



NEGOTIATION

The Negotiation Playbook

Negotiating never makes a genuine offer worse — the risk of asking is smaller than what you fear, and the cost of not asking is financial.

We've been involved in a lot of salary negotiations — as recruiters, as hiring managers, and, come to think of it, as employees ourselves. We've sat on every side of the table, including on the fence.

Here's the thing worth knowing before any of the tactics below: negotiating never makes a genuine offer worse. A company that's decided it wants you has already spent real time and money getting there, and pulling an offer over a reasonable, professionally handled counter is rare — and reputationally costly for them. The risk of asking is smaller than you fear; the cost of not asking is financial.

It also helps to remember that the employer is thinking in terms of the fully loaded cost of salary plus tax, benefits and overheads. A small rise in base salary can mean a lot to you and comparatively little to them — and in many cases, when an employer says they have \$150k, they often have \$160k. It can be genuinely trivial on their side of the table, and significant on yours.

\$160k is often what's really there when an employer says they have **\$150k** — trivial on their side of the table, significant on yours.

THE FIRST NUMBER

Anchoring

The first number spoken in a negotiation exerts an outsized pull on where salary usually ends up. We call this anchoring — and, generally, the more precise the anchor, the more the conversation pulls towards that number.

You shouldn't go into a process without knowing the employer's range, and finding that out should always be your first step. There are exceptions — a company in the Middle East, for cultural reasons, will never lead with a salary. But in the US and the UK, you should always know the range before being put forward, and know where it sits against the wider market (something we can advise on).

Our advice is to anchor early. When a recruiter is putting you forward, get your own range in first. If you're at the top of the range, ask the recruiter to put the stake in the ground for you — "I will not move for anything less than \$x." Every subsequent conversation is then anchored around that. And if you're lowballed after that, you know the company isn't serious.

"Anchor with confidence, and precision."

SIX BEHAVIOURS

Negotiation Behaviours

- Never say you need this job — it collapses your leverage and can lead to outright rejection on the spot. Many startups actually want to feel they've "won" you; green banners of enthusiasm are fine, desperation isn't.
- Don't negotiate before you have a "yes, if..." — get to an agreement in principle first, before specific numbers and package details. Negotiating too early can read as transactional and stall the whole process.
- Go from verbal to written immediately — once you have a verbal offer, ask for it in writing straight away, covering every element from base to equity, start date, title and benefits.
- Never accept on a call — even the best offer in the world, take it away. Say it's genuinely exciting, but ask to come back to them in a few days or hours. Asking for space costs you nothing.
- Salary isn't the only thing you can trade — some hiring managers do have a hard stop on salary, but that's rarely the end of the conversation. Signing bonuses, vesting start dates, review timelines and annual leave can all be signed off by finance more easily than a base-salary rise.
- Speak their language — people respond well to hearing their own phrases reflected back at them. If the employer uses specific language, use it too; it's a small thing, but it helps in any negotiation.

Scripts You Can Use

Some of the moments above are easier with the words ready to go. These are word-for-word scripts we give candidates for the key conversations.

IN THEIR WORDS



I want to make sure this is the right mutual fit before we get into specifics — could you share the range that's budgeted for this role? I'm confident we can find something that works if it's the right fit.

— WHEN ASKED YOUR SALARY EXPECTATIONS, BEFORE AN OFFER EXISTS



Thank you so much — I'm genuinely excited about this. This is a big decision, so I'd like to take a few days to think it through properly. Can I come back to you by [specific date]?

— WHEN YOU RECEIVE THE OFFER



I've really enjoyed getting to know the team, and I'm confident this is where I want to be. Based on [the scope we discussed / market conversations I've had / a specific benchmark], I was hoping we could get closer to \$[precise number] on base. Is there flexibility there?

— WHEN YOU COUNTER



I want to be upfront with you — I'm further along in a process elsewhere, and I'd genuinely prefer to join you. Is there room to move on [specific term] so I can make that decision now?

— WHEN YOU HAVE A GENUINE COMPETING OFFER — ONLY IF IT'S REAL; IT'S DISCOVERABLE, AND IT'S A SMALL, CONNECTED INDUSTRY



I take this seriously and I want to give it a proper look — a decision like this deserves more than [48/72] hours. Could we extend the deadline to [specific date]?

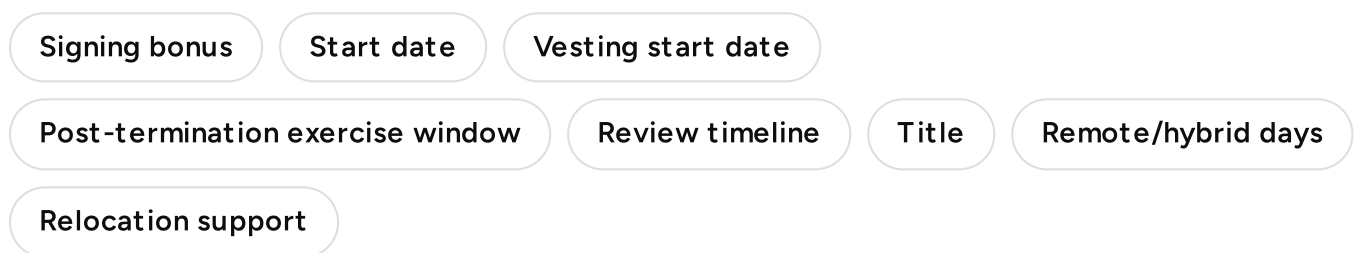
— WHEN THE OFFER HAS A TIGHT DEADLINE (AN "EXPLODING OFFER")

Most reasonable companies will grant that extension. A company that refuses outright is telling you something about how they'll treat time-pressure decisions later, too.

