

That's Negotiable

You have survived and even thrived in your postgraduate experiential training and are now being selected for a new position. It is important that you find the right fit for your first permanent job, especially with the potential that it could extend well beyond 1–2 years. However, it may be tempting to keep “status quo,” accept what appears to be the best job offer or that perfect job, and forget one of the final steps before job acceptance – **negotiation**.

Always negotiate! My residency class recently had a professional development discussion with our residency program director (RPD) (timely for me to be writing this piece). Various types of job offer components are fair game for negotiation. If you don't ask for more of something, you will never get it. Although this seems more than straightforward, my RPD's advice was new to many ears.

First, understand *when* it is appropriate to negotiate – which is once you receive the formal job offer. *Receive* is a purposeful verb; if you accept the position right on the spot, there is less potential for negotiation. Therefore, our RPD told us that we should not accept a position immediately but should always take the time to think about it, even if it is our definition of a perfect job. Now, this is easier said than done. Of course, you think that you won't be one of those people caught in the moment. I predict that I will have to make a conscious effort to pause, ask when the employer needs a response by, and avoid being caught in the excitement of the moment. After all, we just got done with our postgraduate education, where we became entirely too comfortable with saying yes to many different “opportunities.”

Second, assuming you are successful in asking for time to consider an offer, it will likely be 10 times more challenging to say, “I want to accept your offer, but can we discuss a few items first?” It feels unnatural to request privileges from an employer who does not yet know us and our work ethic. After all, going through the match, no negotiation of salary or benefits was involved. My peers mirrored that this could be an unnatural conversation without practice. To prepare for this negotiation, have a paper trail of your starting package. An institution may extend an offer over e-mail or telephone. If it occurs by telephone or an e-mail that lacks a confirmation letter detailing the offer, make sure this step is forthcoming. It can be something as simple as, “Great, thank you so much for the offer – will you be sending me the details and next steps in an e-mail?”

Third, receiving – not signing – your formal letter is a great way to assess which components are negotiable. Start with the base salary and see if it is reasonable for a pharmacist with your training in your geographic area. My RPD advised us to set realistic expectations by knowing the market rate for our potential positions. The [Creative Group Salary Guide](#), [salary.com](#), and [payscale.com](#) provide information on starting salaries and cost-of-living adjustments for different geographic areas. I know my worth as a residency-trained clinical pharmacist, but this may not truly reflect how much my new boss has allocated toward my position in the larger realm of the institution. You'll also want to consider cost of living together with moving expenses, sign-on bonus, or both. I would love to end up near a large city – but moving to that area would subject me to higher moving expenses, taxes, and housing prices than in the cornfields of my current base in Indiana. Therefore, I would expect my salary for a similar position in these two geographic areas to be slightly different. Many cost-of-living calculators are available online to assist you in this assessment. Similarly, if you are willing to participate in a sign-on bonus, be cautious because these deals may require evaluating the fine print. Some sign-on bonuses come with requirements to stay for a certain period or risk having to pay back the bonus if you change institutions. This can affect job fluidity if you want or need to change institutions. You may not be able to foresee a family member becoming ill, necessitating you to relocate closer to home. Another requirement could be publishing a certain number

of papers within a year. If, for some reason, you take family medical leave of absence (FMLA), are you still responsible for these responsibilities, despite not working? These details should be determined so that you are not caught off-guard by the potential imbalance of employer expectations.

In addition, negotiation is possible and more likely for components other than the base salary. For instance, other benefits, like starting dates, research days, vacation days, health care plans, and loan repayment programs, may all be negotiable. Consider the advantages of receiving compensation that is nontaxable, especially given that we'll be jumping into new tax brackets with post-training positions. Maybe I can attend two conferences a year fully expensed, or obtain a \$10,000 research grant, or have an added 3 days per year allocated toward paid time off. I currently live outside my home state, so I would love to have that added flexibility with travel. However, what is important to me may not be as important to you. Therefore, communicate your values to your potential employer in hopes of designing a package that leads to the best fit for you. The goal is to have engaged and invested employees, thus increasing employee satisfaction and decreasing institution turnover.

Moreover, after you have accepted a job on terms that are mutually agreed on by you and your employer, you will still need to evaluate some of the details before your first day. Asking transition questions such as onboarding documentation, duration, and timing of orientation can also help you stay excited for your next career. This is another triple-check that you and your employer are on the same page of the start date as well as on the same page regarding the expectations for the first day you walk through that door.

Negotiating job offers is not yet something I am comfortable with, so I am always looking for ways to gain knowledge and perspective. It has been great to glean from my network of residents, mentors, and professional development new ways in which to shape my own arsenal of negotiation strategies. No job can truly be perfect, but with a little negotiation, you can help mold it to being as darn close to perfect as possible, which sounds like a good first job to me.

Have more questions on this hot topic? Please see the Q&A from October 2017 *Experts in Training* newsletter here: https://www.accp.com/docs/resfel/Horner_Answer_final.pdf.

About the author: Anne Thorndyke is a PGY1 pharmacy practice resident at Indiana University Health – AHC located in Indianapolis, Indiana. She is an avid state fair attender; in her free time, she enjoys volunteering in the community and developing her networking and negotiation capabilities.