How Much Does It Pay?

Summary: One of the biggest questions attorneys want to know before moving to another firm is how much the firm will pay them. Learn more in this article.

When considering a lateral move, many attorneys want to know how much a prospective firm will pay them. This is frequently a difficult question to answer, and not the most important factor in considering a move. It’s far better to focus on quality of work, experience, training, mentoring, stability, etc., rather than short term salary considerations. Hiring partners value long tenures with firms, even if the firm is not a top one. It does not make sense to move from one firm to another simply because you want to make more money. It may hurt you over the long run.


With that said, salary does matter, of course it does. I’m often asked about salary when discussing job postings with candidates considering a lateral move. This information is tough to determine before applying. Often firms do not disclose salary information publicly, and what information is available may not be accurate. As a general matter, it is always best to apply and wait until the offer stage to negotiate salary. Otherwise you may foreclose an amazing opportunity that provides numerous non-financial benefits to you and your career.

When is the best time to discuss salary?

Sometimes firms ask about an attorney’s salary expectations early in the application process. This is one of the most challenging questions for attorneys to answer. You don’t want to aim too high, for fear of losing the opportunity altogether, but you don’t want to aim to low and sell yourself short. Ultimately, you want to ask for an amount that you would accept without reservation.

Do your research. There may be some information online that sheds light into how much a firm pays its associates. Firms often publish their starting salaries for first year associates on NALP’s website, and you can estimate based on that number. You can consult your recruiter, who may have inside knowledge on the firm and the market. You can also consider your budget. How much do you need to make to cover your living expenses? What amount do you need to make to feel you are being fairly compensated for your services? You can then set this amount as your floor in salary negotiations.

Be as specific as necessary. One way to answer is to say that you are flexible based on your experience and
the market. If this is too vague, you can provide your current salary and say that you are flexible within that range, but that salary is not the most important factor in your decision-making process. Of course, this answer only works if you are employed with a similar firm and are happy with your current salary. It is far more difficult to answer if you are moving firms to make a better salary, changing markets, unemployed, working outside a law firm, etc. In that case, I usually ask a candidate, “What amount will make you comfortable taking the job?”

**How to negotiate salary?**

Generally speaking, it’s best to leave all salary negotiations to your recruiter, if you are working with one. A good recruiter is like an agent who can advocate on your behalf and address any issues that arise. When an attorney negotiates on their own, it can lead to bad feelings on both sides if not all expectations are met. Your recruiter can diffuse the situation and provide a buffer between you and the firm.

It’s also important to consider your compensation package as a whole rather than focus solely on salary. Firms often provide valuable incentives to their attorneys, including signing bonuses, moving expenses, end-of-year bonuses, benefits, origination fees, etc. These may more than make up for a lower than expected salary offer, so be creative when considering your compensation. And always ask your recruiter any questions you have before accepting or declining an offer.

- See [How to Negotiate Your Way to a Better Salary](#) for more information.