

# *Is that your* BEST OFFER?

Times are tough, but is getting a pay rise completely out of the question? It may be harder, but it's not impossible to negotiate yourself a better deal. Here's how.

WORDS MARIE ROCHER

**F**or years, Sharmela, a hard-working administration assistant, had dreamed about moving up in the world, so she was overjoyed when her boss asked her to leap into the gap left by retrenchments in her company's marketing department. 'I grabbed the opportunity,' says Sharmela. 'I was eager to prove myself, learn new skills, make new contacts and earn more money.'

But four months into her new job, Sharmela's salary remains unadjusted. While she is aggrieved by the lack of compensation for her new duties, she feels unable to broach the subject of a salary increase, especially in the light of recent organisational restructuring. Not only does she fear her boss will think she's ungrateful, she also doesn't know *how* to ask for more money. But, advises Michelle Naidoo, a Durban

employment and labour attorney and director at Deneys Reitz Attorneys, if you're dissatisfied with conditions or remuneration, this must be raised.

It's important to be realistic in the current economic climate, says Jo'burg's Brenda Bensted-Smith, CEO of recruitment agency, Ad Talent, but we shouldn't be bulldozed by a blanket response that there are no increases or bonuses to be had right now. 'Look at your company's results,' she advises. 'Your understanding of the economy, how your business sector is affected and how your company is performing will put things into perspective.'

## **No ask, no get...**

The gender pay gap in South Africa currently stands at 25%. Kim Meredith, CEO of The DealMaker Programmes Company – an international strategy and negotiation skills consultancy – and author of *Work Diva: How to Climb the Corporate Ladder Without Selling Your Soul* (Oshun), points out that women have failed to narrow the gap 'largely because they're poor negotiators'. According to Meredith, conflict is inherent in negotiation and because women prefer to avoid conflict, they don't get the deals they want.

Part of the ability to negotiate well is being taken seriously. Meredith and Bensted-Smith agree that women have to work harder than men to establish credibility. 'We're often perceived as emotional, irrational and illogical, and if we're to win in the workplace, we need to work on these perceptions,' says Bensted-Smith.

The woman who knows what she wants will get what she wants, says Meredith. Bensted-Smith emphasises preparedness. 'Before asking for a pay rise,' she says, 'ask yourself two questions: is your company in a position to give you an increase, and do you deserve one?' In answering the second

question, she says it's useful to evaluate your intrinsic worth and value to your organisation. This has both quantitative and qualitative elements. 'It's important to quantify your contribution to your company's bottom line by proving that your cost to the company is minimal compared to the revenue you generate. Then, qualify your other contributions – mentoring a team, cementing good client relationships etc.'

### Value-added employee

'I have no idea what I should be earning,' admits Sharmela. She isn't alone in her ignorance of her fair market value\*, says Bensted-Smith. 'Look at

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comparative industries and earners relevant to your own qualifications, experience and expertise to benchmark remuneration,' she adds. 'If you can, provide evidence indicating that others in your position are earning more, but that you are producing better results.'

Being a value-added employee is key – getting the job done, being consistent, working hard and smart, taking on responsibility and treating others with respect will earn you respect, give you the edge and up your bargaining power, says Meredith. And don't sell yourself short. 'In a recession, companies will pay a premium for those they value; if you don't value yourself, don't be surprised if the company doesn't.'

One-on-one negotiation can be intimidating but, says Kathy Dolk of Corporate Training Specialists – a Jo'burg company providing assertiveness training – all it requires is confidence. Assertive women express their opinions confidently and remain respectful of others. Aggressive women, on the other hand, attack or ignore others' opinions, while passive women choose not to state their opinions. Communicating requests assertively means expressing them in an honest, open and direct manner without threatening or manipulating. Making good eye contact, adopting a confident posture and speaking to the point will establish an air of authority. 'Remember when your mother told you to keep your chin up?' asks Dolk. 'This body language exudes self-confidence.'

## Strength in numbers

It's estimated that unionised women earn up to 30% more than their non-unionised colleagues, and Sharmela admits that she and her co-workers have talked about whether their situation would improve with unionisation. According to Naidoo, in certain

environments mass action is the only way in which individual voices will be heard and entertained. 'Often, the power imbalance between an employer and a single employee is so significant that unless the employee is in a key position or possesses specialised skills, the process of individual bargaining may prove challenging.' Negotiation between trade unions and employers is called collective bargaining. The Labour Relations Act creates a framework in which this bargaining can take place and ensures that all employees have the right to join a trade union.

Sharmela, however, was surprised to learn that a monetary increase wasn't the only way to up her pay package. Including many variables in a salary negotiation is what a skilled negotiator

would do, says Meredith. Naidoo adds that in the current climate, angling for benefits or perks in lieu of cash is a clever approach – asking that your remuneration package be restructured in a tax-efficient manner could result in a 15–20% 'cash-in-your-hands' increase. Bensted-Smith goes one further: 'You may want to risk a little to gain a little. Consider reducing your basic salary and negotiating more money based on productivity and performance.'

'What if my requests are declined?' asks Sharmela. Meredith advises trying to understand why you aren't more highly valued – is it a clash with your boss, a less than helpful HR department or the company culture? If the issues can't be addressed constructively, she says, 'give of your best until you can find another position.'

## USEFUL TIPS FROM WOMEN IN THE KNOW

*'Be confident – if you believe in yourself, your organisation will too!' – Vanessa Hofmeyr, Portfolio Manager, Investec Asset Management*

*'Be clear about what you're asking for. Focus on the pay increase and don't get side-tracked by other issues or become emotional. Always follow up your requests.'*

*– Liesl Fichardt, Advocate and Partner, Berwin Leighton Paisner*

*If you've taken on extra responsibilities, state that you're excited about the opportunity and looking forward to discussing your progress and reward structure at a suitable time in the future, once you've had a chance to prove yourself. Follow up after four months, cite specific examples of how you've risen to the challenges and ask for a salary review. If you haven't secured an increase after two attempts, move on.'*

*– Anet Ahern, Investment Professional, Sanlam Investment Management Global, and author of *Becoming a Mother, Remembering your Self* (Aardvark Press, 2007).*

## Girl Power

Discrimination is cited as a reason for the gender pay gap in South Africa. The Employment Equity Act promotes equal opportunity in the workplace by eliminating unfair discrimination. Says attorney Michelle Naidoo, if you have evidence that you're being paid less than a male colleague on the same level, you can follow these steps:

- State your grievance by writing a letter to your senior manager or by following your company's grievance procedure.
- If you're dissatisfied with the outcome and believe there are no justifiable grounds for disparity, refer the issue to the CCMA for conciliation.
- If the matter remains unresolved at the CCMA, the dispute will be referred to the Labour Court as an alleged unfair discrimination dispute on the grounds of gender.
- Should the court rule in your favour, it can order damages, compensation and an order directing the employer to prevent unfair discrimination in the future towards other employees. ❖

\* Visit these sites to see how your paycheck compares to industry standards:

- [www.adtalent.co.za/salary.htm](http://www.adtalent.co.za/salary.htm)
- [www.careers24.com/TalentSurvey/results.htm](http://www.careers24.com/TalentSurvey/results.htm)
- [www.mywage.co.za/main/Paycheck](http://www.mywage.co.za/main/Paycheck)

