

# NEGOTIATING A POSTDOC POSITION

*"No matter how delighted you are with an offer, it is wise to view it as part of the last stage of the process – the negotiation stage – even if you ultimately decide not to negotiate anything."*

Margaret Newhouse  
Office of Career Services, Harvard University

## Why negotiate?

*"Whether you're a fresh Ph.D. searching for a lab in which to do a postdoc, or you're trying to land a junior faculty position and create your own lab, negotiations are crucial in developing your scientific career."*

Vid Mohan-Ram  
Writer/Editor for Science Careers

Although the *formal* terms of a postdoc position may range from temporary student status to stable employee (depending on the institution), always think of your postdoc placement as a professional employment position, and consider it to be just the first of many transitional negotiations and employment engagements to come in your professional career. Taking a proactive stance and giving yourself a strong start at this point will allow you to be more productive and achieve a higher personal satisfaction with your quality of life over the long term. Strong negotiating skills will serve you well throughout your career: start early and refine this skillset. Studies have indicated that failing to negotiate a first salary can reduce an individual's earnings by more than \$500,000 by the age of 60 (cited in Babcock and Laschever 2003).

Women, take note: studies have also indicated that men are more than four times as likely as women to negotiate a first salary; that when asked to pick metaphors for the process of negotiating, men picked "winning a ballgame" and a "wrestling match," while women picked "going to the dentist"; that women often don't know the market value of their work, reporting salary expectations between 3 and 32 percent lower than those of men for the same jobs; and that, in one group, eight times as many men as women graduating with master's degrees from Carnegie Mellon negotiated their salaries – achieving, on average, starting salaries that were about \$4,000 higher than the women's (cited in Babcock and Laschever 2003).

*You've been offered a postdoc position! Negotiating and clarifying the terms and mutual expectations of that position is the crucial next step. You are in your strongest position during the period between receiving and accepting the offer. While some postdoc positions are quite well defined, with a salary and funding duration set by institutional or funding agency guidelines, there are nonetheless many other elements that make up the entire "package" that you should seek to discuss.*

*"I was so happy to get the job, I just took whatever they offered . . . When I got here, I found that I had less lab space, less start-up funding, and a lower salary than anyone else in the department."*

Interviewee quoted by Catherine Conrad

*"Many women are so grateful to be offered a job that they accept what they are offered and don't negotiate their salaries."*

Linda Babcock  
Women Don't Ask



## What to negotiate:

As you advance in your career and negotiate future job offers, you will have more leverage and your potential employer will have more latitude, meaning that more negotiable items will be 'on the table' as you move from postdoc to jr. faculty, tenure, researcher or other professional position. At the postdoc level, a good place to start is to simply be aware of what's *potentially* negotiable, learn what is *actually* negotiable in the offer you are considering, and pick and choose what is most important to you.

### Negotiate terms and/or clarify expectations:

#### Generally:

- Start date
- Duration of position and funding

#### Financial terms:

- Salary
- Benefits package (health, life, disability, retirement)
- Moving expenses
- Leave/vacation

#### Potential leave options:

- Unpaid leave if externally funded
- Maternity/paternity/family leave

#### Research support:

- Lab facilities, equipment
- Office space
- Computer/software
- Secretarial assistance
- Graduate/undergrad Research Assistants (RAs)
- Conference and travel funds
- Grant writing support
- Journal subscriptions/books

#### Service and Teaching:

- Teaching load
- Student advising

#### Acknowledgement of research contributions:

- How credit & authorship will be attributed
- Industry – projects & publications
- Academia – projects & ownership
- Intellectual property rights
- Patent rights

#### Quality of life:

- Work schedule
- Parking
- Housing
- On-site childcare
- Spouse/partner employment assistance

## How to negotiate:

**Do your research beforehand.** Be prepared – the negotiating process starts before you get the offer! First, *some* postdoc positions are well defined at the start, in terms of a salary and funding duration set by institutional or funding agency guidelines; if you have applied for such a postdoc position, you should already know these figures. Generally, know the average salary range for similar positions in your field. Sources of information may include advisers or mentors, professional associations, the institution itself (academic dean's office), or published figures in resources such as *The Chronicle of Higher Education Almanac* (an annual compendium of college and university data) or the *Collegiate Times'* database of salaries for some public universities (<http://www.collegiatetimes.com/databases/salaries>).

**Wait until you've received an offer.** Do not negotiate or make requests until you have received the offer.

**Do not accept right away.** It's likely that you'll receive the offer from, and engage in discussion and negotiation with, your future potential mentor or supervisor, who is likely to be either a department level faculty member or the PI (Principle Investigator) of the funding grant. Tell them how pleased you are to receive the offer, and express your enthusiasm for the position and the institution. Clarify aspects of the offer as necessary. Have them email or fax the terms and conditions. Ask how long you have to decide. Then, take some time to think about it.



