How to Answer "What Are Your Salary Expectations?" in an Interview - With Tips and Examples

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When you're in the middle of a job interview or even filling out an application, not knowing how to answer "What are your salary expectations?" can make you panic. You don't want to say something too high and price yourself out of a job you want or need, and you don't want to say something too low and end up not getting paid as much as you could or should be making. You might also be afraid that the interviewer will judge you harshly or unfairly based on your monetary choice.

Lucky for you, we have all the tips and scripts you need to confidently address any questions regarding salary expectations—and ensure you're getting the compensation you're worth. (By the way, "What are your salary expectations?" is a different question from "What is your current salary?" which is illegal for companies to ask in some states and cities.)

Why do companies ask, "What are your salary expectations?"

When Joyel Crawford, a career coach and host of the podcast Career View Mirror, worked in recruiting, the main reason she asked about salary was to gauge a job candidate's expectations relative to the budget allocated for the role. So unlike many other common interview questions, your response to "What is your desired salary?" could disqualify you from consideration for a job. But that isn't necessarily a bad thing, since you might not be able to accept or enjoy a role that doesn't pay enough for you.

Discussing salary early on also ensures neither the candidate nor the company will "waste time and effort on several rounds of interviews to find out that the salary is wildly off from what you want," says Jennifer Fink, CEO and founder of executive coaching firm Fink Development. "Ideally, employers and recruiters would be upfront with salary information and volunteer it first, but that's not often the case," Fink adds.

Of course, when a job posting lists pay (which is often the case nowadays as a result of recent salary transparency laws), candidates can avoid applying if it's out of their range. Unfortunately, not every employer has a culture of transparency surrounding pay, Fink says, so you might not encounter this hurdle until you apply or interview.

Eloise Eonnet, a Muse career coach and the head of communication consultancy Eloquence Coaching, cautions job seekers to lead with an open mind when tackling salary expectation discussions. "They're not just trying to get people on the cheap," she says. "Job seekers often approach the conversation as a conflict, when I think we need to be more graceful…and truly assume that the employer is just trying to understand, 'Can we afford you, and can we make this work for both parties?'"

That said, if a company isn't willing to make it a two-way conversation, that's a red flag for Eonnet. "If they're like, 'No, give me a number,' that's incredibly telling…do you want to work for an organization that right off the bat, as soon as there's something that's a little sticky…they're not gracious about it and not willing to work with you?"

8 tips on how to answer salary expectations in an interview

Pay can come up in different ways in a job interview or application, and you can use different strategies on how to answer salary expectation questions (see below for more scripts and examples!). But no matter how you choose to respond, you should still know what your ideal salary is before this discussion arises.

Maybe the interviewer *needs* you to state a number, or maybe they tell you what they're offering and ask you to react. Either way, "Some processes won't move forward until they know that a candidate is a good fit salary-wise," Fink says.

Use all these tips below to come up with an acceptable salary number or range for you, so that regardless of how you plan to respond to questions about your salary expectations, you know what you're ultimately looking for.

1. Search online for salary ranges in your field and location

Start your salary research by looking up your desired job title by name, geographic location, and years of experience through free resources on the internet. This will give you a better idea of the average market rate and improve the outcome of your salary negotiation.

2. Talk to people in similar roles

Comparing salaries with people in your network who have the job you want is another way to gain insight, Fink says. Use multiple sources to get a good sense of the going rate for the kind of job you're interviewing for, and take into account any additional skills and qualifications

they have, the size of their company, their career trajectory, their industry, and their location in comparison to you.

Eonnet suggests beyond your immediate network reaching out to friends of friends on LinkedIn who recently left an organization or job you're gunning for. "People are more willing to share what they made at a previous role than what they're currently making," she notes.

3. Consider what you need to live

Next, figure out how much pay *you* personally need (and want). Look at your predicted expenses and goals. If it's your first job and you'll be moving out of your parents' house, if you'll now have to pay for childcare, or if you'll have to finance a car to get to the office, this job is going to cause a major budget shift. If you'd be relocating, consider moving expenses and the cost of living near your new job.

