



## You Can Try, But You Can't Always Get What You Want

**M**ost designers I meet want to make a lot of money. (They also want to do great work.) When I was a student at Pratt, my husband's first job paid \$125 weekly, the amount of our monthly rent. We had a used car, went camping on weekends, ordered in pizza at will and had friends in for dinner. I earned tuition with part-time jobs; his was paid by the GI Bill.<sup>1</sup> In the evenings, we'd sit on the top step of our brownstone and wonder what we would do with more money because we were able to do whatever we wanted.

It's not so simple anymore.

Today, the cost of living consumes a greater proportion of salary. Recent grads with student loans to repay and those without them need to carefully calculate their fixed costs and know what salary ranges are before discussions with prospective employers so that, 1. They don't have to wait tables at night and 2. They know how frugal they have to be. The good news is that personable, intelligent new grads with passion for their work, who are hard working and motivated, who speak and write well in English, and who are mature in manner are *in the minority* and with talent on top of that, are very *employable*.

### The context

Understand what's going on in the world, the local economy and your field. Is there a demand for people like you? Are many people with your skills, interests and experience out of work? You will have leverage to negotiate a compensation package if the economy is good, there's a strong demand for your skills and few good people available.

### Salary range information

Never rely on a single source for salary information. AIGA/Aquent does an annual salary survey in cooperation with *Communication Arts* that shows the influence on salary and total compensation of position, years of experience, region, metropolitan area, type and size of organization and client base—local through international.<sup>2</sup> This is rich information compared to salary.com and other sites that simply provide

averages. See also salary surveys from other professional societies (for interactive design for example), industry associations and trade magazines.

Other important sources are word-of-mouth, your network in the geographic area where the job is and, for recent grads, last year's graduates and your school's career services office.

A first job often defines one's career path, but not always according to plan.

The recruiter who introduces you to a potential employer will know the salary range on offer and will help you negotiate.

These days, the most senior positions don't offer astronomical base salaries, but bonus potential and stock situations make them very lucrative. A base salary of \$185,000 plus a guaranteed bonus of 35% is a healthy yearly cash compensation of \$249,750, plus

benefits and stock warrants—at least it was in spring 2007.

The salary range for recent grads varied in 2007 from \$32,000–\$45,000.

### Quality matters

Salary surveys cannot take into account whether you are a bloody genius, a good performer or if you just get by. (Of course a potential employer learns this from your portfolio.) A top talent (and our definition includes a marked innate ability for design accomplishment plus a collaborative work style and terrific persuasive skills) with four to seven years of experience will command double the salary of a designer who is "average;" two-and-a-half times more with ten to fifteen years of experience and three times more with fifteen or more years of experience. Bonuses will range from 10 to 100 percent of salary and there are also various ways of obtaining value through stock.

The reputation of your school may affect an offer as might having a graduate degree (depending on where it is from). Similarly, if you worked for a well-known organization, a potential employer correctly thinks you'll bring know-how,

## business

sophistication and connections from working with top professionals and important clients and this is worth money.

### Timely salary discussion

The best time to discuss salary is after you've convinced an employer you can do the job, if you really want it, and you can feel that they really want you. This usually happens during the second interview. If you are asked about salary before an interview or during the first one, it may be a ploy to eliminate the most expensive candidates. If pressured, say you are negotiable within the range of X to X, depending on benefits and bonus potential, but be sure the bottom of the range is an acceptable amount and the top within reason.

Here are some other things to say:

- Let's talk about salary when we are both sure I am right for the job.
- My requirement depends on the responsibilities, fair market value, benefits and bonus potential.
- What salary range does the company usually pay for an individual with my qualifications for this position?

If asked about current salary, be truthful; include benefits and bonus. Be prepared to make the case for your asking package

if there is a big discrepancy between it and what you currently or previously earned.

### Know what's negotiable

Some recent grads are so excited about being offered a position that they may be too quick to accept. Remember, if the prospective employer didn't think you could do the job, they wouldn't make you an offer.

For designers with more than three years' experience, employers usually pay relocation expenses. Company policy determines the amount and how they are paid, a flat amount or reimbursement from receipts. Some negotiable items:

- Base salary
- Sign-on bonus
- Professional memberships
- Conference attendance and expenses
- House-hunting trips, temporary housing for individual and significant other
- Home computer set up, PDA, cell phone
- Competition entry fees and credits
- Reimbursement for further education and training

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- Title
- A scheduled review earlier than standard
- Number of first-year vacation days
- Eliminate customary waiting period for health benefits
- Travel
- Significant other's job-hunting expenses
- Unpaid time-off for yearly visit to home country
- Expenses for obtaining or transferring a visa
- Pretax transportation, dependent care or similar types of deductions
- Domestic partner benefits
- Expenses incurred buying and selling a residence
- Potential transfer to other company locations

### Evaluate the soft issues

Great work environments are those where designers discover and design for unmet customer needs; other employees do not question their value; budget, facilities and equipment are up to the standard of the work to be done. Most employers want a balanced life and if that's important to you, ask

questions about frequency of late nights, travel and weekend work, flexible schedules, etc.

The work a designer will do is sometimes more important to them than salary but in a profit making organization, only accept fair pay. (Teaching is one of those jobs where the pay usually doesn't match what the designer can earn in the design business.)

Some designers want to work for a big company or with a star designer, others like the products a company makes or an industry or service. A first job often defines one's career path, but not always according to plan. Experienced designers will attest to not thinking about package design as a junior but getting a first job where great package design was being done and really getting into it. Or environmental graphics from a one-off exhibit they participated in, or doing interaction design because it needed to be done.

### Don't accept a job offer on the spot

You need time to think it over. Thank the potential employer for it and if information about benefits or bonus is not included, ask for them. Show enthusiasm for the job and company and say you need a few days to think about it. Companies often specify a date by which they want a response. If you want to negotiate the offer do it before that day. Respond by the deadline or the offer is likely to be withdrawn. If you need a few more days, give an alternate response date. If it seems appropriate, you may say that you are expecting or weighing other offers. They may ask what your decision will be based on and could open the door to further negotiation. Some potential employers want an immediate response and if this happens, you can negotiate or walk away.

### Evaluate the offer

Compare all factors in addition to salary: relocation policy, medical, dental, eye, disability and life insurance, employer contribution to 401(k) plan or similar long term savings plan, tuition reimbursement, stock plans, bonus potential, vacation, even the commute, if relevant. If there are no or very limited benefits, raise your asking salary.

Try matching your values to those of an employer. My above-mentioned husband left the job because his boss would not allow him to receive or make personal calls and insisted that each page of his sketch pad be covered with many design concepts rather than, as was his habit, one. **CA**

### Notes

1. Korean War veterans received a fixed monthly government stipend to pay tuition, fees, books and living expenses.
2. Available at [Aquent.com](http://Aquent.com) or [AIGA.org](http://AIGA.org)