

Negotiating a non-academic job offer

An EMBL Fellows' Career Service Handout



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Academia does not usually prepare you for evaluating and negotiating a job offer; however, this is a skill you will need to cultivate and become comfortable with. If you are preparing for a job interview, you likely have a list of things causing you anxiety, one of which may be how to answer the question ‘What are your salary expectations?’. It is not uncommon for hiring managers to ask candidates for their salary expectations, as well as their availability to start working, early in the hiring process. If you are not prepared, you may end up blurting out a random figure that does not reflect what is fair for someone with your skills and experience, or a start date that does not align your preferred timeline.

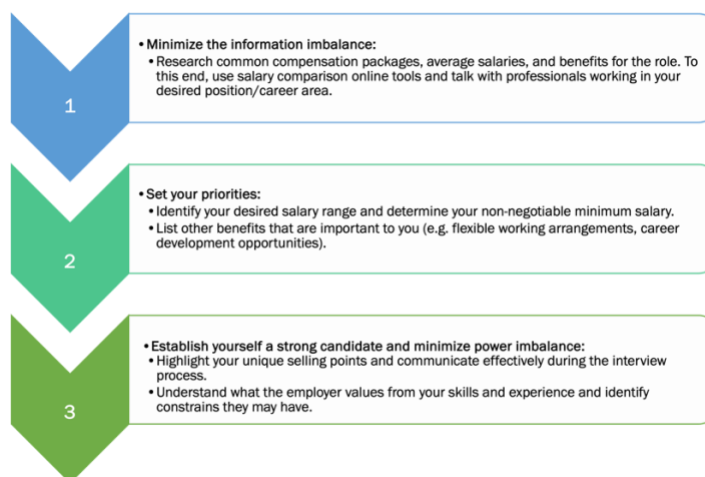
To avoid this, research standards for your desired position/career area and use salary comparison online tools to calculate a fair salary expectation. When negotiating, frame your salary expectations by citing your research or relevant benchmarks. Do not wait until the job interview, think in advance about what you want from your next position, what your value is, and learn how to tactfully approach the negotiation process.

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General principles for negotiating a job offer

Negotiating is an expected part of the job interview process, and most employers will not pull a job offer simply because you ask for higher compensation, a flexible start date, or other benefits. As long as you communicate professionally and your requests are reasonable, there is little risk in negotiating. However, approaching job offer negotiations can be difficult, as employers often starts the process with more information than applicants, and multiple candidates may still be under consideration for the role. To build an effective negotiation strategy, we advise you to:



Setting your salary expectations

When setting your salary expectations, your aim is to narrow down a range that is appropriate according to your skills, experience, role, and geographic location. If you are applying for jobs in high demand or that require a unique skill set, you will be in a position to ask for higher compensation. On the contrary, you might have to set your salary range lower if applying for roles that usually attract a lot of candidates with more generalist skills.

While you want to aim high, you do not want to be rejected from the hiring process for being outside of the company's salary range, particularly if it is a job appealing to you. To be on the safe side, set up your salary expectations based on data and not personal needs or anecdotal evidence. While salary is not an easy topic, there are a few things you can do to prepare in advance and get compensated appropriately.

Negotiation is more than the salary

A job offer includes more than just the base salary, it often comprises other benefits that can be attractive to you and nice to have. Some of these benefits might be fixed or simply unavailable for the role or company you are interviewing for. Understanding the overall compensation package is essential, as it can significantly impact your long-term job satisfaction and work-life balance. Regardless of whether you decide to negotiate beyond the salary base, consider the following components as part of the overall package when assessing or comparing offers. We have categorised the list into benefits that are frequently negotiable and those that are typically fixed in the employment conditions.