Take all these factors into account ahead of time so you're prepared to respond based on your actual needs and don't accidentally accept a salary "where you're eating Top Ramen and MoonPies for dinner each day," Crawford says.

When you set your salary range, Eonnet adds, "you should start with the comfortable as your bottom."

4. Take into account other monetary or lifestyle benefits

Crawford also recommends thinking beyond base pay alone. "Ask yourself: What do you value?" she says—be it stock options, paid time off, a yearly bonus, commuter benefits, or childcare benefits—and how the presence or absence of these would affect your life inside and outside the office.

Additionally, note what the organization may provide that could affect your budget, or would not be providing that could suddenly increase your expenses.

For example, you might decide tuition assistance or the ability to bring your dog to work is worth more to you than another $5K a year. On the flip side, major gaps in benefits—like the lack of an employee health insurance plan—might raise your salary requirements drastically. Check the job posting or the company's website or Muse profile ahead of all your interviews to get a sense of what benefits and perks each company offers.

5. Know when to encounter salary expectation questions

Generally, Eonnet says, salary expectation questions are asked after a few rounds of interviews, when an organization has decided it's really interested in you—a good sign, she adds. But if you're working with a recruiter, it could come up sooner.

"A recruiter asking you for a salary range is very different from the organization asking you for a salary range…because they're not going to waste their time putting you out for something that you're not going to want," she says.

6. Prep your answer beyond just numbers

In your answer, "it's usually worth pointing out that the salary is only one component of what you're looking for, and that you are considering salary as part of an overall opportunity," Fink says. You might also want to reiterate what you bring to the table for a prospective employer when formulating your answer to support the range that you're giving, Crawford says. The company is getting something for their investment—a great employee.

"The experience that you might gain in this position as a stepping stone towards your next, that might be worth a certain dollar amount to you that you're willing to forego," Eonnet adds.

7. Build your confidence with practice

Eonnet recommends all her clients practice their responses out loud, with a friend or family member, several times before they speak with HR. "Put yourself in that situation so that it's not the first time you say it," she says. "It's going to be so much easier if you said it out loud before."

Along with how you want to frame it, practice justifying your range or response. "You have to be incredibly confident about why those numbers are, and if you don't get the top of your range, what do you need in its place for you to feel confident?" she notes. "Only then can you truly engage in that conversation in a way that is not apologetic, or uncomfortable, or whatever else might happen for a lot of us when it comes to talking about money."

Finally, she suggests approaching the discussion with enthusiasm and positivity, and expecting to match the energy of the person you're speaking with. "Practice saying that with a smile, eye contact—all those things are incredibly important because you're setting the tone for the conversation."

Keep in mind, too, that this isn't just about getting to a compromise—it's also a chance for the hiring manager to gauge your communication and people skills. "You're going to engage in a tough negotiation, and it's almost expected that they want to see you at work," Eonnet says.

8. Try to avoid answering on paper

As much as you possibly can, try to avoid having to provide an answer over email or in an application. Instead, Eonnet says, suggest hopping on a quick phone call, and summarize your agreement afterwards if need be in writing.

4 best ways to answer "What are your salary expectations?"

Depending on where you are in the job search process and your personal situation, there are four main strategies for addressing the question 'What are your salary expectations?' on an application or in an interview.

1. Give a salary range

Crawford's secret recipe for successful salary negotiations is to "come from a place of collaboration and service." By giving a salary *range*, you show that you're willing to be flexible and work with your prospective employer.

And by giving any numbers at all, you're "voicing the value you bring to the table," Crawford says. Showing that you've done your research and you know what you're worth tells an interviewer that you're serious about your skills and what you can bring to their company.

When giving your salary range in an interview, "try to keep the bottom of your range toward the mid-to-high point of what you're looking for," Fink says. For example, if you're personally looking for $85,000 to $100,000 and your best guess of what the company has budgeted is $80,000 to $95,000, you could give a range of $92,000 to $100,000, so that even if the company negotiates below the range you stated in your interview, you're still happy.

