Ten tips for negotiating job offers


With a lot of hard work and a little luck, many scientists receive an exciting phone call this time of year—a job offer. Despite years of work preparing for this moment, many of us are clueless about how to proceed. Scientists are rarely trained in how to negotiate. Some are reluctant to ask for anything they are not offered; others believe they should play hardball. In reality, you should aim to strike a balance between asking for the necessary resources to ensure your success while avoiding coming across as selfish and alienating future colleagues. To make this crucial period less stressful and more lucrative, we have created a list of tips to help you negotiate a better job offer. The tips are focused around faculty jobs, but many also apply to negotiations in general. Use them wisely!
1. **Celebrate your success:** Before you do anything else, pause and appreciate how far you’ve come. It is a testament to your hard work and talent that you have made it through your training and secured a job offer. Relax and enjoy the moment.

2. **Learn about negotiations:** Spend a day or two reading books and online resources about how to negotiate. Trust us, it is worth the investment. The techniques you learn will come in handy countless times throughout the rest of your career.

3. **Know your worth:** Before you start any negotiation process, you need to learn your value on the job market. Salary levels vary widely depending on your field and expertise, as well as market conditions for the type of position you are considering. You might be able to find salaries online, especially if your offer is from a public institution. Otherwise, ask your mentors and recent hires about typical salaries and other benefits. The packages negotiated by recent hires—especially those at the same institution—are likely the best predictor of what you might obtain. In our experience, colleagues are often willing to get on the phone and share information about the offers they negotiated. Find out as much as you can. Knowledge is power during negotiations. If you fail to do your homework, you risk being shortchanged.

4. **Think broadly:** You can negotiate for much more than salary, so put in the time to research the full range of support you can ask for at the institution that made you the offer. Academic negotiations often include teaching releases, start-up research funds, support staff, lab and office space, access to special equipment, relocation costs, and travel funds. Knowledge of the norms and resources available at your prospective institution can help you keep your requests within reason. Research funding tends to be smaller in Canada than in the United States, for example, partially because junior faculty in Canada are more likely to receive grants earlier in their careers. Reach out to your professional network for advice about these norms.

5. **Create a budget:** Take the time to write out your request in a formal budget, just as you would do for a grant application. Writing a budget will not only make you appear more professional, but it will also help you to work out each budget item in detail. For example, in some programs, graduate students are covered by university funds, whereas in others they may cost faculty members upward of $45,000 per year; either way, you’ll want to budget accordingly. Be prepared to back up every request with a strong justification. You could say, for instance, that you will need funds to build your lab and support your students and staff, or that you will need a teaching release to set up your lab and write grants. Including justifications may make it easier for your advocates within the institution to argue on your behalf.
7. **Consider all your options:** If you are lucky enough to have a competing offer, you may be able to leverage it for a better outcome. Find out the deadline for every offer; some institutions will give you a week or two to decide, while others might give you months. If you are waiting to hear back from other institutions, you can try to slow down the process to see if any of those other options materialize in an offer. If you had an interview at one institution but it has not yet extended an offer, reach out to let the institution know that you have received an offer elsewhere and politely ask whether it will be able to give you a firm response in the near future.

8. **Take your time:** After slogging your way through the academic pipeline, you will probably be eager to close the deal and move on to the next phase of your career. But try not to rush the negotiation process. If you come across stumbling blocks, think of creative ways to get through them, and ask others for advice if you need it. Your prospective employer may be unable to budge on salary, for instance, but they may be able to compromise on other dimensions that have value for you (e.g., reducing your teaching requirements, giving you more start-up funds). Listen carefully to find out which elements of the offer are flexible and negotiate those dimensions. Be patient as your negotiation partner tries to resolve your requests; this can be a stressful process for them, and many of the elements of an offer require additional approval or resources from others.

9. **Get everything in writing:** Once you are hired and arrive on the job, people will have moved on and may even forget the terms of your agreement. Get everything in writing. This will give you peace of mind as you focus on the next stage of your career.

10. **Tie up loose ends:** Once you have signed your official offer, it is courteous to reach out to other institutions that have either made you an offer or given you an interview to let them remove your name from consideration. Then, send out thank-you notes to everyone who supported you throughout the process. They will be eager to help you celebrate your success and help guide you through the next stage of your career.

We hope these guidelines will come in handy when you secure your next job offer. Just remember to pay it forward and help your future students, trainees, and colleagues with their own negotiations.

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