EIGHT OTHER LEVERS

What You Can Negotiate: Beyond the Number

Base salary is only one lever, and often the least flexible one. Several other terms are frequently easier for a company to move, because they don't touch the permanent comp structure.



90 days

the standard post-termination exercise window — extending it costs the company very little

6 vs 12 mo

asking for a formal compensation review at 6 months instead of the standard 12

48–72 hrs

a typical "exploding offer" deadline — worth asking to extend

- Signing bonus — often easier to move than base salary, since it's a one-time cost rather than a permanent increase to the comp structure.
- Start date — genuinely low-cost to the company in almost every case; a useful trade if you need it and they can't move on cash.
- Vesting start date — confirm it's your actual first day, not the offer date; a small detail with a real long-term effect.
- Post-termination exercise window — extending beyond the standard 90 days costs the company very little and is an increasingly common, reasonable ask.
- Review timeline — asking for a formal compensation review at 6 months instead of the standard 12 is a common, low-friction request, especially if the initial offer is below where

you wanted.

- Title — costs the company nothing directly, and matters for your next move; worth asking for explicitly if the scope of the role supports it.
- Remote/hybrid days — at companies with any flexibility at all, this is often more movable than cash, especially post-offer.
- Relocation support — frequently has a separate, less scrutinised budget line than base salary; ask specifically rather than assuming it's fixed.

SEED TO SERIES C+

Who Are You Negotiating With?

Everything above holds regardless of company size, but how much room you actually have to move, and what you should be pushing on, changes a lot depending on the stage of the company you're negotiating with.

Seed stage (roughly under 20 people) is the least flexible on base salary — there's no comp band yet, and all spend runs through the founder directly. But it's often the most flexible on equity percentage and title, since those cost the company nothing in cash today. Push harder on equity and vesting terms than on base here: a founder can move a fraction of a percent of equity far more easily than they can move cash runway.

A Series A–B scale-up usually has a real comp band, but it's rarely rigid, and there's typically a named HR or People lead in the loop rather than just the founder. This is often the sweet spot for negotiation — enough structure that your request is taken seriously, not so much that everything is locked. Base, sign-on bonus, start date and title are all realistically movable, though expect somewhat more resistance on equity percentage than at seed, since the option pool is now shared across a bigger team.

At Series C+, formal, often benchmarked comp bands mean individual base salary usually has the least leeway of any stage — a recruiter or hiring manager genuinely may not be able to move it without a re-leveiling conversation, and that probably has to happen very early in the process, before your involvement. This is where sign-on bonus, start date,

review timeline and title become the real levers, because they sit outside the formal band. Equity at this stage is smaller as a percentage but often carries lower-risk, more predictable value, worth weighing against a seed-stage grant rather than comparing headline percentages directly.

Seed: push on equity & vesting

vs

Series C+: push on sign-on, start date, review & title

“At seed, weighting your ask toward equity percentage and vesting terms over base salary can genuinely be the best move, because the equity upside curve is steepest early and cash is what the company can least afford to give. By Series C, that logic mostly reverses.”

GETTING AN EDGE

Final Negotiation Tips: Ways of Getting an Edge

Do it in writing, not on a call. A live conversation will always have back and forth, but you need time to think clearly, not under pressure — and writing gives you an audit trail. Research clearly shows documented, written negotiation reduces bias too, and several studies show women in particular achieve measurably better outcomes negotiating in writing than face-to-face. The natural way to make the switch: have a warm, brief call, then ask to follow up in writing — “As discussed, I wanted to put in writing that I’d love to get to a position of \$/£/€...”

When negotiating through a recruiter, don't assume our sole motivation is financial — it isn't. We're interested in getting the right person in the right role for the long term; a short-term boost to our bottom line means little to us. We can't vouch for other recruiters, but they will genuinely have your interests at heart too.

Negotiating through a recruiter? Tick these off:

- ☐ Be specific — what's your walk-away number? What else do you have on the table?
- ☐ Trust your recruiter — if they say it's not going beyond a certain number, that's from real conversations where that inflexibility was outlined to them.
- ☐ Be early — set your stake in the ground very early in the conversation, because that will be one of the first things a recruiter communicates ("you won't be able to get this person for less than x").

THREE MISTAKES

And the Do Nots: Mistakes We've Seen

Over-negotiating on everything at once

Negotiating before there's an offer

Letting things drag

Over-negotiating on everything at once. We saw this ourselves as hiring managers a few years back — a candidate wanted to negotiate on absolutely everything, and it came across as adversarial. It turned out to be a real warning about the character we were looking to hire, one that hadn't come through in the interviews. They lost goodwill, the conversation didn't go well, and we withdrew the offer.

Don't negotiate until there's an offer on the table. There's a difference between staking your ground and negotiating early — if you haven't actually had a formal offer, hold your horses. We've seen candidates try to negotiate too soon, and it shifts the tone of the whole process.

Don't let things drag. If you've asked for time to consider a negotiated offer, don't let it drag beyond that. We've seen candidates who were still genuinely keen leave the negotiation dragging far too long — and in that time, employers sometimes get cold feet.

About Example

We've taken the examples in this guide from our own experience over 25 years of hiring, leading and building marketing teams, and now as a recruitment agency specialising in SaaS marketing roles.

When you work with us, we're not on anyone's side — we're impartial, and we always look for the best outcome for everyone. Our clients want the best person, and if you've got as far as a negotiation, you are that best person. With a well-anchored conversation about salary, you may not even feel the need to negotiate.

We are, as always, here if you want our advice.



Example Recruitment — marketing-led headhunters for SaaS and FinTech startups and scaleups in New York and London.
Read the live report and get in touch at theexample.co/reports/the-negotiation-playbook