GOWLAND

Make More Money by Avoiding the Salary History Question

"How much were you making in your previous position?"
"What's your salary history?"

If these questions are cringe-inducing, there's good reason: asking about salary history perpetuates the wage gap in which women make less than men for doing the same work. It's such a big deal that the state of Massachusetts made it illegal for employers to ask about salary history. Good work, Massachusetts.

Regardless of where you live, I'm a firm believer that you should be paid based on the work you'll be doing in the new role, your new company, and your market value (the "going rate"), *not* what you were making previously.

Just think: with the salary history question, if you were underpaid in your first job, you'll continue to be underpaid in every job after that…forever. Good news: there are simple strategies to avoid the salary history question so you can put the past behind you and begin to get paid what you're worth.

An Example:
One of my clients had an HR manager that kept asking her to share her salary history during the interview process. My client knew she'd been underpaid previously and that she'd be changing industries and moving to a larger city to take this role.

My client used the strategies I've suggested below and was able to increase her salary by 40%. She and I both believe this increase would have been unlikely had her new employer learned how much she was making in her previous position.

You might be thinking, "Not answering the question sounds great in theory, but how the hell do I do it in practice?" Fret not. Below are three scenarios you could find yourself in and strategies on how to deal with each.

Before we dive in, remember it's up to you how and if you apply my strategies to your life. Every person's personality and situation is different, so instead of pushing a cookie-cutter, one-size fits all approach, I encourage you to figure out what feels comfortable and authentic for you. Each scenario includes reflection questions so you can decide your own next steps.

The strategies below have worked for my clients in the past – I hope you'll find them helpful, too.

1. In a computer-based application form or email

Say an application includes a question about "current salary" or "expected salary". The application makes it *seem* like you have to fill it out, but you actually don't have to at all. Similarly, you don't have to answer if an employer asks via email.

I recommend including a friendly note that encourages future discussion.

> Sample Language*:
> "I look forward to discussing compensation once I have learned more about the position."
>
> "If I seem like a good fit for the position, I would love to learn more about the responsibilities of the role – that way I can determine what salary I should seek. I'm excited about [something specific that demonstrates your interest in the position] and am looking forward to hearing more about [company] and your goals for this position."

If the salary question is part of an online application, you could leave it blank or put a zero and include the note in your cover letter or elsewhere in the application. Don't worry, your employer probably won't think you're ready to work for free.

For salary expectations, I recommend you use the same language as above. You want to learn as much about the position as possible before you share your numbers; that way you can assess the responsibilities and compare them to market value data. (Check out my mini-course, You're Worth It: Establishing Your Market Value.)

Clients have asked me if these strategies might make their application less likely to proceed. Frankly? They could. That said, to my knowledge, this has never happened to one of my clients. If you have a strong application, leaving that question blank is unlikely to be a deal-breaker. Personally, if an employer were to reject a compelling candidate for leaving that question blank, my values probably won't line up with their philosophy. Again, though, this decision is up to you

Reflect: What strategy would YOU use if the question came up on an application? Take some time to brainstorm what language feels comfortable for you.

** All the sample language provided is purposefully generic. I recommend you personalize it, as it's most likely to be effective if you are communicating in your own words.*

2. In an interview

Some employers ask about salary history in the interview process. If you're nervous about it, that's ok! Many of my clients have felt squeamish initially but successfully navigated this process. Recognize the feelings that come up for you and know that you can do this!

Sample Language:
"My previous employer considers that information confidential."

- Only use this if it's true, of course.

"That's something I only share with my accountant."

"Based on my experience and research of positions with a similar level of responsibility and scope in [city/region], I'm seeking a salary range of [range]."

- I don't advise sharing your range early in the interview process unless your potential employer asks for it, but when they ask about salary history, they're clearly looking for you to name a number first. Act like a political candidate and pivot to the question you wish they'd asked.

You can still say all these things without being defensive, but instead demonstrating interest and enthusiasm for the position. Contrary to what you may have seen in hard hitting negotiations on TV, it doesn't help your negotiation to be standoffish or lukewarm. Throughout the interview and negotiation process, you want to demonstrate that you're excited about this company and this new gig.

Reflect: What strategy would you take if the question came up in an interview? Do the above tactics feel right? Take some time to brainstorm below, writing out what you might say. Read it out loud and practice with a trusted friend. It'll help you boost your confidence and comfort in navigating this question.

3. If they're very persistent

If your potential employer asks many times, and none of the above answers are working, you can always decide to share your salary information. If you know you were underpaid from looking at your market value, don't hesitate to say so.

> Sample language:
> "My previous salary was below market value at [current salary], so based on my skill set, experience, and research about this position, I'm seeking [salary range]."

Reflect: How would you like to respond if your potential employer is very persistent?

Next Steps

The client I mentioned in the initial example was very nervous about avoiding the salary history question. Because she recognized her nervousness and practiced (out loud!), she was able to successfully avoid the question and significantly increase her income.

This is *your* story, and you get to decide how to proceed. Remember, you can do this!

If you want to successfully negotiate your situation in a way that feels authentic to you, check out my e-courses on the following common negotiation situations:

- A raise
- A promotion
- A new position
- Maternity leave

As well as my mini-course:

- You're Worth It: Establishing Your Market Value