

The inside track from academia and industry

Tough sell

Let's talk money: what you're likely to earn, how to get a pay rise and when to consider other options.



Martin Lang

Salaries in the science industry have long been a topic of discussion. What sort of pay should scientists expect at various stages of their careers — as recent graduates, postdocs and scientists with some experience in the workplace? How should they approach pay negotiations? How much should an employer expect to spend on salaries?

Many recent graduates have no idea how much they should expect to earn. Where should they look for actual statistics? Talking to friends and former colleagues is one possibility. Studying statistical data delivered by institutes or professional institutions is another. But the situation is more complicated than it may seem. Salaries depend on a variety of issues, including company size, national or regional location and, of course, individual qualifications, skills and work experience. And can you trust everything you read? It's important to remember that these statistics often come from surveys. People are more likely to fib about salaries than just about any other subject.

Smart young academics applying for an entry-level position often have high hopes. With their master's or PhD, perhaps from a prestigious university, they may consider themselves to be among the elite of their nation. They have survived on what seems like modest pay at universities or

"The desire for more pay should not be the primary motivation for seeking a new job."

public-service institutions, and they expect better. But academic and public-service postdoc positions actually pay rather well, compared with entry-level jobs in industry. Work experience does help, though, and pay rises tend to be larger and more

frequent than at universities.

When we interview young academics, they often seem to have unrealistic expectations about their first real salary. They stare blankly when we try to explain what's on offer in the real world. They are surprised to learn that medium-sized companies or small research organizations will not fulfil their financial expectations. Only big companies can pay those sizeable entry-level salaries. But openings there are rare, and the companies can choose from a large number of qualified candidates.

Young academics should try to strike a happy medium. They should first of all look at the company (does it have a good reputation?) and at the job (is it really the one for me?). Only as a next step should they think about the money. Find a job you love, and the bonus is that you are likely to do well and be in line for promotions or pay rises.

What about scientists with some employment experience? First of all, the desire for more pay should not be the primary motivation for seeking a new job. If you're otherwise contented, speak to your manager. Make your case for a pay rise on the basis of your performance: an argument based solely on living costs is not likely to win you more money. Argue on the basis of your skill set and the extra projects you have taken on for the company. Your success at negotiating could depend on your personality, qualifications and efforts within the company. Always keep in mind that you have the option of asking for non-cash benefits such as a company car, laptop or a mobile phone rather than requesting higher wages.

If you are successful, a higher salary may bring with it a change in the scope of your duties and more responsibility. Consider not only what you have done for your company but what kind of new duties you are willing to

assume. Ask yourself if you are willing and able to take on new functions: do you really have the time and the appropriate qualifications? You should also consider that you might take away responsibilities from your

"When moving on, try to evaluate your own qualifications in a realistic way."

colleagues. It's not a good idea to cause ill-feeling in the company.

When moving on, try to evaluate your own qualifications in a realistic way, in the context of your particular business sector and function. For example, positions in R&D or sales and business development are usually better paid than those in administration. In clinical research, employees of contract research organizations are paid less than their colleagues at sponsoring drug companies.

From the perspective of the hiring company, the competition for highly qualified scientific staff has grown in recent years and will keep on growing. Those companies that do not pay as well as or better than their competitors could lose specialists. Moreover, scientists often put their heart and soul into their job, but rarely get the appropriate financial reward. Undervaluing employees often leads to staff attrition. As an employer, it's important — now more than ever — to be aware of changes in the job scene and shifting moods among your scientific staff.

Like any employee, scientists should know how to behave in pay negotiations, how to prepare and how to argue. And remember that accepting lower pay than you wanted does not necessarily mean taking a step backwards in your career. ■

Martin Lang is recruitment consultant for Kelly Scientific Resources in Cologne, Germany.