

# You Can Negotiate a 3-Day Weekend

Itamar Turner-Trauring

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# Preface

This book is the result of my own journey to negotiating a shorter workweek as a programmer. The lessons I learned—both on my own and from others—are summarized in this book, as a guide for your journey. But a book can't do your work for you: you will need to practice the necessary skills, and you will need to choose the necessary actions for your particular situation.

*You* ought to be in control of your career and your life, *you* ought to be able to decide the kind of life you live. My hope is that this book will help you negotiate the time to achieve the goals that you have chosen.

—Itamar Turner-Trauring

**I need your help!** To help improve this book, both for yourself and for other readers, please [email me](#) any questions, comments, or suggestions you may have.

# Chapter 1

## Introduction

Are you tired of working evenings and weekends? Do you have children you want to see for more than just an hour after work? Do you want time for a hobby or three, be it tennis, baking, pottery or chess? Or do you want time to work on a side projects, or time to improve your programming skills?

Do you want a 3-day weekend: a 32-hour workweek?

Reduced hours are achievable! It's been years since I've worked long hours, and for the past 6 years I've been working less than 40 hours per week. Soon after my daughter was born I quit my job as a product manager and became a consultant, writing software for clients. I worked

20–30 hours per week while our child was in daycare, and eventually I was hired as an employee by one of my clients, where I worked a 28 hour workweek, spending the rest of what would have been work hours taking care of my child when she wasn't in daycare. At my next two jobs—also startups—I've worked 35 hours per week, no more.

And it's not just me. Other software engineers have also succeeded at negotiating a shorter workweek; along the way I'll share some of their stories, and what you can learn from them.

## **1.1 Negotiating shorter hours isn't easy**

Finding a job where you can work fewer hours is fundamentally different from finding a good job, or a well-paying job. The benefits you're asking for at a good job are offered by the company by default. And negotiating for higher pay is part of the hiring game.

Working fewer hours, in contrast, is rarely a standard benefit: you're asking for a deviation from the norm, which makes life harder for your manager.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>This is not universally true: in some European countries shorter

The manager you're dealing with—a hiring manager or existing manager—will have new worries, hurdles that you will need to get over:

- On the business level: How will this impact the team's ability to achieve its goals? Will you still be productive?
- On the administrative level: How do benefits work? How should your pay be scaled? What is the actual normal workweek you're going down from?

Faced with these worries, a manager will be tempted to take the easy way out by refusing your request. So you need to either help reduce their worries, motivate them to overcome them, or ideally both at once. And this is also part of the negotiating process.

## **It's not “part-time”**

These worries are why I'm not going to call these “part-time” jobs, even though that is a perfectly accurate description. The phrase “part-time” suggests a lack of commitment, at least in US culture. You're not really there all the time, you're not a full member of the team... it just

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workweeks are more common.

doesn't sound good.

Since you need to convince a manager that you will be a productive member of their team, you should be using a phrase that suggests full commitment to the team and the project. You'd like to "reduce your work hours", or have a "compressed schedule". And I will try to avoid the phrase for the rest of the book.

## 1.2 An overview of the book

Before we move on to the specifics of negotiating for a 3-day weekend, there are some basic principles we need to cover:

- In order to negotiate, you need to understand some basic principles, which will be covered by [Chapter 2](#).
- [Chapter 3](#) explains how having money in the bank can strengthen your negotiating position; living below your means will also make it easier for you to accept a lower salary when you cut your hours.
- To help you practice your negotiation, [Chapter 4](#) suggests some exercises you can do at your current job. They will help you improve your negotiation skills, but also free up some time.

- [Chapter 5](#) covers the different dimensions you will need to consider when negotiating: your hours, pay, benefits, and more.

Next, it's time to cover what you're here for: negotiating a 3-day weekend. There are two basic places you can do so:

1. At your current job.
2. At a new job.

Negotiating at your current job is much easier. You are more valuable, you have more credibility, and you have an insider's view of the constraints and possibilities. That means overcoming the business and administrative hurdles mentioned above will be much easier.

Once you've negotiated that first job, negotiating the second, third, and fourth time will be easier. So if at all possible, it's best to start at your current job before moving on elsewhere.

- [Chapter 6](#) explains in detail why being an existing employee will make it easier for you to negotiate.
- The specific negotiating process you should follow is covered in [Chapter 7](#).

