

To Negotiate or Not to Negotiate: Should the Economy Dictate How Students Respond to Salary Offers?

Sylvia Camacho's daughter recently graduated from a university in New York City. According to Camacho—director of career services and cooperative education at Suffolk County Community College—her daughter did everything she needed to do in order to land a good job. She worked for 1½ years as an intern with two different public relations firms, was active in college activities, targeted her resume, practiced her interview skills, researched employers, and networked.

She was averaging about three interviews in the city every week, but became frustrated because many of those interviews were not for actual jobs.

“Recruiters admitted to her that they had no job openings, but that they were impressed with her resume and wanted to bring her in to consider her for future opportunities,” Camacho explains.

During her six-month job search, Camacho's daughter targeted only public relations firms. She hoped to work with her intern placement, but it merged with another company. And she almost had a job when a recruiter confessed that he had planned to make her an offer following a college recruiting trip, but when he returned to his office, he received an e-mail from the company's CEO declaring that the company was entering a hiring freeze.

Two weeks ago, Camacho's daughter received an offer from a small boutique public relations firm. The salary offer was below the job market listing, but because she had not had any offers, she accepted.

“Personally I would have liked for her to have taken a few days to think about this offer and had hoped that she would have been able to negotiate at least the going rate for new public relations hires in New York City,” Camacho says. “But she is a practical person who wants to work in the city, and from her perspective, had nothing else to consider after more than six months of job hunting.”

The experience of Camacho's daughter illustrates the struggles of some college students. Should students negotiate salary offers in this slumping economy? By doing so, would they be putting off recruiters?

Both recruiters and career services practitioners sent responses to this question posted on [NACE's RecruitTalk listserv](#). Much like the advice she had for her daughter, Camacho thinks it's in the student's best interest to discuss salary flexibility.

“Given the cost of living in this area, I do encourage students to negotiate, but only if they truly have something to offer in terms of skills and experience,” Camacho points out. “Otherwise, I recommend that they consider building their skills and experience base.”

While some feel it's inappropriate to negotiate up in this economy, many professionals—from both the career services and the staffing side—don't feel it's unreasonable for students to ask.

For instance, James Wallace, director/professor of assessment and career services at Langston University, says he sees “nothing wrong with candidates negotiating salary with a potential employer as long as both parties are transparent. Further, they must negotiate in good faith to ensure fairness to and for all concerned.”

In the past few months, Jennifer Gillilan, senior corporate recruiter/campus programs for Manhattan Associates, has noticed fewer campus candidates attempting to negotiate their salaries than in previous years.

“As a general rule, I do not think attempting to negotiate is inappropriate, provided the student is polite, appreciative of the initial offer and opportunity, and has done his/her research on the ‘market rate’ for the position and is able to substantiate that,” Gillilan says. “It also helps if that candidate has made an exceptional impression on the interviewers throughout the recruiting process, and established him/herself as a ‘superstar’ candidate.”

However, Gillilan points out, the bottom line is that even if the negotiation approach is well-received and well-prepared, recruiters may not be able to negotiate when they have fewer positions available and when their hiring managers know that there are plenty of top candidates in the job market.

“But, when done properly,” she adds, “it never hurts to try.”

Steve Tiufekchiev, director of campus relations with SRA International, said that even in this type of job market, “inappropriate” is not the right way to describe attempts by students to negotiate salaries because they may be disconnected from marketplace realities.

“Let’s face it, they have lived in a ‘bubble’ for the last four or five years, and are just now getting a dose of reality,” Tiufekchiev says. “It will sink in when they look around and a lot of their peers are still chasing an offer...and they will consider themselves lucky.”

He says that recruiters sometimes have to take time to educate candidates about the realities of the marketplace, which can turn very quickly.

“Remember, much of what [students] are basing their info on comes from looking in the rearview mirror to last year’s salary data and peer offers, which are already outdated,” he points out. “That being said, companies are making offers, and the top candidates will always be in demand. And companies will continue to fight for the right talent, but we just have to do a lot less fighting as there is more top-tier talent available. This is the key point and why negotiating may not work.”

Tiufekchiev says the biggest mistake is still the oldest and most common: a serious lack of preparation on the part of highly educated candidates.

“When a former Wall Street intern who worked at a premier bank comes to my interview and cannot even tell me our stock price, or ask me what happened to the stock price, this is unforgivable in this market,” he says. “Candidates have had their fun for the last few years, now employers are back on top. It is just the natural cycle of the job market.”

Terry Erickson, coordinator of career services and cooperative education at the University of North Dakota, has a motto that applies to any economic cycle: Ask for what you want or take what you get.

“[Students should feel free to negotiate offers] if they feel they are worth it and have backed that up with research, solid GPAs, as well as related work and leadership experience,” Erickson says. “The employer is always free to say it can’t do that at this time, but at least it puts it on the table for negotiation and a possible tradeoff. If a student isn’t happy coming in the door with the salary he or she is offered, that student isn’t going to get any happier as time goes on.”

Kevin Stoller of HireEducation.org agrees that students should negotiate salary offers, noting that hiring managers want to give applicants as much as they are authorized to give.

“That does not necessarily mean that I can offer a higher salary, but maybe there are some ‘soft’ benefits that I can offer,” Stoller explains. “Keep in mind, the hiring manager wants them to accept the job maybe even more than the student wants to accept. The opening is there because the hiring manager needs help and they just went through a four- to six-week process or longer to find who they think is the right person. So I don’t want them to turn down the offer over a small amount of money or additional benefit.”

Stoller suggests that students open negotiations with a question—“What flexibility do you have to adjust the offer?”—and then wait for the hiring manager to completely answer it. This simple question, he notes, requires the manager to say something more than “yes” or “no.” It also phrases it in a way that doesn’t put the hiring manager at risk with his or her boss by having to ask for more.

“As a hiring manager, I always had something in my back pocket that I could offer a new hire,” Stoller notes. “Maybe it is relocation assistance, a signing bonus, extra vacation days, COBRA costs, cell phone allowance, or more. So bottom line, even though the economy is tough, it shows business maturity to engage in this conversation, as long as the students know they may not get anything more than the original offer.”

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