

Should You Negotiate the Job Offer? Guidelines for a PhD Student

by Varun Grover, University of Arkansas

You just received the phone call with an offer. This was the one you wanted. You are excited. The many years of hard work, late nights, criticism, and challenges that you faced through the doctoral program are finally (and literally) paying off. You still have that nagging dissertation pending, but at least you know that it all ends well – and you will soon be in a tenure track position in a place you want to be.

Your initial inclination is to quickly accept the offer and be done with the whole process. By doing this, you can cancel the pending campus visit (which you feel exhausted just thinking about) and focus on your dissertation. But then a thought occurs to you. **Should I negotiate the offer?** Mulling over this issue you wonder (1) why the offer is not as good as some of the others in your peer group have received based on what you have heard, (2) whether this offer is just a starting point and negotiation is expected...in not negotiating would you not be doing what is expected, (3) if getting the most you can upfront is important – especially since you know that once you are in the academic system salary compression is inevitable (4) if negotiating would “turn off” your potential employer, and start you off on the wrong foot and (5) if you would be any good at negotiating ...after all you have largely been conditioned in the PhD program to not make too many “waves.”

These issues could all have some validity. In my 30 odd years of experience working with doctoral students, they often come to me delighted with their offers and some trepidation about negotiation. My advice is simple. *If the student has some apprehension about the offer they should negotiate.* Even in cases where the offer was given as “the best they can do” or in markets with high supply and low

demand, there might still be room for negotiation. I tell them – what is the worst that can happen? The school might say no. I have never heard of a case where an offer is rescinded because the student negotiated. I also advise them to not think of negotiation as a particularly unique skill and it does not need to be (and should not be) confrontational. They can do it. After all, the very fact that they have received an offer indicates that there is some level of mutual interest and commitment between the two parties.

So, what are the guidelines for negotiation? While any good book on negotiation might answer this question, I offer some guidelines and tips below, based on my experience with doctoral students in the academic job market. Some of these guidelines are just common sense, while others are takeaways from cases with which I have been directly or indirectly involved in. I divide this into the what of negotiation and the how of negotiation.

The What (Parameters of Negotiation)

First, you determine the parameters of negotiation. This is for you to do some introspection about the offer. What are the components of the offer, and what can be negotiated? Typically, in academia (tenure track offers) the following can be subject to negotiation:

- Salary (amount over the academic year)
- Teaching load (usually can be reduced in early years, although permanent reduction is tough since it is fixed by the institution)
- Summer support (number of summers, amount received as research money each summer, teaching options for pay in summer)



Varun Grover is the David D. Glass Chair and Distinguished Professor at the Walton College of Business, University of Arkansas. Prior to this he was the William S. Lee (Duke Energy) Distinguished Professor of Information Systems at Clemson University. He has published

extensively in the information systems field, with over 220 publications in major refereed journals. Over ten recent articles have ranked him among the top four researchers based on number of publications in the top Information Systems journals, as well as citation impact. He is Senior Editor for MISQ Executive, Section Editor of JAIS, and Senior Editor (Emeritus) for MIS Quarterly, the Journal of the AIS and Database. Dr. Grover is recipient of numerous awards from USC, Clemson, AIS, DSI, Anbar, PriceWaterhouse, etc. for his research and teaching. He is a Fellow of the Association for Information Systems.

- Tenure (earliest point at which you can go up for tenure, although this is often fixed by the institution for fresh PhDs)
- Research Budget (amount of startup funds)
- Conference Support (number of conferences and/or dollar amount)
- Support: (graduate assistant hours, startup computer budget)
- Expenses (moving expenses)
- Time to accept (latest point at which you must accept the offer)

Of these, you should determine which ones are very important to you and which ones are not as important. Correspondingly, identify the ones that are acceptable to you based on the current offer, and which ones are not. By dividing the parameters of negotiation into this 2X2, you can get a good sense of where you should spend your negotiation energy. Items that are important to you and are unacceptable are the ones you should target. All the others (not-important/acceptable; not-important/unacceptable; important/acceptable) should not be the primary focus of negotiation.

