

## **Negotiating Benefits**

Did you know that you may be able to negotiate some of your benefits? Even though companies put fixed policies on most benefits, some benefits are negotiable - and sometimes, all you have to do is ask.

**Signing bonus.** If a company wants you badly enough or can't meet your salary demands, it might sweeten the deal by offering you a signing bonus, a one-time payment that doesn't increase the base salary on which everything else is calculated. A signing bonus is a good-faith demonstration that the company agrees you're worth more than the job pays.

You can even ask for a signing bonus during the salary negotiation. Word your question something like, "What's the signing bonus for this position?" rather than "Is there a signing bonus for this position?" But remember, signing bonuses are taxed as regular income, so that's something to keep in mind as you settle on a figure.

**Vacation time.** Sometimes you can get more than the standard time going into the job.

**Extra time away (paid or unpaid).** You can also request extra paid or unpaid leave for a preplanned trip, for artistic or volunteer work, or a reasonable personal reason. And of course, you should get time away for service in the Armed Forces and for jury duty.

### **Ask and you shall receive**

At the end of your first interview, especially with an employment person, ask about benefits. Negotiate with the hiring manager. But the best place to get complete information about the benefits package is from the human resources (HR) person. In addition to health coverage and vacation time, traditional benefits could include sick time, short- and long-term disability, life insurance, AD&D (accidental death and dismemberment) insurance, survivor income, stock options, retirement plans, and more.

Don't be afraid to ask questions. You may want to know how long the waiting periods for various benefits are. How long before you can participate in the 401(k) or other retirement plan? What's the company match on the 401(k)? When are you fully vested? What kind of healthcare benefits are there (HMO, PPO, indemnity plan)? Watch out for preexisting conditions. For example, if you have a child with diabetes, many plans won't cover the child for at least six months, if ever. If that's the case, you'd want to negotiate something else to cover the expenses.

If having super healthcare benefits (dental, vision, prescription coverage, etc.) is important and the company doesn't have them, that could be a deal-breaker for you. On the other hand, some companies have "cafeteria plans," which let you choose what benefits to pay for. Maybe, for example, you can opt out of life insurance and pick up three extra days of vacation.

What other benefits would seriously interest you? You should be able to participate in networking sessions and professional associations, attend conferences, and receive additional training and other opportunities for professional growth. Some companies offer subsidized daycare, emergency daycare, a fitness center, flexible hours with telecommuting, sabbaticals, or valet service for dry cleaning or groceries.

Startups, those caffeine havens, are fond of stocking the refrigerator with soft drinks and offering bottomless cups of coffee. Wednesday might even be pizza day. But you'll probably have to wait until your first hump day on the job to negotiate for extra cheese.

- *Linda Jenkins, Salary.com contributor*