

# O'Neill Career Hub

## How to Negotiate Federal Job Offers

It is a common misconception that you cannot negotiate a federal salary after receiving an offer. By bringing up your unique qualifications and needs, such as your educational background and work experience, you are advocating for yourself, your future, and the skills you have worked hard to obtain. If you negotiate to change the starting step level, but the agency's original offer remains firm, you can still accept it, without fear of consequences. The HR specialist and supervisor may have a range in mind to offer you, depending on your years of experience, specialized experience, critical skills, and the agency's budget.

### Vocabulary:

- **General Schedule (GS)** PayScale is used by the federal government to determine the salaries of its employees.
- Under the GS system, jobs are broken down into "**Job Series**," each with a unique numerical code. Each series has a starting paygrade and a maximum paygrade.
- A **Career Ladder** position enables an employee to move quickly up the job ladder. If you're hired for such a position you may start at a lower GS level, but you could end up advancing in grade level faster than what is typical for noncareer ladder positions.
- **Within-grade increases (WGIs)** or step increases are periodic increases in a GS employee's rate of basic pay from one step of the grade of his or her position to the next higher step of that grade.
- Each grade level within the GS PayScale has **10 steps**, which are more flexible.
- **Required Waiting Periods**
  - For employees with a scheduled tour of duty, the required waiting periods established by law for advancement to the next higher step are as follows:

Advancement from...	Requires...
step 1 to step 2	52 weeks of creditable service in step 1
step 2 to step 3	52 weeks of creditable service in step 2
step 3 to step 4	52 weeks of creditable service in step 3
step 4 to step 5	104 weeks of creditable service in step 4
step 5 to step 6	104 weeks of creditable service in step 5
step 6 to step 7	104 weeks of creditable service in step 6
step 7 to step 8	156 weeks of creditable service in step 7
step 8 to step 9	156 weeks of creditable service in step 8
step 9 to step 10	156 weeks of creditable service in step 9

### Before You Negotiate:

- Consider your qualifications
  - What sets you apart from other applicants?
  - How can your educational background and work experience contribute to your success in the position they have offered you?

- If you have other job offers, you can use the salary offers they have provided to build your negotiation strategy for the value of your services.
- Calculate your expenses
  - Relocation
  - Increased cost of living
  - Commute expenses
  - Childcare
- Consult a mentor
  - Talking to someone with more experience in the federal system can give you confidence in your request before you begin your negotiations.
  - Have your mentor review your counteroffer and give advice before you negotiate with your hiring manager.
- Accept your best offer
  - Be ready to compromise on some aspects of your request.

## How to Negotiate:

- Express gratitude.
- Explain your reasons, values, and disconnects if applicable.
  - Then offer a solution to meet your needs.
- Ask if it is possible to meet your requests.
- Ask for updated offer in writing.

## What can you negotiate?

- **Salary\***
  - GS-Level
  - Step Level
  - Agencies may set the rate of basic pay of a newly-appointed employee at a rate above the minimum rate of the appropriate General Schedule (GS) grade because of—
    - the superior qualifications of the candidate; or
    - a special need of the agency for the candidate's services.
    - Please contact the employing agency for information about its policy. An agency must approve each determination to use this authority before the employee enters on duty – the determination cannot be made retroactively.
    - Learn more about [Superior Qualifications and Special Needs Pay-Setting Authority here](#).
      - [USDA SUPERIOR QUALIFICATIONS CHECKLIST AND SUPPLEMENTAL APPROVAL FORM](#)
- **Tuition Reimbursement for Student Loans**
  - The Federal student loan repayment program permits agencies to repay Federally insured student loans as a recruitment or retention incentive for candidates or current employees of the agency. The program implements 5 U.S.C. 5379, which authorizes agencies to set up their own student loan repayment programs to attract or retain highly qualified employees.
  - Some agencies pay up to \$500 per month towards student loans.
  - Learn more [here](#).
- **Recruitment Bonus Incentives**
  - Includes relocation for non-federal employees.
  - Taxed up to ~40%, depending on your income bracket.
  - Service agreement stating you must work a certain period of time or pay back a percentage.

- Some agencies may pay a recruitment bonus incentive for critical skills or severe shortage positions.
- An agency may pay a recruitment incentive to a newly appointed employee if the agency has determined that the position is likely to be difficult to fill in the absence of an incentive.
- Depending on its needs, the agency could pay up to 25% of your salary.
- Learn more [here](#).
- Come prepared!
  - See this [example spreadsheet](#) that you can share with your hiring manager to explain your rationale behind your requests.
- **Relocation Allowance (for federal employees only)**
  - An agency may pay a relocation incentive to a current employee who must relocate to accept a position in a different geographic area if the agency determines that the position is likely to be difficult to fill in the absence of an incentive. A relocation incentive may be paid only when the employee's rating of record under an official performance appraisal or evaluation system is at least "Fully Successful" or equivalent.
  - Unless the vacancy announcement specifically states that the agency will not pay for relocation, you can ask for a relocation allowance.
  - Learn more [here](#).
- Learn more about Pay and Leave Flexibilities for Recruitment and Retention [here](#).