May be negotiable (depending on role and company policies):

- Starting salary
- Annual bonus
- Stock options (for established companies) or equity (in a start-up)
- Job title
- Relocation package
- Starting date
- Mobile phone and/or laptop
- Company car
- Flexible working arrangements
- Remote work
- Part-time work
- Professional memberships
- External professional development opportunities (e.g. language courses)
- Timing for the first performance review (potential salary increase)
- Deadline to decide on the offer

Normally fixed part of employment conditions (occasionally negotiable):

- Vacations days per year (though some companies allow you to 'buy' extra vacation days)
- Company pension schemes
- On-site gym/sport facilities
- Subsidised public transportation costs
- Canteen offering free or subsidised meals
- Access to (subsidised) day care
- Private health insurance
- Sick days per year
- Parental leave and child sick leave days
- Internal professional development opportunities

What else would be nice for you to have? _____

Do your research

The first step in salary negotiation is to determine the typical salary ranges for the roles you aim to apply for in your desired location. While online salary comparison tools can provide a starting point, the figures listed on websites may be outdated or reflect professionals with many years of experience in specific or related roles. Therefore, the most valuable information often comes from professionals currently working in the same role or career area. We strongly encourage you to combine online research with such conversations to gain realistic and up-to-date insights, including:

- [Glassdoor.com](https://www.glassdoor.com): This website allows you to research salaries based on job titles and location. You can filter results by years of experience and industry sector. Additionally, it provides salary ranges for various companies in your selected location, along with employee reviews and insights into company culture.
- [kununu](https://www.kununu.com): Originally created for job seekers in Germany, it has now expanded to other countries, including Austria or Switzerland. The platform helps users research potential employers and gain

insights into company culture before applying or accepting a job offer. It can also assist in salary negotiations by providing context on what other employees are earning in similar roles.

- [Biotech salary survey results 2022 from r/biotech](#) (North America-focussed).
- [Informational interviews](#): Engaging with professionals working in the type of roles and/or company/organisations you are interested in is the most efficient way to set your salary expectations. Keep in mind that not everyone is honest when discussing this topic, so, whenever possible, try to complement their input with additional sources of information. Below are a few examples of how you can explore politely this topic during an informational interview:
 - *I understand that HR often inquires about salary expectations. Based on my research, the typical salary range for this position appears to be XXX. Could you offer any advice on what a reasonable starting salary would be for someone with my skills and experience?*
 - *Could you please provide guidance on what a typical starting salary would be for this type of role?*
 - *In your opinion, what should the salary range be for a position like this?*

In some cases, particularly big companies, there may be collective agreements or works council agreements that establish fixed salary ranges, allowing for limited room for negotiation. For instance, some German biotech companies base their salary scales on the [tariffs set by IGBCE](#) - the mining, chemistry and energy trade union (Industriegewerkschaft Bergbau, Chemie, Energie (IGBCE)).

Regarding additional benefits, each company offers different perks and has different ideas about what they are willing to negotiate. Reaching out to former or current employees before the interview process can provide valuable insights. If you decide to pursue this, you might consider asking:

- *Can you describe the typical compensation package for these roles, including the salary range and other benefits?*
- *Is there any benefit you wish you had negotiated for but didn't?*
- *Are there specific benefits at your company that you value highly?*

Set your value

After conducting your research and estimating the typical salaries and benefits offered to professionals with your skills and experience in a specific sector and location, you should set two key values:

- 1) The minimum salary you would be comfortable accepting, assuming a standard benefits package.
- 2) Your target salary, also based on a typical benefits package.

Keep in mind that salary negotiations typically focus on your total cash target (the annual gross salary, excluding benefits). Several online calculators can help with this, such as [ListenToTaxman](#) for the UK, [Salaire brut en net](#) for France, [Nettolohn](#) for Germany, [InfoJobs](#) for Spain, [coverflex](#) for Italy.

As mentioned earlier, other factors might justify accepting a lower salary, so be sure to identify any additional benefits that could compensate for this, whether due to their monetary value or alignment with your lifestyle goals.

The negotiation strategy

When to start negotiating

Negotiating a job offer may push you out of your comfort zone, but this discomfort can pay off significantly. Salary expectations can come up early in the hiring process, such as during the first interview with HR, at the end of the final interview round, or once you have received an offer. In any case, avoid initiating the conversation yourself, let the employer bring it up first. Early in the process, salary discussions are usually meant to understand whether your expectations align with the company's budget for the role. The formal negotiation typically happens later, which plays in your favour because:

- By the time you are a final candidate, the hiring manager may be more willing to make concessions than they would earlier in the process.
- Throughout the interviews, you will likely gain more accurate information about potential areas for negotiation, the hiring manager's priorities, and the value of other company benefits, allowing you to be more strategic in your approach.