**Approach negotiating as a problem-solving method and a search for mutual gain.** Negotiating is an interactive dialogue. The individual and department extending the offer is a potential ally, mentor, advisor or future colleague with whom you are likely to have shared goals and interests. Remember that the individual or committee have decided that you are the best person for the position. They not only want you to come, they want you to thrive there.

**Find a source of inside information about the norms in a given department.** Advance information on the norms of a particular institution or department is invaluable.

**Enter the negotiation process with a clear sense of what you want and what your expectations are.** Set your priorities. Think creatively about what is possible and acceptable to you. Think about what is essential to you, and what conditions you cannot accept. Identify the deal-breaker issues.

**Think in terms of a compensation package rather than a salary figure.** Remember to look at the entire package as you compare offers – benefits and cost of living may make the difference between two salaries. Decide which benefits and perks are most important to you.

**Be straightforward, matter of fact, and honest.** Bluffing always carries risks. You do not want to damage your future credibility.

**Adopt the spirit of a joint venture for mutual gain, and look for common interests behind seemingly conflicting positions.** Help the people you are negotiating with be creative in generating options and solving your problems. Explain and justify your interests as you make your requests. For example: "I understand you can't fund 'X' but can you increase the amount for 'Y'?" Or: "I really want to come here, but ---- has offered me X, Y, and Z. Is there anything you can do to make it easier for me to turn them down?" Throughout the process, maintain and convey an enthusiasm for the position, the institution, and your potential engagement there.

**Listen carefully, and hear and understand your potential mentor/supervisor's interests and constraints.** A successful negotiator has the ability to understand the viewpoint of others. Do not press on matters beyond their control – although you can certainly ask for some commitment to intervene with the responsible agencies (e.g., the child care center, the housing authority). Negotiations will most likely be conducted in stages, and you may introduce new requests or change priorities during the process. But don't do this lightly, as this kind of pattern could not only frustrate your potential mentor/supervisor, but also undermine your credibility.

***"Definitely find out about the source and duration of funding before accepting a position . . .***

*If you are good, your mentor may want you to postdoc for a long period. Three years in any postdoc is probably enough. Three years often corresponds to the length of a grant that pays the postdoctoral fellowship, so the grant may define the duration . . . Be very wary about accepting one-year appointments. Be aware that the length of a postdoc will likely be governed by the prevailing job market. When the job market is good, assistant professorships and suitable positions in industry will mean you can transition early to the next stage of your career. Since the job market even a year out is unpredictable, having at least the option of a three-year postdoc fellowship is desirable."*

*Philip Bourne, Editor-in-Chief  
PLoS Computational Biology Journal*

***"Try not to fixate on a specific number . . . a \$38k salary will go a lot further if your postdoc position is at the University of Nebraska than if you're moving to Columbia University and have to live in or close to New York City. Some institutions will offer you low-cost health care while others may require that you pay more out of your own pocket. You may also be eligible for retirement packages at some institutions but not at others. Being new parents will almost certainly change your tax situation, too."***

*Biophysical Society Blog*



**Once the negotiations are complete, reiterate the offer as you understand it.** Ask for the offer in writing, such that both parties have formal record confirming mutual understanding of the conditions of the offer. Inquire as to when they would like to receive your final decision. Express your appreciation of their willingness to respond to your concerns, and go to bat for you.

**Even if you expect to take this offer, ask for a reasonable period of time to think it over** – perhaps a few days or, at most, two weeks. Professional ethics require that employers give you a reasonable amount of time to make a decision. If you are waiting for other offers, "reasonable" is most likely defined by the time when most of the offers will be out in a given field. If you feel they are putting undue pressure on you, you might ask your adviser to intervene. If you are pressed for a decision on one offer before others are made, call the contact at your preferred institution, explain your situation, and ask whether they can speed up their decision-making.

**Make your decision as though it were your final one. Although exceptions occur, professional ethics dictate that once you have accepted a job offer, you are bound to that decision.** Once you accept, inform all other potential placements of your decision, as well as your adviser(s) and anyone else who has assisted you in your search.

**If you are not going to accept, explain why tactfully, honestly, and constructively.** Leave them with a positive impression. Reiterate your own positive impressions and your regret that the position didn't work out, and write a follow-up letter as well.

In closing, if you find yourself daunted by the prospect of negotiating a postdoc position (or anything else), remember:

*"Don't look at the postdoc as just a period of advanced research and increasing knowledge of a discipline. Also look at it as a time of professional development and growth in regard to lifelong learning and critical skills such as communication, professional etiquette, leadership and management, and responsible conduct of research."*

*Cathee Johnson Phillips, Executive Director  
National Postdoctoral Association*

*"Your ability to negotiate, communicate, influence, and persuade others to do things is absolutely indispensable to everything you accomplish in life. The most effective men and women in every area are those who can quite competently organize the cooperation and assistance of other people toward the accomplishment of important goals and objectives."*

*Brian Tracy  
Motivational coach & author*

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