If it's time to move on to another job, or you know it won't

work at your current job, it is possible (though much harder) to negotiate a shorter workweek as a new hire.

- In order to negotiate at a new job, you need to understand what makes you valuable as a programmer and as an employee. This is covered in [Chapter 8](#).
- [Chapter 9](#) covers the next step, finding jobs to apply to.
- Finally, [Chapter 10](#) covers the negotiation process for a new job.

Finally, there's the question of money: how do you maximize your income while still reducing your hours? This is the topic of [Chapter 11](#).

But before we get there, we must start at the beginning: the basics of negotiation, which we'll discuss next.

## Chapter 2

# The Basics of Negotiation

How do you find a job with a shorter workweek? By negotiating better terms, either at your current job or at a new one. And to do that you need to understand the basics of negotiation.

In this chapter I'm going to be focusing on salary negotiation as an example, since it's more common and something you'll also want to do. But the same principles will apply when we start talking about negotiating a shorter workweek.

## 2.1 Believing in yourself

Before you negotiate with anyone else, you need to negotiate with yourself. You might have a little voice in your head telling you stories that keep you back, and you need to convince this voice that yes, you can and should ask for more.

**“I’m not that valuable, why would anyone give me more?”**

In later chapters we’ll address the ways in which you are valuable, both as an existing and potential employee. For now, let’s consider the broader picture.

First, an employer will only hire people if they feel they are getting sufficient value above and beyond the cost of the employee. And since there’s always uncertainty about how much value an employee produces, the expected value needs to be a lot higher than the cost. So if your employer is paying \$100,000 for your salary and benefits, that suggests the value you’re producing is more like \$200,000.

Second, at the moment the hiring market for programmers is very tight. This may change, but until it does programmers have a stronger bargaining position.

Third, as a programmer there's almost always an employer which pays higher. If you live in a low-income area, there are higher-income areas accessible via remote work. And there's almost always another company that will pay more than your current job, given that at the top end companies like Google and Facebook pay out huge amounts of money in stock grants.

**“Why should I be treated differently? I’m doing OK, why ask for more?”**

You shouldn't *need* to be treated differently. Everyone should have a place to live, enough to eat, a good education, health care—and everyone should be able to work 32 hours per week, or whatever hours they choose.

But that is not the world we live in, for now at least. You can and should try to make things better for everyone<sup>1</sup>, but in the meantime you should also make sure you're getting what you need. If you don't, who will?

Consider, for example, the cost of being underpaid: you might find yourself needing more money later on, but with lower savings because of your lower past pay. Often you'll have a harder time getting a large salary bump when

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<sup>1</sup>If you live in the US I encourage you to check out the [Tech Worker's Coalition](#) and/or the [Democratic Socialists of America](#).

changing jobs, because many companies are unwilling to increase your salary more than an arbitrary amount above your previous pay. This is a good reason not to share your previous salary during job interviews—but even better is to get paid fairly from the start.

### **“Asking for things is terrifying!”**

It’s true, negotiating can be stressful, and even scary. The first time I negotiated a short workweek I was dealing with people I knew, and they knew what I wanted from the start. But when I negotiated a shorter workweek the second time I was dealing with strangers, and only raised the subject once I’d gotten a job offer. We talked on the phone, but even so I spent the whole conversation dealing with an adrenaline rush, and the resulting fight-or-flight physiological effects were not helpful.

What can you do to deal with this fear?

- Only negotiate once you know what you’ll do if things go wrong (your fallback). This will reduce the uncertainty: you’ll have a plan for the worst case. I’ll cover this in more detail below.
- Practice negotiating small things, which will make it easier to negotiate big things. We’ll cover this in

## Chapter 4.

- Prepare in advance for an important negotiation. You can come up with arguments in advance, write them down, and have them available on site so you don't forget the details at the critical moment. You can also role play the negotiation in advance with a friend or family member.
- Don't give an answer on the spot; you can always say you need to think about it. I'll cover this in more detail below.

Finally, always remember your goal, what you're trying get out of the negotiation. Even if the negotiation is stressful, it will be over soon—and the benefits can change your life: a shorter workweek, a larger salary, or ideally both. Here's Brian, whose story you'll hear later in the book, talking about his experience negotiating a shorter workweek:

BRIAN: "I never negotiated anything before, at previous jobs I more or less accepted what was offered. I'm highly inexperienced at negotiating, my boss was surprised that I was able to negotiate at all. It was quite a learning experience, and it felt good to stand up for myself in a negotiating context."

