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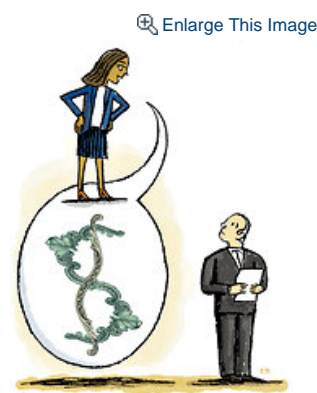
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# In Job Hunting, the Pas de Deux of Seeker and Offerer

By ALINA TUGEND  
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I HAVE a friend who, like many people, has been looking for a job for over a year. He's had dozens of interviews and been called back multiple times for positions that, in the end, he never received.



Robert Neubecker

This friend, who asked not to be named because he was still looking for a job, summed up the whole process this way: "I liken it to playing chess on a board I can't see against people I don't know."

A lot of other people who have been job hunting in the last few years feel the same way. You don't want to present yourself as over- or underqualified. You don't want to ask for too much or too little. But all too often, it can feel as if you're driving in a strange place without a GPS or even a road map.

The good news is that these job discussions are taking place. That's a change from the previous few years, when no one was hiring, or even looking. So the negotiations can be seen as a positive sign. But that doesn't necessarily make them any easier.

Take the matter of salary for starters. It is not uncommon for a candidate to be asked back for numerous interviews before the subject of money is even raised. Do you continue going to yet another round of interviews hoping that you'll not only get the job but also get the compensation you're hoping for?

Bill Humbert of [RecruiterGuy.com](#) said that "generally, what happens is that the person representing the company is going to ask how much you're making now."

"The way to handle that is to say, 'What I'm making now is not necessarily germane,'" Mr. Humbert said. "Every company does things differently. Let me ask what the range is for the company.' Generally, the person on the other end doesn't want to waste time and will tell you."

Mr. Humbert acknowledged that while such an answer might work with the human resources department, a recruiter hired by the company to fill the job is much more

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likely to push for an answer. And you'll have to give it.

My friend agreed. "I try to say I would expect a fair salary, and that many things go into job satisfaction, and then I try to get them to name a number," he said. "Recruiters won't let me get away with that. They know the game."

It's difficult to avoid acknowledging what you make now, or, if you're unemployed, what you earned at your last job. But everyone I talked to warned against saying how much you hope to make in the position you're interviewing for.

"In negotiations, you'd rather have them name the dollar," said John Challenger, chief executive of Challenger, Gray & Christmas, an outplacement consulting firm. "If you name your price too early, and it's too low, you've left money on the table and maybe undersold your candidacy. If it's too high, the company may think it can't afford you."

"A good answer to the question 'What kind of money are you thinking about?' " he said, "is 'I'm really open.' "

As my unemployed friend said, "I try not to get eliminated and try to keep the conversation going."

While going through the interview dance with numerous members of the same company with nary a mention of pay may be frustrating, Mr. Challenger said, each time you go in to talk, you're seen in a different (and, hopefully, increasingly positive) light. And the company is more invested in you.

"If you look at it from the standpoint that you're selling yourself, you want to give the company more and more reasons to hire you," Mr. Challenger said. "Be patient."

Lee E. Miller, an executive coach and author of "Get More Money On Your Next Job ... in Any Economy," (McGraw-Hill, 2009) agreed. "If they decide you're the candidate and you've sold them on what you can do — and assuming you have a pretty good idea of your market worth — you're in pretty good shape to convince them they should pay at or near what you want."

After all, while it may feel as if the job seeker is doing all the work, "a lot of mental energy goes into making the decision that this is the candidate I want," Mr. Miller said. Once that decision is made, companies don't want to go back to Square 1.

I know someone who was in the fortunate position of being offered two jobs. When he told his contact at Company B that he was choosing Company A, he was immediately offered \$10,000 more.

"It will cost me that much to start the whole hiring process again," he was told.

If the company is sending you signals and you have a feeling that an offer is going to come in way below what you have in mind, "you might choose to broach the subject," Mr. Challenger said. "But generally, my advice is that if you're raising the issue, you've taken on the wrong role of interviewer rather than interviewee."

Of course, those seeking a job should try and go into an interview having a fairly good idea of the salary for the position they want. Web sites like Glassdoor.com, [Salary.com](#) and [PayScale.com](#) list salary ranges within industries, companies and geographical locations. But, as Mr. Challenger said, "even in the same jobs, companies are all over the map."

And if you're more than \$10,000 apart, Mr. Miller said, than the job is probably not worth what you think it is. What you can do then, he said, is "focus on redefining the job



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to use the full extent of your skill set.”

“Often, it’s not that hard to redefine a job,” he said. But there is one roadblock that is impossible to overcome — if you’re asking for more than your prospective boss is currently making. A recruiter or human resources person might tell you that during the interview process.

While salary, of course, is important, people tend to overemphasize it. There are lots of other tangibles that one can try to negotiate — vacation time, signing bonuses or extra money for relocation, for example.

Performance bonuses are often thrown into the mix, too, though it can be tough to get an employer to promise a specific amount in writing.

“We’re such a litigious society now, that a company is going to be very cautious about promising performance bonuses,” Mr. Humbert said.

And of course, people need to take into account the intangibles when seeking a job as well.

“I’ve had people take 20 percent cuts in income, because they’re on call seven days a week and they’re tired of that kind of life,” he said.

Consider the commute, the opportunity for advancement, the type of people you’ll be working with and for, the complexity of the work and the autonomy you’ll have, Mr. Challenger said.

But all that must come at the end of the interview process, when the company has offered you a position, he said. “I’ve seen people who’ve not had an offer already negotiating and begin asking about vacation. You haven’t done enough work yet to convince them that you’re the right person.”

Perhaps it’s best to consider job hunting as a lot like dating. Both parties are trying to figure each other out, sometimes with scanty information. You rarely know who the competition is. You don’t want to talk about heavy things too early, though you should be ready when they arise. And when an opportunity comes along — tempting as it might be — don’t commit to something that’s wrong for you.

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