Be sure to listen carefully during the interview process and ask open-ended questions to understand the working culture, challenges, and priorities for the team and position. Gaining this insight will help minimise the information and power imbalance during negotiations.

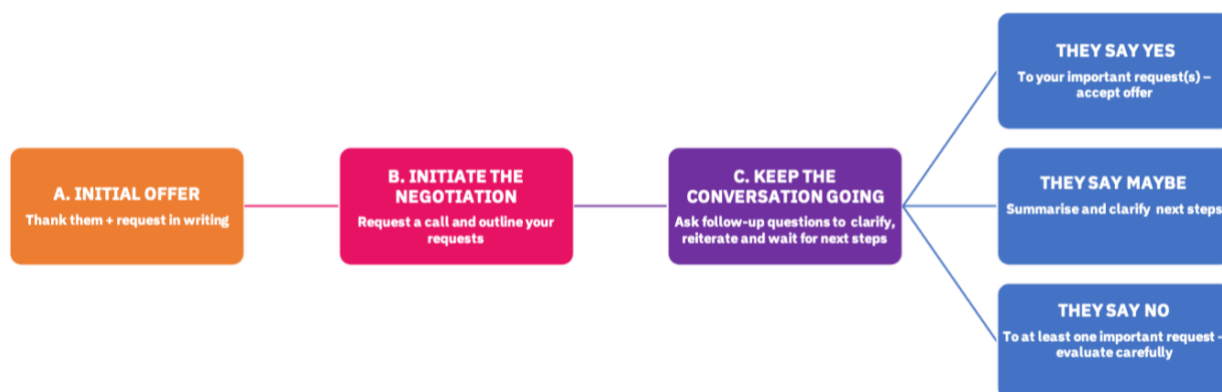
- **If asked to provide your salary expectations early in the hiring process**, focus on your qualifications, and express your flexibility and openness to negotiate. Avoid committing to a specific figure. Instead, use follow-up questions to redirect the conversation towards gaining more insight into the role and overall package compensation:
 - *I am very interested in this role because [explain your motivation]. Regarding salary, I would expect a compensation package that fairly reflects my X years of experience and skills in X, Y, and Z. Since salary is just one component, could you provide information about the other benefits offered before I provide an initial figure?*
 - *I recognize that salary is only one part of the overall package, so I would need more details about the benefits before providing a final figure. For example, I am particularly excited about applying my experience running cryo-EM workshops for customer training. However, I am concerned that frequent travel may impact my living expenses. Could you clarify how often an application scientist typically travels for this role and whether there is additional compensation, such as a daily allowance?*
 - *Before we discuss the package, I would love to learn more about the role, particularly regarding the responsibilities and team. The job description mentions supervisory responsibilities - could you provide more details about this, such as team size, backgrounds, and specific roles?*
- **If pressed to be more specific**, mention a specific figure. Avoid giving a range; doing so often leads the negotiator to focus on the lower end. Instead, ask for an amount near the top of the range identified in your research, keeping in mind that they will likely attempt to negotiate you down.
 - *I would need more information about the typical compensation package for these roles before providing a final figure. I am flexible and open to negotiations; however, based on my research, I would expect a salary in the range of €75,000.*
 - *Based on my research for roles requiring these skills and responsibilities, salaries of around €75,000 seem typical.*

Two exceptions to the guideline of delaying salary negotiations are:

- **If the job advertisement asks for salary expectations to be included in the cover letter or if the application is submitted via an online platform that requires you to provide a salary expectation:**
 - **Cover letter:** state that you expect a salary in the range of €XXX, while mentioning that the final figure would depend on the overall compensation package.
 - **Online platform:** you will likely only be able to insert a numerical figure, so in this case, provide a general figure near the top of the range identified in your research.
 - In both cases, if you are among the top candidates but your salary request is too high, they may still reach out to gauge your interest, even if they cannot meet your expectations.
- **For requests that are important to you but may be difficult to accommodate (e.g. you can only work remotely or if you are applying for a full-time role but prefer part-time hours):**
 - Declaring a major demand after the final interview may frustrate your negotiation partners. Employers prefer candidates to discuss major requests early in the process—either through a call with HR (potentially before applying), by directly mentioning this in the cover letter, or during the initial screening interview.
 - If you choose to contact them before applying, write a concise email emphasising your fit for the role, and ask whether your request would be considered compatible with the position.