So what does this strategy sound like in practice?

Examples of giving a range

If you're interviewing for an [administrative assistant position](#) in [Orlando, FL](#), you might say something like:

"Taking into account my experience and Excel certifications, which you mentioned earlier would be very helpful to the team, I'm looking for somewhere between $42,000 and $46,000 annually for this role. But for me, benefits definitely matter as well. Your free on-site gym, the commuter benefits, and other perks could definitely allow me to be a bit flexible with salary."

For a [front-end web developer interview](#) in [Atlanta, GA](#), your answer might be:

"In general, I'm looking to make around $68,000 to $75,000 in my next role, given my experience and expertise in Python, JavaScript, and AngularJS. However, compensation isn't the only thing that matters to me, and I'd love to learn more about the job, the company, and the work environment here. Your website mentions childcare benefits, which signals to me that this is a company that values working parents, which is definitely important to me, and I could be a bit flexible with salary for the right fit."

2. Flip the question

You can also respond to "What are your salary expectations?" by simply asking what the company is looking to pay.

Once the interviewer answers your question, they'll expect you to say if the salary works for you. So you still need to do your research, but now you'll be able to tailor your response to the budget the company has.

If the interviewer gives you a number or range in line with what you expected or higher, great! You can talk about how that sounds perfect for you. But if the response is lower than you're happy with, you have to come up with a plan to respond.

Examples of asking a company their salary expectations

Start off with a simple response such as:

"That's a great question—it would be helpful if you could share what the range is for this role?"

Then, if the interviewer says a job pays, say, $55,000, and that's a bit below where you were hoping to make, you might say something like:

"I was hoping for something more in the $60-to-$65K range, but I'm definitely open to negotiating based on the entire compensation package."

You can then follow up with questions about the benefits that matter most to you like 401(k) matching or additional PTO.

But if you're looking for a lot more than $55,000, you might have discovered an impasse:

"Unfortunately, with my experience and current salary, I don't know if I can accept anything for less than $80,000 a year. Do you know if there is any flexibility in the budget for this role?"

3. Give a specific number

Typically, responding to questions about salary with a single number limits your ability to make something work with the company, Crawford says. But in some unique cases it may make sense.

"In certain high-stakes negotiations, that could be a really strong tactic," Eonnet says. "But it's very, very risky." If you're not completely confident in your justification, or can't afford to miss out on this role due to salary demands, she suggests instead offering up a smaller range for the company to work with.

Example of giving a specific salary number

"Based on [my current/previous salary of (number)], as well as [list what specifically you bring to the table, including skills, connections, achievements, or clout], I'd like to be making [number] in my next role. However, I'm open to considering [range] for the right fit that provides [long-term growth potential/benefits such as (list benefits you value)]."

4. Delay answering

When you're still learning the scope of a position and what benefits the company offers, you might prefer to delay answering questions about your salary expectations.

"They owe you that information before you can talk about numbers," Eonnet says, adding that when you delay your response with confidence as well as a willingness to keep the conversation going, "it's incredibly hard for them to push you on giving them a range" in the moment.

One warning: Don't default to this strategy just because you're afraid of missing out on a position or scared of having a tough conversation. When you feel like you really need a job, it might be tempting to take whatever salary you can get—but you're ultimately doing yourself a disservice.

Examples for how to delay answering, "What are your salary expectations?"

"That's a really important conversation, and I'm looking forward to having it. But before I can engage in that discussion and give you some numbers, I'm going to need to better understand [list what you want to know about benefits, perks, bonuses, or other aspects of the role]."

"Right now, finding the right position for me is more important than salary. I'd love to learn more about the job, the company, and the entire benefits package before we talk about numbers."

Remember that through all this talk of salary expectations you bring value to any company you work for. Figuring out what that value is and telling potential employers will only help you ultimately get the pay you deserve.

Crawford points out that in an interview, you're essentially being asked, "Why should we invest in you?" Knowing what that investment is worth is an essential piece of the puzzle—for you and your potential employer.