And here's Alex, whose story you will also hear:

ALEX K: "You get better with practice. I was super nervous the first few calls I got where I was going to negotiate, but with practice you get better."

## 2.2 The wrong way to negotiate

Before moving on to the principles of negotiation, let me share a story of how I negotiated badly.

During my first real job search I interviewed at a company in New York City that was building a financial trading platform. They were pretty excited about some specific technologies I'd learned while working on Twisted, an open source networking framework. They offered me a job, I accepted, and my job search was over.

But then they sent me their intellectual property agreement, and I actually read legal documents; you

should read them too. The agreement would have given the company ownership over any open source work I did, including work on Twisted. I wanted to ensure I could keep doing open source development, especially given that was their reason for hiring me in the first place. I asked for an exemption covering Twisted, they wouldn't agree, and so we went back and forth trying to reach an agreement.

Eventually they came back with a new offer: in return for not working on Twisted I'd get a 20% salary increase over their initial offer. I thought about it briefly, then said no and walked away from the job. Since I had neither a CS degree—I'd dropped out—nor much of an employment history, open source contribution was important to my career. It was how I'd gotten contracting work, and it was the reason they'd offered me this job. And I enjoyed doing it, too, so I wasn't willing to give it up.

I posted about this experience online, and an employee of ITA Software, which was based in the Boston area, suggested they were happy to support contributions to open source projects. It seemed worth a try, so I applied for the position. And when eventually I got a job offer from ITA and they asked me

for my salary requirements, I asked for the second offer I'd gotten, the one that was 20% higher than my original offer. They accepted, and I've lived in the Boston area ever since.

As we go through the principles below, I'll come back to this story and point out how they were (mis)applied in my two negotiations.

## **2.3 The four principles of negotiation**

You can think of the negotiation process as building on four principles:

1. Employment is a negotiated relationship.
2. Knowledge is power.
3. Negotiate from a position of strength.
4. Use the right tactics.

Let's go through them one by one.

## **Principle #1: Employment is a negotiated relationship**

If you're an employee, your employment relationship was negotiated. When you got a job offer and accepted it, that was a negotiation, even if you didn't push back at all. Your choice isn't between negotiating and not negotiating: it's between negotiating badly, or negotiating well.

### **Negotiate actively**

If you don't actively try to negotiate, if you don't ask for what you want, if you don't ask for what you're *worth*—you're unlikely to get it. Salaries, for example, are a place where your interests and your employer's are very much at odds. All things being equal, if you're doing the exact same work and have the same likelihood of leaving, would your employer prefer to pay you less or more? Most employers will pay you less if they can, and I almost had to learn that the hard way.

**Applying the principle:** In my story above, I never proactively negotiated. Instead, I accepted a job offer from the financial company without any sort of additional demands. If they were happy to offer me a 20% raise just to quit open source, I probably could have gotten an even

higher salary if I'd just asked in the first place.

## **Negotiation starts early, and never ends**

Not only do you need to negotiate actively, you also need to realize that negotiation starts much earlier than you think, and ends only when you leave to a different job:

- The minute you start thinking about applying to a company, you've started the negotiation process; as you'll see, you'll want to do research before you even talk to them.
- Your interview is part of your negotiation, and you can in fact negotiate the interview process itself (e.g. suggest sharing a code sample instead of doing a whiteboard puzzle).
- As an employee you will continue to negotiate: if you always say "yes" when your boss asks you to work long hours, your contract for a 3-day weekend will mean nothing.

In short, your whole relationship as an employee is based on negotiation.

## Distinguish between friend and foe

A negotiation involves two sides: yours, and the company's. When you're negotiating it's important to remember that anyone who works for the company is on the company's side. Not yours.

I once had to negotiate the intellectual property agreement at a new job. My new employer was based in the UK, and it had a US subsidiary organized by a specialist company. These subsidiary specialists had provided the contract I was signing.

When I explained the changes I wanted to make, the manager at the subsidiary specialist told me that my complaint had no merit, because the contract had been written by the "best lawyers in Silicon Valley." But the contract had been written by lawyers working for the *company*, not for me. If his claim had been true (spoiler: they were not in fact the best lawyers in Silicon Valley), that would have just made my argument stronger. The better the company's lawyers, the more carefully I ought to have read the contract, and the more I ought to have pushed back.

The contracts the company wants you to sign? They were written by lawyers working for the company.