Note: If your salary expectations change during the recruitment process, it is important to communicate this promptly. For example, if you initially indicate a salary expectation of €75,000 but later reassess your value and decide that €85,000 is more appropriate, you should address this before getting an offer. If you wait until they offer you the salary that you said you expected, and then you ask for more, this appears inconsistent. Instead, address this proactively in advance by sending a short email to your HR contact. In the email include a justification such as industry benchmarks or a deeper understanding of the role's responsibilities. Always express a willingness to discuss and negotiate, emphasising your commitment to finding a mutually beneficial arrangement.

Responding to the initial offer



A. INITIAL OFFER

When you receive an initial offer, always request it in writing, typically, the company will contact you via phone or email to extend the offer, but never accept it during the phone call. When answering them, express your enthusiasm for the position and thank them for their time. If the written offer is not provided, request it before you begin the negotiation process, making it clear that you are very interested in the role but would like to review the offer in detail.

- *Thank you for the good news. I am very excited about the prospect to join your team. Would it be possible to summarise everything you described in an email or offer letter? I would like to take a look at all details in case I have any questions.*
- *I appreciate the opportunity to discuss the position and my qualifications with you and the team last week. It was great meeting everyone, and I sincerely thank you for the job offer. Would it be possible to summarise everything in an email or offer letter?*
- *I am very excited about this opportunity and would like to confirm the next steps. Will you be sending an offer letter or employment contract for me to review? Please let me know any additional information from my side. Thank you again for the offer, and I look forward to hearing from you.*

Once you receive the written offer, if it has not been mentioned, ask for the deadline by which they would like your answer and the appropriate contact person for any questions you may have.

B. INITIATE THE NEGOTIATION

If you want to negotiate, request a call to outline your requests, as phone or video calls are typically more effective for negotiations than email. Reach out to your contact person to arrange a conversation about the job offer, and briefly outline the points you want to discuss to avoid surprising them with additional requests during the call. If possible, include justifications for your requests. The most convincing reasons will be based on a solid understanding of your value or market worth, such as the information you have gathered about typical offers for similar roles. Additionally, consider how an alternative package might benefit your future supervisor, team, or company; for example, a relocation package could enable you to start sooner. A UCSF survey of US PhDs and postdocs transitioning to industry found that negotiations typically resulted in a 3-7% increase in salary (see minute 12 in this [video](#)). Therefore, if you plan to ask for more, this range can serve as a useful guideline for setting your negotiation target.

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- *Thank you very much for sending the offer letter and for the brief explanation included in the email. Before accepting it, I would like to discuss the salary and clarify some of the benefits outlined in the letter. As mentioned in the interview, I have over five years of experience in [recap of what makes you a good fit]. Based on my skills and experience, my research suggests that a salary closer to €XXX is more typical for this role. I am confident we can reach an agreement, and I would appreciate the opportunity to schedule a phone or video call this week to further discuss the compensation package for the position. Thank you for your time, and I look forward to hearing from you soon.*

When discussing the offer, start on a positive note by reiterating your interest in the role. Then, highlight the specific items from the offer letter that you would like to discuss. As you introduce and address each point, pay close attention to their reactions. If they seem uncertain about any aspect, ask clarifying questions to gain a better understanding.

