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NEGOTIATION SKILLS FOR SCIENTISTS MOVING TO INDUSTRY

How to reach agreement on salary, annual leave and other benefits. **By Sarah Wild**

In 2021, Branka Milivojevic prepared to leave academia for the second time. She wanted greater flexibility so that she could be available for her children, and was tired of the instability of grant-based contracts. Five years previously, she had joined a neuromarketing start-up in Rotterdam, the Netherlands, as a principal scientist to automate and standardize the analysis and visualization of neuroimaging data. But within a year, she had returned to a university research position, enticed by exciting projects. For her second move to industry, she drafted a list of what she wanted to negotiate for.

"I had a list of the top ten things I wanted for my job," says the former cognitive neuroscientist, who is now based in Utrecht in the Netherlands. "Negotiating a higher salary is great, but salary is not the only thing that is important," says Milivojevic, now a data scientist at the Dutch railway operator Nederlandse Spoorwegen. Her list formed the basis of her negotiations with potential industry employers — and reminded her what she was prepared to fight for. This included flexible working hours and a location close to home, or to have her commuting time included as part of her working hours.

Increasingly, academics are finding themselves negotiating industry salaries. In 2021, for example, only one-third of newly graduated mathematics and statistics PhD students in the United States entered academic jobs, excluding postdoctoral positions, compared with almost 60% in 2001, according to the US National Science Foundation's Survey of Earned Doctorates. In the social sciences, that proportion plummeted from 66% to 48%.

For many academic researchers, the COVID-19 pandemic triggered a re-evaluation of their work life and the realization that they were discontent with their workload, career progression and work environment. According to *Nature*'s 2021 salary and job satisfaction survey, less than half of respondents from around the world were satisfied with their job prospects. Industry respondents (64%) were much more likely than those in academia (42%) to report

feeling positively about their careers. That's a marked shift from the 2016 survey, in which satisfaction levels across the two sectors were neck and neck (63% and 65%, respectively).

A 2022 report from the UK University and College Union found that more than half of its members were considering a career change (see go.nature.com/3kbxspv). It's unclear how many of these researchers will actually jump ship, but laboratory leaders are already struggling to fill early-career posts. For researchers wanting to move into industry positions for the first time, those who have already done so offer their insights and advice on what homework to do before negotiating, why to negotiate salary and which other aspects of the job are on the table.

Data scientist Tim Gravelle has moved between industry and academia for the past 20 years. "You need to get a sense of what it is that you value," says Gravelle, who joined business consultancy firm Bain & Company in Toronto, Canada, as its insights data science director in November 2022. It is also important to know what skills and traits companies value.

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Branka Milivojevic brought a list of desired job traits to the table when seeking a new position.

Attaching a price tag

Before she found her railway job, in which she develops and implements data solutions for problems ranging from graffiti prevention and bike-rental forecasting to drone-based building inspections, Milivojevic reached out to colleagues who had left academia and conducted informational interviews with them. These are conversations to seek informal advice on a career path from someone with appropriate knowledge and experience. "It was just listening to different people's stories and trying to figure out what they did, how they did it and what skills they used," she says. In the end, she conducted between 10 and 20 interviews, she adds, and now Milivojevic offers the same conversations to others who are looking to leave academia for industry. One of those former colleagues whose advice she sought ultimately flagged the advertisement for her current job.

Often, people inside academia are not as well placed as those outside to offer advice to those looking to leave. Cancer biologist Shambhavi Naik knew she wanted to move into the field of public policy, but such a move was uncommon in India, where she is based, and she struggled to find people to advise her. "Some of my mentors told me that if I really wanted to impact science policy in India, then I should stay in academia," she remembers. "It was almost as if I was betraying academia by leaving, so people advised me against going into industry."

Milivojevic credits the book *What Color Is Your Parachute?* by Richard Nelson Bolles with helping her to understand what she valued. First published in 1970, it is a self-help book still popular with jobseekers, helping them to understand what they want out of a new job. For example, Milivojevic wanted to work in a large organization, because she found the size of academia comforting; she also wanted to be as far from neuroscience as possible, so that she would not be drawn back into the field. She included all of these values in her job hunt and negotiations with prospective employers.