Human Resources works for the company, as does the in-house recruiter. However friendly they may seem, they are not working for you. And third-party recruiters are paid by the company, not you. It's true that sometimes their commission is tied to your salary, which means they would rather you get paid more. But since they get paid only once per candidate, volume is more important than individual transactions: it's in their best interest to get you hired as quickly as possible so they can move on to placing the next candidate.

Since all these people aren't working for you, during a negotiation they're *working against you*.

The only potential exception to this rule are friends who also work for the company, and aren't directly involved in the negotiation process: even if they are constrained in some ways, they're probably still on your side. They can serve as a backchannel for feedback and other information that the company can't or won't share.

## **Principle #2: Knowledge is power**

The more you know about the situation, the better you'll do as a negotiator. More knowledge gives more power: to you, but also to the company.

### **Know what you want**

The first thing you need to do when negotiating is understand what *you* want.

- What is your ideal outcome?
- What can you compromise on, and what can't you compromise on?
- What is the worst outcome you're willing to accept?

### **Do your research**

You also want to understand where the other side is coming from:

- What is the company's goal, and the negotiator's goal? For example, if you discover their goal is minimizing hassle, you might be able to get what you want by making the process a little smoother.

- What resources are available to them? An unfunded startup has different resources than a large company, for example.
- Has the company done something similar in the past, or will your request be unprecedented? For example, what hours do other employees in similar positions work? How much are other employees paid?
- What do other companies in the area or industry provide?
- How is this particular business segment doing: are they losing money, or doing great?

The more you understand going in, the better you'll do, and that means doing your research *before* negotiation starts.

**Applying the principle:** In my story above I never did any research about salaries, either in NY or in Boston. As a result, I had no idea I was being offered a salary far below market rates.

As a comparison, here's a real example of how research can help your negotiation, from an engineer named Adam:

ADAM: "Being informed on salaries really helped my negotiating position. When my latest employer made

me an offer I asked them why it was lower than their average salary on Glassdoor.com. The real reason was likely ‘we offer as little as possible to get you on board.’ They couldn’t come up with a convincing reason and so the salary was boosted 10%.”

Glassdoor is a site that allows employees to anonymously share salaries and job reviews. Five minutes of research got Adam a 10% raise: not bad at all!

### **Listen and empathize**

If you only had to make yourself happy this wouldn’t be a negotiation: you need to understand the other side’s needs and wants, what they’re worrying about, what they’re feeling. That means you need to listen, not just talk: if you do, you will often gather useful information that can help you make yourself more valuable, or address a particular worry. And you need to feel empathy towards the person you’re talking to: you don’t need to agree or subordinate yourself to their goals, but you do need to understand how they’re feeling.

## Share information carefully

Sharing information at the wrong time during a negotiation can significantly weaken your position. For example, sharing your previous salary will often anchor what the company is willing to offer you:

ADAM: “I graduated from university and started working at the end of 2012. At my first job I worked for way under my market rate. I knew this and was OK with it because they were a good company.

Then I switched jobs in 2013. What I hadn’t accounted for was that my salary at my first job was going to limit my future salary prospects. I had to fight hard for raises at my next job before I was in line with people straight out of school, because they didn’t want to double my salary at my previous company.”

In general, when interviewing for a job you shouldn’t share your previous salary, or your specific salary demands—except of course when it *is* helpful to do so. For example, let’s say you’re moving from Google to a tiny bootstrapped startup, and you know you won’t be able to

get the same level of salary. Sharing your current salary can help push your offer higher, or used as leverage to get shorter hours: “I know you can’t offer me my previous salary of \$\$\$, but here’s something you could do—”. Just make sure not to share it too early, or they might decide you’d never accept any offer at all and stop the interview process too early.

Most of the time, however, you shouldn’t share either your previous salary or specific salary requirements. If the company insists on getting your previous salary, you can:

- If you work somewhere with relevant laws (e.g. California and Massachusetts), point out that this question is illegal. Asking about salary *expectations* is not illegal in these jurisdictions, so be careful about the distinction.
- Ask for the company’s salary range for the position, as well as the next level up in the salary tree. Chances are they will refuse to share, in which case you can correspondingly refuse to share your information.
- Say something like “I expect to be paid industry standard pay for my experience.”

**Applying the principle:** I shouldn’t have told ITA Software my salary requirement. Instead, I should have gotten them

to make the first offer, which would have given me more information about what they were willing to pay.

