

CHAPTER 5

Use a RANGE and not a NUMBER

Settling on a specific number during a phone interview is like picking a suit before you know the occasion. Instead, you'll bring a range of (compensation) suits so you can tailor to the event.



Key points:

- A number too early is self-sabotage
 - Too low, and you just left money on the table
 - Too high, and you get screened out.

- It's a no-win scenario, a Kobayashi Maru scenario from Star Trek: The Wrath of Khan.
- Captain Kirk's pay negotiating solution: Use a RANGE.

Recruiters will always pressure you to give a number; to commit yourself to a figure. This pressure starts in the application:

“What's your salary requirement?”

Then, it continues when the Recruiter calls you. One of the inevitable questions is, “John, how much money do you need to make?”

Part of a Recruiter's job is to qualify you, and to do this, they have three main goals.

Are you qualified?

They will ask questions about your experience and qualifications to make sure you check all the major boxes for the Hiring Manager.

Are you Interested?

Is this role a match for your career ambitions? Do you like the company, the location, the work schedule?

Are you affordable?

They try to answer this question in their mind:

“Can I get you?”

When I’m training Recruiters, I call this the *QIA* (Qualified, Interested, Affordable). Coming away with...

Qualified? – YES

Interested? – YES

Affordable? – YES

...is the minimum a Recruiter needs to advance you to the Hiring Manager without risk of embarrassment.

The purpose of this chapter is to teach you an important lesson. This might be the most important lesson of the whole book.

Here, you’ll learn how to avoid **THE MOST COMMON MISTAKE** that candidates make in the negotiating process. They answer the Recruiter’s question directly, with a number, instead of using a range.

Why is giving a number early on a mistake?

I’ll answer that with a story about Frank, who probably missed a lot of peak opportunities.

I’ve encountered a lot of bad negotiating advice in the world. One day, I was reading some advice, confidently

given, from an Executive named Frank. Frank's negotiating strategy, built over a career of 5 job changes, was this: "when people call me, I tell them I need a \$300,000 salary or it just won't work for me. And they either say **yes** or **no**, and it's that simple. If they say yes, then we talk further. If they say no, then I have avoided a lot of wasted time."

That sounds good, right? No wasted time, and you dispel the mystery of salary immediately. They can meet your high asking price, or they can't.

Here are the not-so-obvious problems with this approach.

The first issue is leverage. Unless your skillset is exceptionally rare, you have no leverage to ask for a high amount early on. Apart from your resume, you haven't yet made the case that you're worth a high amount. That happens in the interview, and you haven't been granted access to the interview yet.

Then, there's cutting off your own negotiating legs. If they say yes, what if the company was willing to pay \$300,000 to \$380,000? Congratulations. You just low-balled yourself. You could have held out, made the case that you were worth paying high in the range, and gotten much more.

Overall, when you give a number, it is rarely spot-on. It is either too high or too low.

Too high because the Recruiter doesn't yet see you as worth that much. Or too low because they would have been willing to pay more, and you painted yourself into a corner.

It is exceedingly rare to luck out with the Goldilocks number before you even start.

To avoid this trap, become Captain Kirk from the Starship Enterprise.

Star Trek II: The Wrath of Khan is one of my favorite movies. In the movie, Captain Kirk faced a Starfleet Academy test called the Kobiyashi-Maru, a no-win scenario designed to teach Captains how to deal with guaranteed failure.

Lieutenant Saavik, a curious Vulcan, asks Kirk to explain how he dealt with the catastrophe.

"Lieutenant," Doctor McCoy declares, "you are looking at the only Starfleet cadet who ever beat the no-win scenario," pushing a finger toward Kirk.

"How?" Saavik probes...

Smirking, Kirk replies: "I reprogrammed the simulation so it was possible to rescue the ship."

"What???" Saavik is incredulous.

"He cheated!" David snorts.

“I changed the conditions of the test,” counters Kirk. “I got a commendation for original thinking. I don’t like to lose.”

Kirk’s estranged son David accused him of cheating, But Kirk found a way to beat the system. He found the work-around and instead cheated death at the hands of unmerciful Klingons.

How to avoid the Phone Screen Kobayashi-Maru: Don’t take the bait when the Recruiter asks you for your pay requirement or your minimum salary requirement. These are attempts to get you to commit to a number because the QIA is easier for them this way.