When cell biologist Rebecca Lim decided to move on from her associate professor position at Monash University in Melbourne, Australia, she was adamant that she would travel less. Before the pandemic, she would spend fewer than six consecutive weeks at home, therefore she made limited travel a condition of her employment.

Money was also an important factor for her. She looked at the spectrum of jobs that she would be prepared to do — from logistical roles to being a bench scientist in industry — and attached price tags to them. For some jobs, such as a senior operations position or another role that would take her away from the science, "they would have to compensate me incredibly well for me to even contemplate doing that", she says.

But attaching a salary figure to a specific job can be difficult, especially if researchers are making their first leap out of academia or are the first in their family to go to university. "It's quite a different experience when you come from parents who are professionals," explains Lim, who is now senior vice-president of scientific affairs driving research and development at a cancer therapeutics company called Prescient Therapeutics in Melbourne. "Mum didn't finish school. How is she ever going to advise me on such things?"

Although job search sites such as Glassdoor offer salary ranges, their scales are skewed towards remuneration in the United States or other parts of the global north, and are often not particularly useful for people from other parts of the world, says Lim.

In 2021, Lim identified what her salary would be should she become a full professor, then added her employer's annual pension to that and used it as a baseline for negotiations. To help with her own salary talks, Naik, who is now head of research at the non-profit public policy research centre Takshashila Institution in Bengaluru, India, asked people in non-governmental organizations and consulting companies what others with a comparable education in similar fields, such as economics or foreign policy, were earning. She also trawled government policy job adverts to benchmark her salary.

Karen Kelsky, who left academia in 2010 to start a career-coaching consultancy company called The Professor Is In, says that academics in general "have no idea of their value". "But they have gigantic, brilliant brains that are finely honed to do research," says Kelsky, who is based in Eugene, Oregon. "The trouble with [some] academics is that they turn those brains off when it comes to job offers."

The trick is to treat the job hunt like a research question, she suggests. "Anthropologists are going to be well situated to go speak to a lot of people, the [quantitative analyst] people are going to be well situated to do a spreadsheet. Everybody has research skills, so it comes down to not treating your career as though it is outside of your skill set," she says.

Kelsky also recommends always aiming high when asking for a salary, because academics

tend to habitually undervalue their worth. She warns against doing the company's negotiating for them. "People, often women, don't want to put the company in an awkward position," she says. Although the company might have numerous constraints, "that's not your business. Ask for a huge number and let them tell you that they have constraints. Don't assume it". In fact, most of the people interviewed for this article wished they had asked for larger remuneration when they were offered their jobs.

Milivojevic suggests putting a number on the negotiating table initially, because the first figure mentioned becomes the "anchor point" for salary negotiations. But doing so too soon in the interview process, before the prospective employer has decided to commit, could scare them away. "If you wait until they've committed to you specifically, then you can have this conversation," she says.

Having alternative job opportunities is the best way to strengthen a negotiating position, says Lim, who still had research funding and projects when she decided to move on from academia. Consequently, she did not need to jump at the first offer, which might not have met her requirements.

Geophysicist Matthias Meschede says that having numerous job options allows you to choose the one that best suits your needs. He treated job interviews as fact-finding missions after he had completed his postdoc at the Paris Institute of Planetary Physics in 2017. The following year, after a career fair in Paris called PhDTalent, Meschede had interviews with five companies for possible job opportunities. "I had no idea about salary," he remembers, therefore he decided to follow the interview processes as far as possible so that he could improve his interview skills and see what salaries prospective employers would offer him.

"To really see what you're worth, you need to see the number," says Meschede, now a socio-technical systems manager at a software company called Tweag in Paris, after having been promoted twice there. However, if Meschede were to repeat his multiple-interview strategy, he would "get a feeling for what's possible in the first interviews and try to go up from there with my own offer".

