Written by Julie Desmond
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Marcus writes: I have been asked to prepare the 2010 budget for my new purchasing department - mainly departmental salaries. I want to research what we should be paying as I suspect we are ALL underpaid because we were all hired during the down economy. My buyers are asking for more and I, too, feel underpaid.

Julie says: This is tough because our down economy still hasn't come around, and with so many talented people available to work, employers have the upper hand on compensation decisions. Still, you and those in your department should always expect to be paid fairly. To find out what “fair” means, these days, research from three different angles:

Web sites such as salary.com, payscale.com and jobstar.org are easy first places to start doing compensation comparisons. The Bureau of Labor Statistics (bls.gov) also publishes wage information. Make sure your results are industry-and location-specific if possible.

After that, connect with any professional organizations related to your positions, as they commonly post member surveys related to salaries and benefits. Compare what you learned in step one with what you hear from these organizations.

Finally, ask around. HR people from competing companies probably won't give you salary info, but peers, friends or LinkedIn/Facebook connections who do similar work in other companies or comparable industries might be willing to give you ballpark numbers for each position if you explain why you're asking. You can also type your job description into a search engine like Indeed.com and see what salary parameters are most common. Do a reverse search, too, typing in your expected salary to find out how many other companies are hiring your position at that comp level.

If you can't secure all the money you're looking for, consider other negotiating chips (more days off, flexibility, training or education or more $$ toward your health care, for example) or see if you can negotiate a six month salary agreement stating the budget will be revisited at the mid-2010 mark. If you’re stuck with today’s lowball salary until 2011, keep an ear on the ground for other positions, and expect a bigger jump in compensation in a year or so. A lot can change between now and then.

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