

By KRIS FRIESWICK

“It’s a funny thing about life; if you refuse to accept anything but the best, you very often get it.”

—W. SOMERSET MAUGHAM



Getting Your Due

Times might be tough, but you still deserve a solid salary. Here’s how to haggle.

Asking for a raise at your current job or trying to negotiate a bigger salary on a job offer might seem foolhardy in this abysmal market. But experts say that the lousy economy is no reason to stop asking for what you think you deserve – you just have to get creative about it.

Before attempting negotiations, get into the head of your boss or potential boss, says Mark Gordon, founder and director of Vanguard Partners, a negotiation consultancy, and senior adviser to the Harvard Negotiation Project at Harvard Law School. Are there a billion people out there who could replace you tomorrow? What’s the salary range for the position? Is a salary freeze in effect? Do your research – ask co-workers who do similar jobs what they make, troll your social networks, use the Web to find out as much about the company’s position as possible. Find out if what you think you deserve is stretching things in today’s ugly economy.

Never one to settle for ramen noodles and an anemic paycheck, Lola’s putting these negotiating tips to good use.

Second, determine your BATNA, says Gordon. This acronym stands for Best Alternative to a Negotiated Agreement. “If you walk away from the table, the BATNA is what you are walking away to,” says Gordon. In other words, if you can’t come to acceptable terms with your current or future employer, what is your alternative? Do you stay at your current job at the current salary? Turn the offer down and look for another job? The answer depends on your marketability, personal preferences, and tolerance for risk. If you have a unique, highly marketable skill and can afford to be unemployed for a while, and the salary you’re making or being offered is ludicrous, walking away from a job or declining an offer might be a reasonable BATNA. If you’re one check away from bankruptcy, staying put might be your BATNA. And remember: It’s easier to find a job when you have one.

Once you know your BATNA and your employer’s BATNA, you know how much relative power you have in the negotiations. Unfortunately, right now, employers have some serious BATNA. There are plenty of people looking for work, and most companies are trimming costs. However, compensation includes more than money, says Gordon. “Look for creative options,” he says. “In general, the best solutions are the ones that are low cost to the employer and high value for you.” Such options include more vacation time, instant vesting in a 401(k) plan, deferred compensation arrangements, job flexibility, and telecommuting. And don’t take a “no” to your position as a “no” to negotiations. Indicate a desire to work collaboratively on a solution rather than making it a war game with winners and losers.

Finally, don’t fail to negotiate because you think it will send the wrong message. “It does you a disservice,” says Gordon. “It’s a false fear that merely discussing other benefits will disqualify you from the job. If you do it with a sense of inquiry and humility, it could increase your stature in the eyes of the employer. Just because your BATNA is bad doesn’t mean you shouldn’t ask for what you deserve.”

Kris Frieswick, author of The Cheap Bastard’s Guide to Boston, writes frequently about money.