Often, academic expertise is not quantified in the same way as industry experience, although the underlying skills are the same, and this disconnect can put former academics at a disadvantage in salary and benefits negotiations, says Milivojevic. "When we write an academic CV, we say things like, 'I was a postdoc for three years at this institution.' What that means is that you've been leading a project, coordinating multiple stakeholders — because your collaborators are, in fact, stakeholders — and you were preparing presentations and reports."

On her CV, she included a separate list of skills that translated her academic experience into industry-friendly language. For example, instead of saying that she managed a certain number of students and postdocs, she noted the number of FTEs (full-time equivalents, or a measure of an employee's workload) under her supervision. In her informational interviews, she asked former colleagues who had moved to industry to explain the terminology used in advertisements, so that she could tailor her CV to industry requirements.

Compensation's various flavours

Some employers might not be able to meet a prospective employee's salary number, but they might be prepared to offer equity in the form of company stock or other types of compensation. Applied cryptographer Markus Zoppelt left academia in 2021 and did two other jobs before starting his current position as a software engineer at Code Intelligence in Bonn, Germany, in 2022. "I was very eager on getting a stake in the company I worked for," says Zoppelt, who works remotely from Nuremberg in Germany.

In some areas of industry, such as the non-profit sector, salaries tend to be lower than those offered elsewhere, says Patrick Forscher, a behavioural economist based in Geneva, Switzerland, and associate director at the non-profit organization Busara Center for Behavioral Economics in Nairobi. But there are often other benefits, such as being able to work remotely, travel and do advocacy work.

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Forscher says it is important to negotiate company support when it comes to bureaucracy in foreign countries. His organization has a great deal of experience with immigration, and uses the services of consultants to assist. "Make sure that you're working for an organization that's familiar with how to manage visas and things like that," he says. "If there's not much support, it can be extremely disorientating and difficult to live."

In 2019, Gravelle left a lecturer position at the University of Melbourne to take up an industry position in Toronto. For him, a flexible working arrangement was non-negotiable. "The salary, bonus structure and stock options were really attractive, but the flexibility of where I did my work was really important [because] I liked being home when my kids came home from school," he says. "Coming from academia, people are used to having a lot of unstructured time and if that matters to you, then a position that allows you to have a hybrid or remote-working arrangement could matter a lot to you."

Others who are used to the laboratory bench might find they are more productive in an office, surrounded by people.

In today's globalized workplace, in which people are increasingly opting to work remotely, employees need to be aware of the various legal provisions that apply to where they are living and working — and where these provisions differ.

For example, different companies and countries offer a variety of pension and health packages, which might deviate from those offered routinely by academic institutions. In France, for example, companies offer 30 annual holiday days, whereas US companies usually provide only a handful of vacation opportunities. Some countries, including the United States, do not have government-mandated paid parental leave, whereas others pay for a full year of leave.

A prospective employee should not assume that these benefits are standard when they are negotiating their job and salary package. Candidates should explicitly ask during interviews about annual leave, parental leave, health care and retirement benefits. "This is going to vary from one country context to the next, especially when it comes to employer pension contributions," says Gravelle, drawing on his experience of working in Australia and Canada.

Although academics might have to accept a more junior position when they move to industry, the skills they have acquired, even as early-career researchers, mean that they could progress rapidly. "That's been my experience," says Gravelle. "I was able to advance a lot faster because of the technical tools that I had gained in graduate school."

With this acceleration, however, comes the possibility of exploitation — in which people take on more managerial work or increase their workload without a commensurate change in title or an increase in pay. As such, employees should remember to re-evaluate and renegotiate after a few months if their workload and responsibilities do not match the job they were hired for, or if circumstances change.

Unlike in academia, there are manifold trajectories that a person's career can take in industry. "The first step out of academia is not the last one," says Milivojevic, who has been in her role at Nederlandse Spoorwegen for almost two years. "In academia, you spend so long trying so hard to get this job, and there's only one pathway." Outside academia, there are many more positions, companies and even sectors, she notes.

"If the first job is not the perfect one, you will gain some experience, learn something about yourself as well," she says. "And then you can take the next step."

Sarah Wild is a freelance journalist based in Canterbury, UK.