- *I am very excited about the role and the opportunity to contribute to your team. However, there are two items from the offer letter that I would like to discuss. My first question is related to the salary. The offer specifies a base salary of €73,000. Based on my discussions with colleagues in similar positions and the information I have gathered from online platforms, I was expecting a salary more in the range of €80,000, given my background and experience.*
- *Firstly, thank you once again for the offer. I am very excited about the opportunity to join the team and am happy with the suggested salary and start date. However, there is one item that I would like to discuss. From our interview, I understood that there is a flexible working policy, but it is not mentioned in the offer letter. A commitment to this policy is important to me. My partner will also be seeking a new position in the region, and until they relocate, I would like to split my time between Cambridge and Edinburgh, working remotely three days a week. If this arrangement is not feasible, I would be happy to discuss alternative solutions.*

C. KEEP THE CONVERSATION GOING

It is important to wait and pay close attention to their reactions and to ask follow-up questions. If the person you are negotiating with responds negatively to the figure or benefit you propose, do not let that deter you. Always ask open-ended questions to facilitate a conversation and demonstrate your willingness to find a common ground.

- *It seems that my proposal took you by surprise. Can you tell me more?*
- *You sound surprised. Can you share what salary range the company had in mind for this role?*
- *Which benefits might offer some flexibility for negotiation?*
- *How can I help you move more in my direction?*
- *Thank you for the explanation. I understand the importance of maintaining an equitable pay structure across the team. Would there be flexibility regarding other aspects of the offer, such as relocation costs? This could help me agree to a lower base salary.*

After this initial exchange, you will be better positioned to assess any flexibility in the negotiation and determine whether you want to accept the position. At this stage, it is important to be clear about how much you want the position and what you are willing to compromise on.

D. FINALIZE THE NEGOTIATION:

- **If they say yes to your important requests**, express your appreciation for their flexibility. Request the final offer in writing, and time to give them the final answer.
 - *Thank you very much for your time today to further discuss the offer letter. I will review everything as soon as you send me the final offer, and I will get back to you within a day. Is there anything else you need from me at this stage?*
- **If they say maybe**, summarise the discussion and clarify the next steps.
 - *Thank you for the constructive conversation. My understanding is that flexibility on the salary will require some internal discussion, but that a later start date is likely possible. What would be the next steps to confirm these points?*

If there are any critical items that remain unclear, this part of the discussion can be tricky. Clearly communicate that these points are important to your decision, but try not to imply that you would decline the position if they cannot accommodate your requests. There is always a slight risk that the company may move on to the next candidate if they perceive that negotiations are unlikely to succeed.

- *Thank you again for considering my requests and confirming that a home office day would be possible. From our discussion, I understand that there may be limited flexibility regarding salary negotiation. However, since this is an important aspect for me, I appreciate your willingness to check for any potential flexibility. In the meantime, I will continue researching living costs in the area so that once I receive the final offer, I can make a decision within a day.*
- *Thank you for the flexibility. This is a crucial aspect for me in accepting the offer. When will you be able to confirm this?*

Then wait for the counter-offer.

- **If they say no**, walking away from an offer is never easy, but it is important to recognise when it is time to do so. Before rejecting the offer, reevaluate the initial terms and be careful not to decline a position you really want! If you decide to reject it, thank them for their time and wish them the best in finding a new candidate. You might also mention that if circumstances change in the future, you would be happy to reapply.
 - *Thank you so much for taking the time to interview. It was fantastic meeting the team. I am very sorry to hear this. While I genuinely appreciate the offer [I cannot accept the role for personal reasons] or [I must decline because the role does not meet my salary expectations]. Additionally, [if the company's policy allows remote work in the future, I would love the opportunity to reapply] or [if the salary for this position evolves in the future, I would love the opportunity to reapply]. Thank you once again for your time and the offer. I wish you all the best in your search for the right candidate.*

After the negotiation is finalized, you will receive an updated offer/contract to sign. Ensure that all agreed-upon terms are included and that you understand everything outlined in the document. If you have any questions, do not hesitate to reach out to your contact person for clarification. No matter whether you decide to accept or reject the offer, congratulations! You have successfully navigated the negotiation process.

Extra resources

- [How much salary can you expect in a biotech job?](#) - LABIOTECH.eu
- [Compensation negotiation skills for industry scientist positions](#) - Bill Lindstaedt (UCSF)
- [Compensation negotiation in an industry setting](#) - UCSF
- [Tooling Up: Salary Negotiation, Part 1](#) - Science Careers
- [Salary negotiation: Get what you seek](#) - Nature Careers

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