The How (Approach to Negotiation)

In general, a key aspect of negotiation is establishing a *quid-pro-quo*. Therefore, a statement like: I want \$X or I will not accept anything less than N summers of support are generally terrible negotiating tactics. This is because they sound more like one way ultimatums – give me this or else. They also sound like demands where you are taking but you are not giving anything back. A better negotiating tactic is where you provide a clear rationale for your request (I did not say demand). This could be based on the market (i.e., other offers you have or have knowledge of) or better still based on what you bring to the table (e.g., express your willingness to teach the courses they need taught at the highest level and also your broad repertoire of teaching skills). Artfully, conveying what you bring to the table (without bragging), reinforces what they are getting and puts your request in a reasonable light. Of course, to do this

well, you need to have some sense of what they value – something you should have been able to assess through the preliminary interview and campus visit. Another important aspect of negotiation is to be polite and not come across as being petty. This requires a sensitivity to the person and their context. For instance, if you are going to a school that is well resourced for research, and you push hard for a few hundred dollars in research or computer budget, it could come across as petty. You should have a general sense from conversations on your campus visit that the department has significant resource flexibility. So, while persistence could be good in negotiation, it should not get to the point of being viewed as an annoyance. Remember, the person at the other end will do more for you if you are likable – and they really want you as a colleague.

Related to this issue is the broad understanding of the situation. This requires some information you have, as well as some “feeling out” of the situation based on your conversation. You may have some idea that there are a few other acceptable candidates. This may affect the mindset of the person you are negotiating with. Perhaps you were not his/her first choice. In such a case, they may not be willing to negotiate too hard, recognizing that if you turn them down, there is a “better” candidate in the wings. So, the negotiation discussion should strongly focus on the value (and collegiality) you bring to the institution. Similarly, awareness of the constraints faced by the institution. Perhaps things that may be simple in some schools (e.g., reduced teaching load) might require the department chair to get special permission from the dean (or has no precedent) in others. So, just because your peer received it – does not mean that your institution can readily do it. You can feel out the hard constraints and back off on those during negotiation.

Another important aspect of negotiation is to have a positive attitude. Be upbeat, and not come across as a constant complainer about the offer. Reiterate

your strong interest in the job, so that the person you are talking to (typically the department chair or dean) does not feel that they are wasting their time getting things approved – and you will end up not taking the offer.

If you have multiple requests (in the “what” of negotiation), then try to put them all on the table together. It could be frustrating if you make a request that requires hurdles to approve and after all that you come up with yet another one. Requests in parallel rather than series, can frame the negotiation early – providing the basis for a conversation on positions, flexibilities and constraints. In these discussions, be willing to drop some items (particularly ones that are not that important to you) – as it clearly gives a sense of *quid pro quo*, as well as reasonableness and flexibility.

Similarly, you might be put in a position to reveal information – like – do you have other offers? What schools? How much are they offering? What is the likelihood of accepting ours? In responding, try to understand the intent of the question. Perhaps the reason they want to know is that they are genuinely concerned that you will not accept the offer. Your response can then focus on providing assurance that you are very serious. Honesty is generally a good idea.

Finally, if there are issues that meet you half way (e.g., you wanted research support for 4 summers, but they offered two and agreed to extend it to 3) you still have the luxury of “talking to family” so that you can mull over the compromise. Also, once changes are made to the offer, make sure it is included in writing (in the offer letter). Administrators change, and verbal promises are often rendered worthless.

So, in conclusion, when you receive an offer and you are not overly thrilled with it – do negotiate. This requires some self-assessment of “what” really matters to you, as well as a polite, positive, *quid pro quo*, honest, parallel, contextually aware and open approach to negotiation. In the end, however, the right job is more important than all the things negotiated.