### **Principle #3: Negotiate from a position of strength**

The stronger your negotiation position, the more likely you are to get what you want. And this is especially important when you're asking for something abnormal, like a 3-day weekend.

#### **Have a good fallback (BATNA)**

If negotiation fails, what will you do? Whatever it is, that is your fallback, sometimes known as the "Best Alternative to a Negotiated Agreement" (BATNA). The better your fallback, the better your alternative, the stronger your negotiating position is. Always figure out your fallback in advance, before you start negotiating.

For example, imagine you're applying for a new job:

- If you're unemployed and have an empty bank account, your fallback might be moving in with your parents. This does not give you a strong negotiating

position.

- If you're employed, and more or less content with your current job, your fallback is staying where you are. That makes your position much stronger.

If you have a strong fallback, you can choose to walk away at any time, and this will make asking for more much easier.

## **Provide and demonstrate value**

The more an organization wants you as an employee, the more they'll be willing to offer you. The people you're negotiating with don't necessarily know your value: you need to make sure they understand why you're worth what you're asking.

For example, when you're interviewing for a job, you need to use at least part of the interview to explain your value to your prospective employer: your accomplishments and skills. Once you've established the value of your skills, asking for more—more money, unusual terms—can actually make you seem more valuable. And having another job offer—or an existing job—can also help, by showing you are in demand.

Finally, remember that your goal is to make sure the other side's needs are met—not at your own expense, but if they

don't think hiring you is worth it, you aren't going to get anything. Here's how Alex explains it:

ALEX K: "Think about the other person and how they're going to react, how you can try to manage that proactively. You need to treat your negotiating partner as a person, not a program.

Initially I had been approaching it adversarially, 'I need to extract value from you, I have to wrestle you for it' but it's more productive to negotiate with an attitude of 'we both need to get our needs met.' The person you're talking to is looking to hire someone productive who can create value, so figure out how can you couch what you want in a way that proactively addresses the other person's concerns."

## **Principle #4: Use the right tactics**

Once you've realized you're negotiating, have done your research, and are negotiating from a position of strength, applying the right negotiation tactics will increase your chances of success even more.

## **Ask for more than you want**

Obviously you don't want to ask for less than what you want. But why not ask for exactly what you want?

First, it might turn out that the company is willing to give you far more than you expected or thought possible.

Second, if you ask for exactly what you want there's no way for you to compromise without getting less than what you want. By asking for more, you can compromise while still getting what you wanted.

**Applying the principle:** If I'd wanted a \$72,000 salary, and research suggested that was a fair salary, I should have asked for \$80,000. If I was lucky the company would have said yes; if they wanted to negotiate me down, I would have no problems agreeing to a lower number so long as it was above \$72,000.

## **Negotiate multiple things at once**

Your goal when negotiating is not to "win." Rather, your goal is to reach an agreement that passes your minimal bar, and gets you as much as is feasible. Feasibility means you also need to take into account what the other side wants as well. If you've reached an impasse, and you still think you

can make a deal that *you* like, try to come up with creative ways to work out a solution that *they* will like.

If you only negotiate one thing at once, every negotiation has a winner and a loser. For example, if all you're negotiating is salary, either you're making more money, or the company is saving money: it's a zero-sum negotiation. This limits your ability to come up with a solution that maximizes value for you while still meeting the other side's needs.

**Applying the principle:** In my story above, the financial company wanted intellectual property protection, I wanted to be able to write open source, and we were at an impasse. So they expanded the scope of the negotiation to include my salary, which allowed them to make tradeoffs between the two—more money for me in return for what they wanted. If I'd cared less about working on open source I might have accepted that offer.

### **Never give an answer immediately**

During the actual negotiation you should never decide on the spot, nor are you required to. If you get a job offer you can explain that you need a little time to think about it: say something like "I have to run this by my spouse/significant other/resident expert." This will give you the time to

consider your options in a calmer state of mind, and not just blurt out “yes” at the first semi-decent offer.

Having someone else review the offer is a good idea in general; a friend of mine ran her job offers by her sister, who had an MBA. But it’s also useful to mention that other person as someone who has to sign off on the offer. That gives you the ability to say you’d like to accept an offer, but your spouse/expert thinks you can do better.

