



Title: Salary Negotiation for Social Workers (Part II): An Interview with Dr. Cynthia Conley

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Jonathan Singer: In December, 2008 I spoke with Dr. Cynthia Conley about salary negotiation. We spoke about research on salary gaps, the importance of salary negotiation for the profession, and some basic pointers for negotiating a salary. What we didn't talk about was how you actually negotiate. Cynthia agreed to come back and do a podcast on salary negotiation skills. So, I'm very glad to have Cynthia back for today's podcast on salary negotiation skills.

Jonathan Singer: Cynthia, so let's say I apply for a job. When can I start negotiating?

Cynthia Conley: Negotiation starts once you've been offered the job. Before you've been offered the job you need to do research on the organization or agency, and what your skills and background experience are worth. When you've been offered the job, then you can start to negotiate.

Jonathan Singer: What kind of information about the organization should I know about?

Cynthia Conley: Some of the most useful information to know about an organization is what types of candidates the organization hires (for example...). What are the skills and experiences of employees? Who is your competition? An example outside of social work might help: How do you know what to pay for a car or a house? You have information from research you have conducted on buying a car (e.g. Kelly blue book value, number of car businesses that would be willing to sell you a car etc...) or buying a house (what the houses are going for in particular neighborhood...). The more information you have, the more powerful you become in negotiations. If you've done your background research you can decide that the salesperson is quoting too high of a price, or you'll know what to counter-offer when negotiating the purchase of a house. A quick social work example: if you have an MSW and are applying for a case management position at an agency that employs only people with BSWs, then you can assume that the pay is lower than an agency who hires all MSWs. Knowing what the agency expects and what candidates the organization hires will give you good information on the agency.

Jonathan Singer: So, beyond knowing that I have an MSW and I'm applying for a position usually filled by BSWs, how do I know what my own skills and background experiences are worth?

Cynthia Conley: Well, if you are applying for a job in an agency that serves Spanish-speaking clients and you speak Spanish, you have a valued skill – especially if you know there are likely to be applicants without your language skills. Other skills and background experiences that

translate into dollars are computer skills, other languages such as sign language, supervisory experience, training experience, and for some agencies having some publications under your belt might be viewed as valuable background. The thing to remember is that your skills have to be worth something to the agency. I might be great at fly-fishing, but it doesn't mean that I can negotiate a more comprehensive benefits package because of it. As a potential employee, realize that there are mutual needs and desires on both sides - yours and your potential employers. Negotiation is about getting to a win-win scenario. Employers want to fill an organization's position with a person of value and great skills. It is up to you the candidate to show how your value meets or exceeds the position.

Here's the other thing to do: Set goals for your financial outcome - begin with a salary figure in mind - rid yourself of the mentality that I just need to have a job, I'll take what I'm offered so long as it's employment. *Get rid of the mentality that I did not go into the social work profession to make money. Think about what the goals and priorities are of your employer...*

If I'm an Executive Director who is in the process of hiring someone, I'm going to approach you in a completely different way if I know that you have done your research and are armed with a lot of information versus dealing with someone who hasn't a clue about the organization, similarly paid positions etc. If you don't exhibit self-confidence, a potential employer is going to feel that they don't have to offer anything more to you...

Jonathan Singer: That makes a lot of sense. Ok, so I know about my agency, I know what skills I bring to the table. Now what?

Cynthia Conley: Now you use that information during the negotiation process. The good news for social workers is that negotiation skills draw on all of the basic communication skills that we learn in our programs and in our field work. As social workers we attempt to teach and empower our clients how to successfully negotiate for their well-being, including their financial well-being. Use your listening skills to pick up on what your interviewer thinks is important. Formulate good responses. Decrease split decision-making activity.

Jonathan Singer: How do you respond to difficult money questions?

Cynthia Conley: Talking about money is hard, regardless of the context, but it comes with the territory when you are interviewing and being considered for a position. Social workers are not trained to think about financial information in the same way that business professionals are, so we have a lot of ground to make up if we are going to raise the profession's salaries.

Jonathan Singer: How do you respond to questions such as "what salary are you looking for?" or "how much money do you expect to be paid?"

Cynthia Conley: Open-ended questions such as these leave the dialogue open for you to be able to ask "Can you please tell me what has been budgeted for the position?" Many times you are already going to have this information because of what has been posted, but sometimes you will not. The employer may not want to answer this question, but it is a fair question.

After you are aware of the figure that has been budgeted for the position (and if it is lower than you expected, do not lose confidence that you can negotiate!), give the employer a description of your background experience and skills and convey to them that you understand the requirements and responsibilities of the job and that this experience and skill set that you bring to the job warrant a starting range of _____ to _____ dollars, this is of course negotiable because I really want to work for this organization. Negotiate down, instead of up...you can be guaranteed that the employer will negotiate down versus up much easier than vice-versa. If the employer gives you a salary range between 32,000 and 37,000, confirm that the salary comes near your expectations, but offer a higher range putting their top figure at your bottom figure, such as 37,000 to 42,000. But make sure that your range can be substantiated by your prior research. They may come back at you and say "that you are overqualified for the position", or "that's all that they can offer at this time," but you can still tell them that you want to work for the organization and ask them "what did they have in mind for the salary" When they give you a salary figure - and depending on their flexibility to engage in the negotiation (or not...), you need to decide what you are willing to take, whether they can afford you or not - this will determine whether you continue with the negotiation process. Keep your emotions under control - its much like having a poker face, try not to let your emotions convey your feelings about the offer to the employer. If they are not flexible with their salary figure - you can offer that they negotiate with other benefits such as flex time, comp time, an additional vacation or personal day, as these are generally lower in cost than actual salaries. You are still gaining in personal benefit / compensation even if it is not in the form of actual dollars.

Jonathan Singer: What actions should I take once I receive a final offer after negotiations?

Cynthia Conley: You do not have to come to quick decision right then and there after a final salary figure has been offered. Most employers realize that you need time to think about the offer, but reaffirm your commitment and interest in working for the organization. Convey your enthusiasm and excitement about the possibility of working for the organization, but tell them that you want time to think things over. Prior to getting an interview or offer, when employers request information about your requested salary, it is okay to state "negotiable." Organizations want social workers with good skills and training...while money/salary is important, job qualification takes priority. You can also state that "you are certain that the organization will offer the best possible salary based on your value to the organization"

Jonathan Singer: Cynthia Conley, this has been great. What resources are out there for people who want to learn more about negotiation?

Cynthia Conley: There is a lot of great literature on negotiation tactics. I recommend Martin Latz, Julie Adair King (women focused), Peter Goodman, Fisher, Ury & Patton. Pick one of these and then practice negotiation communication with your friends and family prior to using it with your employer. It is time now that social workers put what they teach into practice for themselves so that they can become more financially stable and have a better financial outlook for their future retirement.

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