

Hallelujah! You've Been Offered a Job. Now What?

by Joseph Du Pont

Good news! After exploring different fields; leaning on the expertise of mentors, family, and friends; taking advantage of your career center's programs and services; and interviewing for several positions, your student has a job offer in hand. So the long, stressful search is over, right? For some students the answer is yes. For most, though, landing a job is only the first step in another critical process: negotiating the terms and conditions of employment.

Boston College Associate Vice President for Student Affairs/Career Services Joseph Du Pont offers 10 tips and insights he regularly gives students:

- 1. Be poised and professional.** This may seem like a no brainer, but if a supervisor is going to make a case that you deserve more benefits, she'll want to know you would be someone good to work with. You can ask for a lot of things, but you never want to seem petty, condescending, or ungrateful. It's always good to get a sense of how you might be perceived by employers. Get the perspective of others. Practice your negotiating skills with friends and career center staff, who can help you articulate your needs in a positive way.
- 2. Evidence is your ally: be prepared.** Your success at negotiating a job offer depends less on what goes on at the negotiating table than what you know before you enter the room, experts say. You should have a solid understanding of the standard salary (or salary range), benefits, and perks offered by similar companies in similar industries. You should also be aware of the top challenges the company is facing—and how you can help solve some of its problems.
- 3. Aim for the top—within reason.** The old saying “If you don't ask, you don't get” holds true in salary negotiations. At the same time, you need to know what is reasonable to ask for—or you could make your potential employer quickly reconsider how they think about you. Do your research so you can focus on objective criteria when you negotiate. That way, a supervisor understands why you are asking for certain things. You need to know this basic information so your potential employer understands you are making reasonable requests.
- 4. Understand an employer's limitations.** The company may think your requests are reasonable and worthwhile, but still may not be able to accommodate you. Employers have real limitations too. If, for example, they have a large recruiting class, they may not want to provide you with benefits others don't receive. Knowing why an employer can't meet your request gives you more context and helps you make informed decisions.
- 5. Negotiate short term while thinking long term.** Understanding yourself, how you fit in the company culture, how much you can learn from your supervisor, and whether the job can position you for future success are equally as important as money at the outset of your career. As you research the field you are about to enter, you should be thinking about how this position is going to prepare you for short-term and long-term success.

6. Consider the entire compensation package, not just salary. The most common mistake students make is accepting a job offer based solely on compensation without considering significant factors such as relocation expenses, merit bonuses, stock options, health insurance, retirement plans, flex time, vacation, conference travel, professional development expenses, the length of your commute, and a company's policies on telecommuting. Know what is important to you.

7. Prioritize. In a negotiation, almost no one gets everything they want. Think carefully about what is a "must have" and what is a "nice to have" before you get to the negotiating table. It's essential that you be prepared to compromise, so focus on those things that are critical to you.

8. Be prepared to walk away. It can be easy to get caught up in the excitement of receiving an offer, but this can color our judgment at times. Take a deep breath before accepting. Most employers will give you at least a few days to consider an offer. If yours doesn't feel right and the employer isn't willing or able to give you the types of compensation you really think you need, you may have to decline. Other opportunities will follow.

9. Make sure you have plans B, C, and D. An unsigned offer can fall apart at the last minute if you can't agree on the essential terms and conditions of your employment. Don't stop pursuing other opportunities—or, worse, withdraw job applications—until the offer is final. Chances are good that things will work out. But you should be prepared if they don't.

10. Reflect on the outcome. Today's students will have more jobs in their lifetimes than any previous generation so it is critical to hone one's negotiation skills for long-term career success. Regardless of the outcome, it is important to reflect on the process, what worked well, and how you can improve for next time. Negotiating is a learned, coachable behavior and a lifelong skill. We all get better with practice.

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