Notice that the employer almost always has this benefit already. Unless you’re negotiating with the owner of the business, you’re negotiating with an agent: someone in HR, say. When you make a demand, the HR person might say “I have go to check with the hiring manager”, and when they come back with less than you wanted it’s not *their* fault, they’re just passing on the bad news. The implication is that the low offer is just the way it is, and there’s nothing they can do about.

Don’t fall for this trick: they often can change the offer.

## **2.4 Exercise: Applying the principles**

Read the following salary negotiation story, from a software engineer named Laura:

LAURA: “I had moved to the local tech hub in the hopes of finding a job. I was living at a friends’ house while they were traveling, and had about 4 months before I really needed to find a job and my own place. So, there was some time pressure—I really wanted to be out by the time they returned.

The job market was good. I got interviews mostly through a local recruiter. At the last place, I went through their in-person interview process and got an offer to work temp-to-perm. I worked for several weeks and in the end I got an offer for a permanent position. They knew that I was living with a friend and was looking for my own place. At this point, there was some haggling about the salary; I was negotiating through the recruiter who had originally placed me.

I had been hoping for \$100K or more. My last position had been \$85K, but it had been at a very small startup in an area without many software jobs. I had expected salaries upwards of \$100K in the city (no specific reason, just what I was hearing online).

Here’s how the negotiation went:

1. They offered \$90K.

2. I asked if they could go to \$95K.
3. They told me \$92K, and we settled on that.

I was still disappointed and actually angry, although I didn't let them know this. After all, I'd moved from an area where living was cheaper and had barely gotten a cost-of-living adjustment in salary. And then a \$2K bump in the negotiation was all they would give? It set the tone for my entire time working there; this feeling that they were super cheap and didn't appreciate my value to them. I did learn later on that other engineers were being paid \$110K-\$120K. All of them had been there for over 5 years, I believe, so maybe it was salary inflation."

Laura did a lot better than I did: she actively negotiated, and did at least some research upfront. But she likely could have done better.

Go back through the principles above, and come up with at least 3 actions Laura could have taken to improve her chances of a better salary. Then go compare your suggestions to those that Laura and I came up with in [Section 11.3](#).

---

## Take Action!

Different legal jurisdictions have different parameters that can impact your negotiating tactics. For example:

- In Germany there is a legal right for existing full-time employees to request a change to part-time status, which can be difficult for employers to reject. You'll need to know the details to understand how to use this procedure.
- In California and Massachusetts employers are not allowed to ask about past salaries during interviews. Massachusetts also has provisions requiring equal pay for identical work across genders, and as of 2019 Oregon has even broader protections. Employers can and will ask about your salary *expectations* everywhere: be cagey and try not to give out unnecessary information.
- Non-competes are restricted in various ways in different places.
- Intellectual property ownership of what you do in your spare time can also vary by state.

Before you start negotiating, make sure you've done your research and learned your legal rights.

## Resources

- *Ask For It: How Women Can Use the Power of Negotiation to Get What They Really Want*, by Linda Babcock and Sara Laschever, is a great introductory book on negotiation. Some parts of the book are aimed at women, who suffer from additional biases when negotiating, but much of the content should be helpful to anyone.
- *Secrets of Power Negotiating, 15th Anniversary Edition*, by Roger Dawson, is a good second book on negotiation. It covers many common negotiating tactics and approaches: even if you don't apply them yourself, it's still useful to recognize when the other side is using them on you.

# Chapter 3

# Building Financial Strength

You have a job so you can get paid: you need to money to pay your bills, buy your food, and so on. In this chapter we'll cover:

- The problem with reducing your hours: a lower income.
- Why saving money can strengthen your negotiating position.
- The long-term benefits of living below your means.

## 3.1 Preparing for a shorter workweek

As you would expect, and as we'll cover in more detail in the next chapter, reducing your working hours usually means reducing your income. If you're living paycheck to paycheck, cutting your salary by 20% so you can work 4 days a week isn't going to be feasible. So you need to make sure you can live on enough money, in advance. If you want to go down to a 4-day workweek, you need to make sure you're spending no more than 80% of your current salary.

Brian is a software engineer who decided he wanted to work only half-time, and spend the rest of his time expanding his skills and working on personal projects. This would have meant cutting his income in half, and to prepare for this he reduced his expenses in advance:

**BRIAN:** "If my boss had agreed to my working every other week that would have been painful, but I would have been able to break even. I planned and prepared for this.

