

Dealing with Questions About Salary History

by Roger Manning

QUESTION: Is it appropriate for me to discuss my salary and salary history with a potential new employer? How do I protect myself if I know that I am underpaid or grossly undervalued as compared to the new position for which I am interviewing?

ANSWER: Your best strategy is to keep them focused on what is an appropriate amount for you to make given your experience, skills and credentials today. This requires some homework, since you have to translate those intangibles into a dollar figure or a range of figures. You should have a very good indication from your research as to what others are being paid in similar positions. In addition, be prepared to explain why you are seeking a significant jump in your salary and be ready to help the employer justify paying you this increased amount -- those people do not want to feel as if they are overpaying you. Many employers gauge an employee's prior level of success or value to their employer by the level of salary. If you are making \$40,000 per year in the same position that most of your competitors are paying \$75,000 per year, there will be some concern that you are not at the same level of accomplishment. If you were, you would be paid appropriately. The same is true if you are trying to advance from one level of responsibility to a higher level of responsibility. If this is true in your case, be prepared to spell it out why you bring this value to the new employer.

You may wish to use objective measurable accomplishments that you have achieved at your current/prior employer as a way to justify the value that you bring to the table. Present the numbers. You have heard before that numbers don't lie. If you put the numbers on the board for your current employer, show your potential employer that you can produce the results that are needed to deserve the salary that you require.

You might also have to explain why prior employers did not bring your salary within competitive ranges due to poor financial status of the company, salary freezes, etc. Be sure to "paint the picture" that money is important but it has not been as important as the job, the career opportunity, the challenge and the relationship that you have had with your past employers.

You could try saying, "I chose to work at my last job for less than my market value for very specific reasons (e.g., gain experience, restart career, gain cutting edge technology knowledge, etc). Now that I have benefited from those experiences, as I look for a new employer, I want to make sure that I am being paid fairly for my talents".

As you follow this advice, do not forget that you have to be prepared to discuss your current salary, even though it ought to be irrelevant. If that information matters to the employer, they will either insist on talking about it, or they will learn it another way. Most if not all employers will ask you to fill out an employment application. You will be required to fill in the salary history for each employer including your starting salary and ending salary. Be very accurate with your answers. You should never embellish or grossly over-estimate your responses. Remember that any information placed upon an employment application will be verified in a job reference check. Any misleading information will be used to disqualify you for employment or worse yet, terminate you after employment.

Try to cover the issue quickly and steer the conversation back to its rightful place -
- what you ought to make, given the value of your talents in the market. Money is important, but that issue usually takes care of itself if you have presented yourself as an outstanding candidate for the opportunity at hand.