



How to put a “price tag” on employees

Valuing a job can be a lot harder than pricing your company's products and services. After all, pay packages have few rules. They go up and down depending on geography, industry conventions, seniority and the job market, as well as a candidate's background. The salary you set must be high enough to attract and retain top applicants but not so high that it eats into your profits. How do you figure how much a job is worth? Follow this five-step guide.

1. Review your pay practices. Often, business owners react to what a prospective employee wants before they know what they should be paying. Don't wait until you find a candidate to come up with an offer. Do some homework and review your past practices and precedents. The decision comes down to how you value the job and what your company can afford. You also need to keep the salaries of new hires in line with what you pay current employees.

Go through a budget process and check how much you spent on payroll for the past year or two. Decide how the position you're filling fits into that overall budget.

2. Define the job clearly and completely. You can't research a job's going rate unless you compare apples to apples. You need a clear-cut job description, not just a job title. Match the job to others in the marketplace by comparing the core functions, responsibility level, and required experience.

3. Track the competition. Uncovering the competitive rate for a job takes detective work. To find what other companies pay, research these sources:

- *Search classified ads in newspapers, trade magazines, or online job boards.*
- *Quiz your professional contacts. Talking to officials at the local chamber of commerce, or expert panelists at a conference, or to other business owners will yield current salary data. Try joining a professional organization in your field. Many associations mount annual salary surveys. The data, funded by member fees, is collected just so companies have access to going pay rates. Also call staffing agencies, recruiters, and/or some of your vendors to learn more.*

- *Search government and media sources. Your first stop should be the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (www.bls.gov). On the home page, click "Wages by Area and Occupation" to find salary histories. This information, while deep and extensive, may be a few years old. For more current information, check business and trade magazine Web sites. Many journals run annual salary surveys, both in print and online.*
- *Pay for a customized survey. Many compensation consultants and market researchers sell salary surveys for specific fields or certain-sized companies.*

4. Set the salary range. Once you have an idea of the competitive rate, experts suggest you set parameters for the job – both a floor and a ceiling.

5. Bundle pay and perks. Health care and retirement benefits and "quality of life" perks go a long way toward attracting talent. Don't overlook flextime, job sharing, and similar options. Employees with two career families, young children and long commutes often choose more time over more money. Consider adding these perks to the compensation package:

- *Work-at-home privileges*
- *Discretionary hours (earlier mornings or later nights)*
- *Paying for all or part of club memberships, association dues, and training courses*
- *Bonuses, such as time off or other prizes, that are pegged to performance goals*
- *Paying for all or part of home technology equipment and/or telecommuting expenses*
- *Picking up all or part of employee-assistance services, such as tax or retirement planning, daycare, family counseling and so on.*

Plan for the future. However you structure the salary, don't forget to plan for the future. Leave room for raises and think six to twelve months to two years ahead. When you're ready, put the offer in writing in an offer letter. Describe all the details and terms, including start date, pay package, benefits, vacations, and special perks such as telecommuting and flextime. Putting everything in writing avoids confusion or disagreements later on.



Small budgets, big results. Creative ways to stretch your marketing dollars

Marketing and advertising activities are expensive, yet vitally necessary, to your business. Too often, small business owners fear that they cannot afford to promote their businesses without busting their budgets and fail to do anything at all. Yet, with a little creativity, you can get the word out without spending a bundle.

Support local sports. Sponsor a local children's team for free advertising. In exchange for a sponsorship fee, the players will wear uniforms with your company's name or logo, or post advertising around the field or in program books.

Sponsor a blood drive. You provide the space and the local Red Cross organization does the rest. In many cases, you'll get free radio and newspaper ads.

Publicize your staff. Most small newspapers also have community bulletin-board columns in their business sections. Notify the business editor every time an employee gets a promotion or completes professional course work.

Magnetize your brand. Are your employees making deliveries in unmarked cars? For a modest fee, you can have removable magnetic signs made. By placing the signs on the vehicles, they can become rolling billboards during the day and convert back to private cars at night.

Send a card. Send birthday cards, Thanksgiving cards, congratulations cards – they're great, personal ways to let customers know you care.

Customize cash register receipts. If you generate receipts for your customers, they should include more than just a transaction record. Use register receipts to tell customers about upcoming specials, and events.



Basic security precautions discourage computer hackers

Spyware, adware, and computer viruses have wreaked havoc with many businesses.



The bad news is that there's no truly hackproof system. The good news is that hacking is typically a crime of opportunity. If your system is safeguarded with a minimum amount of protection -- including a firewall and an antivirus program -- hackers will likely move on and look for easier prey.

Install a Firewall

The firewall is probably the most important part of any security scheme. The firewall prevents unwanted access to your networked computers. Once installed, you can "teach" the application what programs are allowed access to the Internet, and what outside sites are allowed to communicate with your computer. A good firewall will protect you against hacker attacks but not against viruses.

Install and Update Antivirus Software

Keeping your antivirus program up to date is almost as important as installing it. Updating virus definitions will ensure that you have protection against the very latest virus variants. Symantec and McAfee are the leaders in antivirus applications. Also keep current with operating system updates. They are released frequently to plug security holes discovered by hackers.

Consider Adware and Spyware Detection

Adware and spyware aren't necessarily catastrophic to your business, but they can be annoying and will decrease productivity. Installing an application like Lavasoft's Ad-Aware product will keep your computers free of spyware and adware.

You should install your security measures as soon as you bring your new system online. It can take as little as 30 minutes for a new, unsecured computer to be hijacked by hackers and turned into a "zombie computer" that will do the hacker's bidding: sending out spam email or even looking for other computers to take over.