, he says it was clear to him that there "didn't seem to be much willingness to budge" on his salary or to increase the standard start-up money given to new professors, he says. The teaching load of two courses per semester that professors at his university take on during their first year was set as well. But he was given the moving assistance he asked for. "I absolutely had to give in on some things," the assistant professor says. But he says the compromise was worth it. "My field is small. Decent tenure-track jobs are pretty hard to come by."

'Everyone Is So Desperate'

Part of the reluctance to push back in negotiations, particularly for academics who are on the market for the first time, stems from a lack of negotiating experience. Many scholars, like people in other professions, expect their hard work to automatically translate into financial rewards. And for junior faculty members, the positions they tend to hold early in their academic careers—as graduate teaching and research assistants and postdoctoral fellows—provide few negotiating opportunities.

"We're not brought up in environments where we have to negotiate. And we don't generally get a lot of negotiation training," says Mr. Brotherton. "So by the time you get to a faculty job, that's often your very first time negotiating."

Ilana M. Blumberg can relate. The newly tenured associate professor of humanities, culture, and writing at Michigan State University described herself as a "failed" negotiator before an audience of graduate students at a conference about preparing future faculty at the University of Michigan this fall. Ms. Blumberg, who was a new mother with no other job prospects at the time she received her offer from Michigan State, says she wishes "she had more guidance and more gumption" when she was negotiating.

"When I was in graduate school, no one taught you about anything beyond the interview," says Ms. Blumberg, who earned her Ph.D. in English from the University of Pennsylvania in 2001. In her talks with Michigan State, she did manage to get her start date deferred by a year—which, for her, was an important victory. It allowed her to do a key fellowship (at the end of a three-year stint as a visiting assistant professor of English at the University of Michigan) and then begin work at Michigan State in the fall of 2005. "You have to make choices," she says.

Ms. Blumberg, who was on a panel at the conference on negotiating academic job offers in the humanities and social sciences, says many students in the audience "were concerned about what's negotiable and what's not.

"To me, part of what that reflected was that no one wants to ask for too much," she says. "There was just a general mood in the room that people would feel lucky to get an offer no matter what it is." Although negotiations may be playing out differently now than when she was looking for a job in a better economy, she says, that shouldn't stop candidates from making requests. "You can't predict where there's some give in a university budget."

Susan Miller has seen how the tight job market has pushed negotiating out of the picture for many scholars who get job offers at Santa Fe College, in Florida, where she works. Ms. Miller, chair of the English department, says a hire she made over the summer

illustrates a common reaction.

"I told him, 'This is the salary we can offer you,' and he just grabbed the pen and basically signed on the spot," Ms. Miller says. "There was no, 'Is this the maximum salary?' Nothing like that. Everyone is so desperate for a job in higher education."

Salaries at Santa Fe, a two-year college, adhere pretty closely to a strict schedule, but there may have been a possibility for the candidate to get more money if he had simply asked, Ms. Miller says.

Candidates desperate for a job often fear that an institution might rescind an offer if they try to negotiate for more. But the University of Arkansas's Ms. Stewart, who had that same fear early in her career, says job candidates should not worry.

"Deans and department chairs expect to negotiate," says Ms. Stewart. "Sometimes students and postdocs aren't used to being in a position of power, but I think it would be a mistake to give in to that rush of gratitude and relief and not ask for some time to consider the offer."