\*Note you can only negotiate your salary if you meet the target grade for your position. For example, if you apply for a ladder GS-7/9 position and only qualify for a GS-7 versus a GS-9, you are not eligible for salary negotiation.

## Reasons for Negotiation:

1. The level, type, or quality of the candidate's skills or [competencies](#);
2. The candidate's existing salary, recent salary history, or salary documented in a competing job offer (taking into account the location where the salary was or would be earned and comparing the salary to [payable rates](#) of [basic pay](#) in the same location);
3. Significant disparities between Federal and non-Federal salaries for the skills and [competencies](#) required in the position to be filled;
4. Existing labor market conditions and employment trends, including the availability and quality of candidates for the same or [similar positions](#);
5. The success of recent efforts to recruit candidates for the same or [similar positions](#);
6. Recent turnover in the same or [similar positions](#);
7. The importance/criticality of the position to be filled and the effect on the [agency](#) if it is not filled or if there is a delay in filling it;
8. The desirability of the geographic location, duties, and/or work environment associated with the position;
9. [Agency](#) workforce needs, as documented in the [agency](#)'s strategic human capital plan; or
10. Other relevant factors

## Example Negotiations:

Plan A-C Packages: What is your deal breaker, what is non-negotiable? Be prepared to counter-negotiate if your first offer is rejected.

- **Plan A [make generic for resource]**
  - Initial Offer:
    - GS-7, Step 1, \$53,636
    - Moving Allowance: \$10,000

- Value: I will have a graduate degree in public affairs concentrating in environmental policy and natural resources management in May. I have 9 credit hours in administrative, environmental, and natural resources laws, regulations and statutes that directly apply to this job.
  - Solution: Bring about
    - GS-7, Step 10, \$68,426
    - Moving Allowance: \$14,000
    - Student Debt Assistance: \$10,000/yr
    - Housing Assistance: FS Housing for me to help find permanent housing
      - Moving allowance would still apply.
- **Plan B & C:** Dependent on what they say back

## **Tips and Tricks:**

1. Review the job announcement for incentives that may be available. For example, below is a screenshot of the “Summary” section of a job description on USAjobs. Sometimes it might have explicit language that lets applicants know if they are eligible for relocation or recruitment incentives.
2. When determining whether you qualify for a position, review the qualifications section to understand what you are explicitly qualified for. You must meet the eligibility and qualifications requirements as defined by the job announcement. For example, below is a screenshot of the “Qualifications” section of a job description on USAjobs that tells applicants how they will be evaluated.

## Visual Aids:

If you are offered the job and think that you can negotiate your salary range or benefits, it's important to have credible reasons for why you deserve that salary, benefits package, moving allowance, etc. You can use the tables below to help visualize if you qualify for a specific General-Schedule (GS) pay grade level. Use the left column to list each job qualification under the specific GS level, then use the right column to provide examples from your application packet.

Job Qualifications/Eligibility GS-9	Application/Transcript Examples
Processing Special use application	
Administering Special use authorizations for outfitter and guides and recreation events	
Manage volunteer and partner agreements	
Have a combination of graduate level education and specialized experience that is directly related to this position (excess of 18 semester hours)	

If your job is eligible for a Recruitment Incentive, you can view and copy this [spreadsheet template](#) which can help rationalize your request when emailing this to your hiring manager.

Another visual aid can come from the survey portion of your job application. In the furthest left column, write out the survey questions. The central column is the answer you selected, and the furthest right column is where you can provide an example from your application packet.

Survey Question	Answer	Example
Participate with other natural resource disciplines to ensure program requirements are included in the project planning and execution.	I have performed this task on the job. My work on this task was monitored closely by a supervisor or senior employee to ensure compliance with proper procedures.	
Assist with surveys and studies of wilderness areas, recreation facilities, trails for rehabilitation plans.	I have had education or training in how to perform this task, but have not yet performed it on the job.	
Receive training in the development of long and short-range plans for wilderness, trails, special uses and recreation resources for agency guidelines and direction.	I have not had education, training, or experience in performing this task.	

Assist higher graded employees with initiating contact with the public to educate visitors and protect resources.	I have performed this task as a regular part of a job. I have performed it independently and normally without review by a supervisor or senior employee.	
Assist in communicating agency management practices, rules, and regulations to the public for education on wilderness, trails, special uses and recreation activities.	I am considered an expert in performing this task. I have supervised performance of this task or am normally the person who is consulted by other workers to assist or train them in doing this task because of my expertise.	

### Additional Resources:

- [Overview of the General Schedule \(GS\) PayScale](#)
- <https://gogovernment.org/application-process/negotiating-an-offer/>
- <https://www.monster.com/career-advice/article/negotiate-a-higher-federal-salary>
- <https://www.opm.gov/policy-data-oversight/pay-leave/pay-administration/fact-sheets/within-grade-increases/>
- <https://www.indeed.com/career-advice/pay-salary/negotiate-salary-federal-job-offers>
- <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/can-i-negotiate-my-salary-when-receive-conditional-job-angel-castro/>
- <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/what-superior-qualification-special-needs-pay-setting-angel-castro/>
  - [Superior Qualification and Special Needs Pay-Setting Authority](#)
  - Checklist: <https://www.usda.gov/sites/default/files/documents/ad-3077.pdf>