

Starting Career? Strategy Helps Land Good Pay

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Two years ago, Rob Kwong was growing anxious. Fresh out of undergraduate school with a business degree, he wasn't having much luck landing a job.

He knew what an appropriate salary was for people with his major, and he'd posted his résumé on various employment Web sites. But after three interviews and a couple of job offers that didn't come close to meeting his pay expectations, Mr. Kwong started getting nervous -- and desperate.

That's when a telecom company in Fairfax, Va., offered \$7,000 a year less than what Mr. Kwong, now 25 years old and working as an analyst, figured he could be making. Still, he took the bait right away.

"I took it because I just really needed a job," says Mr. Kwong.

Big mistake, say employment counselors who work with people just starting their careers. "As soon as you say yes, you've lost all negotiating power," says Randall Hansen, a marketing professor at Stetson University in DeLand, Fla. "Job seekers should almost never accept [an offer] on the spot."

You don't have to be a job-hunting veteran to wring more money out of a new employer. With a little preparation and the right questions at the job interview, even entry-level job seekers might squeeze more dollars out of their new boss. Here are some tips:

1. Know the going rate.

Most interviewers keep salary information close to their vests. So unless you have a spy on the inside, you aren't likely to know exactly what's on the table. But there are salary information Web sites where you can learn what the average pay is in your region. Try salary.com, payscale.com or salaryexpert.com.

2. Settle on a range, not a number.

If average pay for the job you're seeking is \$37,000, then set your sights on the \$35,000 to \$40,000 range. Don't box yourself into a lower salary or launch yourself out of an interview because you've asked for too much money, explains Dave Gordon, an Internship Director at Columbia College Chicago. Be realistic, he cautions: "If you inflate your range at the beginning you may lock yourself out of an opportunity."

3. Understand what they're buying.

Typically employers filling entry-level positions don't pay nearly as much attention to an applicant's skills as they do their qualities, says Jack Chapman, a career coach in Wilmette, Ill. So concentrate on being enthusiastic, eager and positive. If a potential new boss makes an offer, that means he or she likes you and wants you. It also means the boss may like you enough to negotiate to get you.

4. Don't make the first move.

Don't be first to bring up money. All serious interviews eventually get around to, "How much are you looking to make?" First you want to ask what the job pays. If that doesn't get an answer, give your preferred salary range.

5. Make your case.

"Try not to play hardball at this level," warns Mr. Gordon. But you don't have to be a pushover either. Once you've got a number, remain positive about the position. Ask, don't demand. No one wants to hear you need more money to take vacations in Cancun, but you might have a case for a higher salary if you have to move to a new city. Ask for a day or so to think it over. That gives both of you some breathing room, and the interviewer a chance to discuss your situation with others and, possibly, juice up the offer.

6. Offer options.

Some employers will just refuse to negotiate entry-level salaries. They may be flexible elsewhere, however -- benefits, vacation time, bonuses. All are worth bringing up, but don't have a whole laundry list. "You really need to pick your battles," says Dr. Hansen. If it's a job you really want and a good launching point for your career, don't be greedy.