I moved into a cheaper apartment, drew up a budget, and intentionally decreased my expenses. The cost of living in Germany is relatively affordable: if you'd like

to lower your expenses it's possible. Food is affordable, housing is not too extreme depending on where you live. I don't have a family or a lot of other fixed expenses, and as a single person it's quite doable if you have some self control and decide what your priorities are.”

If you're going from 5 to 4 days a week you won't have to do anything near as dramatic, but small changes can make a big difference.

## **3.2 Strengthening your negotiation position**

If you reduce your expenses before you find a job with reduced hours, in the interim you're going to start saving money. That money in the bank can act as an emergency fund, strengthening your negotiating position.

If you need to live off your paycheck, if at the end of the month your cash balance is zero, you can't say no. You need a job, you need *your* job, and you're stuck. But if you can

temporarily live off your savings, you have a much stronger fallback.

Let's consider some specific ways in which savings can help.

## **Quitting when you need to**

Someday you may need to quit and find a new job. You may see it coming in advance, or you might find out with one day's notice:

At one point I worked at a well-funded, exciting startup. We'd launched our first product, and we were working on the second one, though it was taking longer than expected. But times were good and investment money was easy to come by.

And then, one day, the wheel turned: suddenly VC money was harder to get. The board got antsy about lack of progress and we had the first in a series of all-hands meetings, resulting in a small round of layoffs.

I should have started looking for a new job, but instead I stuck around. Unfortunately we continued spinning

our wheels, moving too slowly towards launching a second product, and I became increasingly unhappy about my job. I have a hard time keeping my mouth shut, and one day I made a snarky comment on a company Slack channel about our management's decision to switch to a new programming language. Something like "if we don't use language X our company will be destroyed, oh no!"

That evening I got an email from the CEO. He warned me that he was putting me on notice: this comment was unacceptable, and if I said anything like that again I could be fired for cause. My wife suggested my comment had indeed been unprofessional and rude, so that evening I emailed an apology to the CEO. His reply suggested that all was forgiven, but I'd had enough.

The next day I quit, giving two weeks notice. On my last day at work there was the second all-hands company meeting; I wasn't invited. The board and CEO had ousted the co-founders and laid off half the company. The company continued on for another eight months, and then had its final all-hands meeting, where the company's end was announced.

I was getting unhappy enough that I should have just quit my job earlier. Or rather, I should have started looking for a new job, as some of my colleagues did (one of them gave notice the same day I did). But having some savings meant that when I reached the point where I felt I *had* to quit, it wasn't a disaster.

## **Looking for a job**

Once you are looking for a job you need the freedom to say “no” to a job offer that won't work for you. After I quit, I spent a few weeks trying to relax, detox, and figure out what I wanted in my next job. The job I'd quit had been a remote job that was less than full time, and I decided that I wanted a local job, but still working less than full time.

Since I was being very picky about what I wanted, I had a rather difficult job search ahead of me. Even under the best of circumstances it can take a while to find a job. If my initial search didn't go well my plan was to start interviewing for remote jobs, which would mean even more time before I had a job.

Luckily, I could take the time to at least try to find my ideal job because I had some savings. If I hadn't had that money saved I would have started having trouble paying my bills,

which means I would have been forced to take the first job offer I got. I would not have been able to afford a leisurely, more difficult job search process that helped me find another less-than-full time job.

## **Saying “no” some more**

There are other occasions where the freedom to say “no” is important.

**Saying “no” to unreasonable working hours.** Sometimes your boss might ask you to do something unreasonable, like taking on twice as much work as you can manage. The stronger your alternatives the better your negotiating position. Money in the bank makes it easier to say “no,” because you don’t *need* the job.

**Saying “no” to illegal or immoral work.** Someday you might find yourself being asked to do something illegal by someone higher up in the company. This is not theoretical: I’ve known people who found themselves in this situation. It’s easy to say “I would never agree to do that.” But what if you need to feed your children or even just yourself, your bank account is empty, and jobs are hard to come by? Money in the bank will help you do the right thing.

### 3.3 Living below your means

So far I've talked about reducing your spending just enough so that you can afford a shorter workweek, and making sure you have an emergency fund in the bank. But, you can take your expense reduction even further: you can permanently live below your means, so that you're saving money even after you reduce your working hours.