Instead, be Kirk. Change the conditions of the test and **offer a range.**

Try this:

“I appreciate the question, but this early in the process, it’s hard for me to commit to a number because I don’t yet have the full picture of the job or the value I’d bring. But I do want to be transparent and can offer this. I’m currently talking with a few other companies, and all those discussions are in the range of high 2’s to mid-3’s for total compensation, including salary and incentives. How does that line up to what you were considering?”

If the Recruiter balks at this or seems uncomfortable because you didn’t give a number, then you can say,

“How about this. Let’s talk a little more about the scope of the job, and I can tighten this up a little today, but I promise that after the interviews, I will have a much better feel, and I will narrow this down quite a bit after interviews.”

As long as there is overlap between your range and theirs, and you have presented as a strong fit for the role, the Recruiter is likely to pass you through to next steps. But to make this work for yourself, you must make the Recruiter feel like you are gettable, and that you will collaborate on a package that works for everyone if there is a strong, mutual desire to work together.

In other words, the Recruiter needs to leave the conversation feeling:

Qualified? YES

Interested? YES

Affordable? YES -- Can I get you? YES.

Make them feel like you are “gettable” without painting yourself into a corner with a number.

And then, during interviews, your job is now to prove that you are worth MORE so you can move up in your own range.

Why are Recruiters so fixated on making you commit to a number in the phone screen if it’s not good for you, the candidates? Why do Recruiters behave this way?

Two reasons.

First, it's easier for them if you give a number because a NUMBER fits into the RANGE they've been given (or it doesn't). This gives them a yes/no answer for their "Affordable" mandate.

It's easier to think of you as "high in the range" or "low in the range" or "above the range." They want to put you into a box labeled "yes" or "no" – and a box labeled "maybe" makes them uncomfortable because their time is precious.

Second, at the end of the day, Recruiters are responsible for several things. They source and screen candidates. They present the most viable ones to the Hiring Manager, and presented candidates assume the Recruiter's *seal of approval*. In other words, the Recruiter is betting their reputation on the quality of the candidate slate.

The Manager then begins to invest time reviewing or even screening these candidates. If the Manager discovers a person is, in fact, not a fit, it's a mortifying mishap -- egg on the Recruiter's face.

If you suffer this embarrassment often enough, it can doom your career as a Recruiter once you've lost the Hiring Manager's confidence.

Next up is interviews, where the Recruiter is tying up the precious time of a group of very busy people. This interview team is almost always short-staffed, sometimes standing in for the vacancy.

Wasted time here will make the Recruiter look very bad, and many corporate recruiters have lost their jobs because they waste too much hiring-team time with off-target prospects.

Finally, after interviewing 3 or 4 candidates, it's time to extend an offer and close the candidate the hiring team has fallen in love with.

But wait... they declined our offer because of pay???

This is not just egg on the face. It's an omlette. This is the worst, most embarrassing situation for Recruiters. They are responsible for screening based on pay fit, they are responsible for managing the candidate's and hiring manager's expectations around pay, and (most of the time) they are the front-line negotiators, extending the offer and closing.

So if the candidate declines the offer when the Recruiter was responsible for the financial fit, who does the Hiring Team feel dropped the ball?

The Recruiter is to blame for the debacle. The obvious suspicion: This Recruiter is incompetent.

And now, with damaged trust, the Recruiter needs to start the whole process over again. Looking at 100 resumes, phone calls with 8, presenting 3 to 5 (which now will be viewed with skepticism), interviewing the top 2-3, and then... offer and close.

And if there is a second round and the candidate once again drops out over financial fit, that's when the Recruiting Manager gets a call, and the Hiring Team asks for a new Recruiter.

This, my dear friends, is why Recruiters must answer the "Can I get you?" question in their minds, and this is why having a number from you is the simplest, most pleasing path for the Recruiter. It's black and white – you fit or you don't.

While this is the Recruiter's preference, it does NOT serve your interests as a candidate. You must find another way to satisfy the "Can I get you?" question, and find a way to beat the system.

We do this by confronting our no-win scenario, our Kobayashi-Maruru, with a range.

I'll share more about how to do that in the Phone Screen chapter.

Now, let's talk about why it's important to say, "*I'm talking with other companies, and they are in the range of x to y.*"