ASK ELLEN – how should I handle requests for salary history or salary requirements?

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Q: When I’m applying for a job and they ask for desired salary or salary history, how do I address that?

A: Addressing salary requirements or history in a job search is a tricky thing. Ideally, salary is not discussed until an offer is made, and a first figure is proposed by the employer. Employers often request or demand salary information from applicants much earlier than that, though.

If you give the requested information first (it could be in a cover letter or online application, or verbally), you lose whatever negotiating power you might have had. If you don’t give the information, you may not have a chance at even getting an interview – some job postings will state explicitly that only those who give this information will be considered and with some electronic applications you won’t be able to submit the application with that field left blank.

If the employer is requiring you to state the salary you are seeking, and without it you have no chance of being considered, then you have to decide if it is worth it to you. Consider seriously how much the job appeals to you and what you think your chances are of getting it. You may decide not to apply. If you give the information and name a figure that is too high, the hiring manager may not interview you regardless of what you have to offer, because the employer is not willing to pay that salary. If you name a figure that is too low, you may end up with the job but at a lower salary than you could have gotten.

As for salary history, that may or may not be relevant, depending on the jobs and pay you have had in the past relative to the position you are applying for with that employer. It could be argued that your salary history is no one else’s business. Again, you have to decide if you are willing to give that information.

One option, if the employer is not saying “you must” in the job posting, is to have a line in your cover letter saying, “My salary requirements are negotiable” (or words to that effect), which addresses salary without giving a figure. You can also give a range rather than just one figure as what you are seeking.

This is a situation where the employers have the advantage in general, and even more so right now due to the current state of the economy and abundance of applicants. It is a risk either way, whether you give the information or withhold it. You have to determine, on a case-by-case basis, which risk you are more comfortable with.

Thank you and good luck!
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