

## When Employers Demand a Salary Range From Applicants but Refuse to Suggest One?

*Why do hiring managers play such coy games around salary?*

By Alison Green

10/22/20

Of all the weird and frankly nonsensical practices that companies use in hiring, probably none are as bizarre as our conventions around negotiating salary. Given that paying employees money in exchange for their labor is what hiring is all about, you'd think that salary would be discussed early, clearly, and directly in any hiring process. But for some reason that approach is more the exception than the rule. Instead, many employers play coy games around salary, hiding what they plan to pay and even taking offense when candidates bring up money.

On the job seeker side of the equation, candidates tend to be very interested in what a gig pays—which makes sense, since most people aren't seeking jobs out of the kindness of their hearts or a desire to be industrious. But employers frequently refuse to discuss a position's salary range until late in a hiring process, or sometimes not even until they make a formal job offer. Meanwhile, though, they're often happy to push—or even require—candidates to show *their* hand by naming a number first. This account from someone who wrote to me is a pretty typical experience:

I was contacted out the blue by a recruiter on LinkedIn about a job opening they hoped I'd interview for. I responded by asking for more information, including the salary range. The recruiter gave me the typical line about salary depending on experience and then turned it on around on me and asked how much I was looking for. I'm not even job seeking right now! Giving me the run-around on salary, after they approached me, is aggravating. I'm sure they have a range in mind. Why not just tell me what it is so we each know if we'd be wasting our time or not?

Candidates frequently worry they'll either name a number that's lower than the employer would have been willing to pay, or overshoot and get removed from the running—even if they would have been willing to accept a lower number:

After applying for a position, the hiring manager ... emailed me saying that she wanted to interview me and asked me about my salary expectations. I researched average salaries for the position (\$53k) and got back to her expressing my interest in the position, suggesting a few times for the phone screen, and with my salary expectations (\$50k-60k). She replied, saying "Unfortunately the budgeted salary for this position is \$40k. Thanks for your interest and best of luck in your search."

The truth is, I'm relatively new in this field and would be okay making \$40k. In fact, I anticipated negotiating the salary with my range as a starting point. Now I'm unsure of my next steps. *Should we part ways, should I say I'm still interested, should I do something else?*

*And, more importantly, how can I respond when hiring managers ask me for my salary range in the future? What's the point of this question when hiring managers have a range in mind? It feels like a game.*

Job seekers who just ask directly what range the position will pay risk running into interviewers who bristle at the idea that money might be a key factor in someone's interest level:

I had a phone interview for a job I applied to at a company I was really interested in. At the end of the call, I was told that the interview process would be the HR screening, a call with the hiring manager, a full day of interviews in the office, potentially a second day, and maybe a project or test. That's a lot of steps for a job interview, in my opinion, so I told the HR rep, "Because this is a lengthy interview process, I'm wondering if you could tell me the salary range for the position. I'm very interested in continuing with the interview process and I'd love to work for X company, but I don't want to get to the end of the process and find that your salary range isn't what I'm looking for, and I'm sure you don't want to deal with that either. That would be disappointing for both of us."

The HR person got really cold and awkward and said she couldn't tell me that information. ... I received an email later that afternoon that said because I was so interested in salary and not the company or the job, they weren't continuing with my candidacy.

In fact, stories abound about employers seeming outright offended that candidates work for money. And while conventions about this are slowly beginning to change, there are still plenty of recruiters, human resources reps, and hiring managers who think that candidates who bring up salary early on are signaling that they're not sufficiently motivated by the work itself.

This is, of course, absurd and means that both sides risk investing significant time in interviewing before discovering that they're too far apart on salary to make it work:

I went through a phone interview, took a full day off for an in-person interview, which was canceled at the last minute, and then took a morning off for the rescheduled interview, after which I was offered the job and told the HR department would be calling me to discuss terms. ... HR called, and ... their range for the position was really low. It was low enough that I don't know of anybody in our industry (and I know folks who are working call centers!) who would be tempted to accept. I felt like they had wasted a day and a half of my time and PTO when any reasonable hiring manager and HR department would have known that what they were offering was unlikely to be commensurate with specialized experience (and this was a large company with a formal HR department, not a mom-and-pop who maybe didn't know better).

*Why do employers play games around salary? Why not just list a salary range upfront in the job posting? Some employers will tell you that if they list a range, every candidate will expect to be*

paid at the very top of it, regardless of their qualifications, and they don't want to set people up to be dissatisfied with their offer. It's also true that there is sometimes extensive salary flexibility when a company is hiring for a role that could potentially be filled by people with vastly different experience levels, so citing a range can be misleading.

But good employers are able to explain how their salary scale works and where the candidate fits into it. The truth is, to some degree, these practices are about hiring people for the lowest amount the employer can get away with. And while you might think, sure, that's just business, data shows these practices disproportionately harm women and people of color, who are less likely to negotiate and likely to ask for less when they do.

As a job candidate, one way to fight back is to arm yourself with as much information as possible and to help others do the same. Talking to recruiters, professional organizations in your industry, and others in your field about salary ranges can help flesh out your understanding of reasonable ranges for the work you do. And if you can push past the hesitance so many of us have about talking openly about money, sharing information with others in your field can go a long way toward decreasing the monopoly employers have on salary data. Ultimately, as long as employers treat salary info like a closely guarded trade secret, candidates will be at a disadvantage.

*Alison Green is the creator of the work advice site [Ask a Manager](#) and the author of [Ask a Manager: Clueless Colleagues, Lunch-Stealing Bosses, and the Rest of Your Life at Work](#).*