

INTERVIEWS:

HOW TO ANSWER THE SALARY QUESTION

Takeaway Points

- The first party to state a salary range loses negotiation leverage, so it's wise to hold out until you're comfortable with the number you're offering.
- Be sure to prepare your answer by researching comparable salaries for those in positions similar to the one you're applying for, in the same location.
- Each position and situation is different so rely on your own judgment when deciding to answer or not.

By: Team Pongo

We all want to be honest and forthcoming in an interview. So when the question “What are you making now?” or “What kind of salary are you looking for?” comes up, it's tempting to just cite a number or a range and move forward – but try to resist the urge. If you reveal your salary expectations too early in the process, you lose two big opportunities:

1. The opportunity to make them love you before they know your price.
2. The opportunity to demonstrate your ability to handle an uncomfortable situation confidently and respectfully, without caving (a prized skill in most jobs).

To Answer or Not to Answer?

If you've done your homework, you should have a fairly good idea of the typical salary range for someone with your level of experience in the kind of position you're seeking within your market.

If you feel it's in your best interests to avoid the question, your reply should respectfully and professionally communicate three general principles:

- Your interest in the opportunity;
- Your expectation to be paid in line with market conditions and your experience level; and
- Your willingness to discuss salary history once you and the company decide you're the right person for the position.

If you're applying for a sales-oriented job where negotiation skills are critical to success, then by all means demonstrate your negotiating finesse and your ability to diplomatically sidestep the question. If you're applying for an administrative assistant's position in a huge company with a rigid salary structure, there's not much point in negotiating.

However, when you should answer depends on when in the hiring process the question comes up. Some companies demand a salary history with your application. Others will ask the salary question in an initial phone screen. The trouble is, at these early stages, they're most likely trying to screen you out, not in. Even at these early stages of the selection process, you have a choice whether or not to provide a compensation number.

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Did you know?

Pongo’s Interview Tips video program provides 12 how-to videos for every stage of the interview, plus printable checklists and interview guides.

What to Say, When You Say It

Don’t get caught off guard. Craft a response that feels comfortable for you and practice saying it. Think that sounds silly? Remember that being unprepared for this question can literally cost you thousands of dollars.

Use the following examples as a guide. Modify them to suit your style and personality, then practice until you can say any one of them with a smile!

1. “I was paid well in my last position. The number was in line with market conditions and the results I delivered. I’m very interested in this opportunity, and I’ll be happy to discuss my compensation history when we determine that I’m the right person for the job.”
2. “I realize you need to be sure my expectations are consistent with the salary range for this position. To ensure that we’re aligned, please tell me your range for this position.”
3. “I’m reluctant to focus on just one factor at this stage when so many other factors affect what makes an opportunity a great fit: the job itself, the company, the people I’d be working with, and growth potential. So far, I’m impressed with what I have learned about this opportunity and I remain very interested in learning more!”
4. “The actual figure will depend heavily on a number of important variables, but my experience and research tell me that fair compensation for this position falls in the range of _____.” [**Note:** Name a wide salary range toward the higher end of your expectations. For example, “\$45,000 to \$65,000 per year” or “\$14 to \$19 per hour.”]

Remember, your negotiating leverage goes way up once they’re convinced they can’t live without you. Just keep in mind that even if you don’t give a range immediately, chances are the employer won’t toss your resume in the wastebasket, says interviewing expert Michael Neece. “Your resume has already proven that they want to talk to you. I’ve never known of a situation in which a prospective employee was eliminated from consideration after an interview because he or she refused to answer the question.”

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