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ADVICE

Negotiating a Better Deal

By Julia Miller Vick and Mary Morris Heiberger | MARCH 22, 2002

Question: Everyone tells me that if you get a job offer, you shouldn't accept on the spot but should negotiate the best "deal" you can get. I just can't do that. When I have traveled in countries where people bargain, I couldn't bargain. It's just not in my nature. But if I get an offer, I want to conduct myself in a professional manner. What should I do?

Mary: If we told you that, in exchange for perhaps only minutes of your time, you could "earn" several hundred, or possibly thousands, of dollars, compounded annually, would you consider learning a new skill?

Julie: It's not a totally new skill, just one you haven't used much in this setting. If you have taught, worked with an adviser, or participated in group projects, you have surely negotiated. If you have personal relationships -- siblings, friends, children, or significant others -- you have negotiated. It's just that when it comes to something as major as a job offer and as major as making the transition from graduate student to faculty member, some people panic. You can do this.

Mary: What you can negotiate will vary tremendously depending on you, your field, and the institution to which you are applying. If you're in demand as a candidate this year (as demonstrated by many interviews and offers), you'll have more room to negotiate, if only because you're more likely to have competing offers. If you're applying for a more senior position, there will be more room to negotiate. Likewise if you're in a "hot" field, a bigger budget may have been set aside to meet candidates' demands. Well-financed colleges generally allow more room for negotiation, while institutions where the faculty members are unionized may have less flexibility than others. Ph.D.'s in fields where "start-up packages" are a routine part of the job offer will have the most details to be

negotiated.

Julie: Negotiating a start-up package is a topic unto itself. For this column, suffice it to say that if you're in a field where you require major equipment, space, and assistance to carry out your research plans, you need to be able to talk about a start-up package in advance of your first campus visit. Do the research to be able to talk convincingly about future grant support, and about exactly what your research requires. You may negotiate the final details of the package after a job offer is made, but discussing your requirements will be part of the campus visit, as you learn what equipment and space are already available. It's after an offer has been made that you might negotiate the final details, such as making a good case that a piece of equipment that might conceivably be shared can't meet the research needs of both you and the person you'd share it with.

Mary: Unfortunately, as institutions struggle with flat budgets or budget cuts this year, the current negotiating climate isn't nearly as favorable as it was even a few years ago. In almost every situation, however, there's a chance that you may be able to get at least a little something more, simply by asking for it. So, let's take it from the top. When you're offered a job, if you plan to negotiate, the first thing you need to do is to display your enthusiasm for the job offer. If all goes well and you end up accepting the position, you'll most likely be working with the person you negotiated with, and this big picture requires making sure that relationship starts out on a positive note.

Julie: Recently a new Ph.D. who has an offer and is expecting another told me that he asked two faculty members about negotiating. One professor admitted that upon accepting her position she had not negotiated a single thing because she figured she would be offered whatever was given others with comparable experience and education. The other professor urged the candidate to negotiate for everything he could want. That professor hadn't negotiated enough and felt others had gotten more. So it's important to become as informed as possible about the job and the institution so that you will have a sense of what you'll need to do the job well.

Mary: The safest way to begin this process is by asking whether the employer has any flexibility to negotiate. Let the employer know that salary is a consideration for you and see what the response is before you state a definite number. You might say: "The salary

is a little less than I was expecting. Do you have any flexibility?" Or, "This is a fine opportunity. The salary does perhaps seem a little low for comparable jobs here (if you've been able to get this information). Can we discuss this?" Then listen very carefully to the response. It will give you a good gauge of how much the employer can, or will, negotiate.

Julie: As we already said, with the economy in a downturn, institutions will have less financial flexibility. It's important to have a salary you're happy with -- particularly as all future raises will build on your starting salary. But if it proves impossible to boost your starting salary, keep in mind that it is not the only negotiable condition of employment.

Mary: There are many aspects of the job that can be negotiable, and several involve teaching. If you've been hired without completing your dissertation, you might want to try for a reduced courseload that first semester. If you are setting up a laboratory and training a technician, you also might want to aim for a reduced load. The teaching schedule may be something to negotiate. Perhaps you hope to never teach on Fridays or Mondays because your partner lives at a distance or because you hope to have a few consecutive days for research. Female candidates who are pregnant may also want to negotiate later starting dates to accommodate the birth of the baby.

A slightly different topic is that of summer teaching. As most faculty salaries are based on a nine-month academic year, you might want to anticipate some extra income by negotiating a summer course. If you can teach more than one section of the same course in your first year, you'll reduce your preparation work and have more time to settle in and get your research up to speed.

Julie: While we've talked briefly about setting up laboratories, Ph.D.'s in non-laboratory fields might also be able to bargain for computers and other equipment for their research, as well as release time to work on their scholarship and money to travel to libraries and research centers. Travel and registration fees for conferences may be part of the offer or may be something you need to negotiate.

Mary: Moving expenses may be part of the offer, but if they're not and you have a distance to move, this may be something to negotiate, along with relocation assistance.

Job-hunting assistance for a spouse or a partner is another factor to consider. You can see that there are many conditions of the job that are negotiable.

Julie: You become even more attractive to an institution when it learns that other institutions want to hire you. If you receive an offer from Institution B but Institution A is where you'd really prefer to go, letting A know that you have another offer and will have to make a decision soon can motivate it to move more quickly on its own decision. You don't need to say it in any kind of threatening way. As a former dean we know advises, simply let Institution A know that you have another offer and you wanted them to know that. Then leave it to Institution A to decide what to do. Chances are good that they'll speed up their hiring process.

Mary: Throughout this process, keep in mind that you will be working on a regular basis with the person you're negotiating with, so be thoughtful. Think about what you need. Avoid looking greedy. Present yourself as a colleague who is looking for what it takes to do the best job possible. Even if you don't have another offer, and are negotiating in a context where, realistically, there is little flexibility, an attempt to negotiate -- well-handled -- can get you off to a good start with your new job, reinforcing the employer's view of you as someone who is self-confident and savvy, as well as realistic and collegial. This puts you in a good position to begin the ongoing negotiation that is part of any job where you work with other people.

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