If you're living below your means, if you *always* spend less than your income, you get a double benefit: you're saving more and your savings stretch further. To see why we can compare two scenarios:

<i>Take-home pay</i>	<i>Expenses</i>	<i>Savings after a year</i>
\$1000	\$800	\$2400 = 3 months' expenses
\$1000	\$500	\$6000 = 12 months' expenses

**Scenario 1:** you have \$1000 take-home pay, \$800 monthly expenses. After a year you'll have saved \$2400, and since your monthly expenses are \$800 that is enough money to pay for 3 months without any income.

**Scenario 2:** you have \$1000 take-home pay, \$500 monthly expenses. After a year you'll have saved \$6000, which will pay for 12 months of living expenses.

Permanently reducing your expenses allows you to save

faster *and* makes your money last longer. **To put it another way, permanently living below your means will permanently increase your negotiating leverage.**

You don't have to reduce your expenses: you can also increase your salary while keeping your expenses steady. And it's certainly worth trying to increase your income. But keep in mind that your expenses are paid with after-tax earnings, which means reduced expenses are better than an equivalent raise. For example, if you're at the 25% marginal income tax bracket, reducing expenses by \$750 a year is equivalent to a salary increase of \$1000 a year.

### **3.4 Negotiating from a position of strength**

Having some savings will help get you through an emergency without destroying your ability to negotiate. Permanently living below your means will make your negotiating position grow stronger and stronger.

Next, we'll cover practicing your negotiation skills.

## Resources

- *You Need a Budget*, by Jesse Mecham, is a great book about how to think about money in a way that helps you achieve your goals. In the US you can probably get a copy from your local library.

## Chapter 4

# Practicing Negotiation on the Job

As with any skill, practice will make you a better negotiator. Negotiating a new job contract is a stressful way to practice, and it doesn't happen very often. Luckily, you will often find yourself negotiating on a daily basis, and for much smaller stakes. These small and unimportant negotiations are a great way to practice for bigger, more important, and more stressful negotiations.

## 4.1 Saying “no” to your boss

Every time your manager, product manager, or CTO ask you to do something you don't want to do, you are negotiating. If you give up immediately and just say “yes, boss”, that's still a negotiated agreement, albeit a badly negotiated one. Negotiating by replying with an outright “no” has its own problems, since you're likely to annoy your boss. But in between the extremes of “yes” and “no” there are a whole range of possible answers, and that's where you can practice your negotiating skills.

### Step 1: Know your goals

In order to provide a valuable counter-offer, you need a strong understanding of why you're doing the work you're doing.

- What is your organization trying to achieve?
- What is your project trying to achieve, and how does that connect to organizational goals?
- How does your work connect to the project goals?
- What do you personally want to achieve?

You should be able to connect your individual action to project success, and connect that to organizational success. For example, “Our goal is to increase recurring revenue, customer churn is too high and it’s decreasing revenue, so I am working on this bug because it’s making our product unusable for at least 7% of users.”

This is something you should do on an ongoing basis as an employee.

## Step 2: Listen and ask questions

Next, when you are actually asked to do something, don’t answer immediately.

- **Don’t say “yes”:** Unless you happen to have no existing work, any new work you take on will slow down your existing work. Your existing work was chosen for a reason, and may well be more important than this new task.
- **Don’t say “no”:** There’s a reason you’re being asked to do this task. By immediately saying “no” you are devaluing the request, and by extension devaluing the person who asked you.

Instead of either agreeing or refusing to do the task, take

the time to find out why the task needs to be done. Make sure you demonstrate you actually care about the request and are seriously considering it.

That means first, listening to what your manager has to say. And second, asking some questions: why does this need to be done? What is the deadline? How important is it to them?

Sometimes the CEO will come by and ask for something they don't *really* care about: they only want you to do it if you have the spare time. Sometimes your summer intern will come by and point out a problem that turns out to be a critical production-impacting bug.

You won't know unless you listen, and ask questions to find out what's really going on.

### **Step 3: Make a counter-offer based on your goals**

Is the new task more important to project and organizational goals than your current task? You should probably switch to working on it.

Is the new task less important? You don't want to do it.

Not sure? Ask more questions.

Once you've made a decision on what you'd prefer to do, you need to communicate it in a meaningful, respectful way, and in a way that demonstrates you're trying to advance project and organizational goals. Which is to say, you want to give a valuable counter-offer.

If you feel you should take the task on:

1. Tell the person asking you that you'll take it on.
2. Explain to the people who requested your previous tasks that those tasks will be late. Make sure it's clear why you took on a new task: "That feature is going to have to wait: it's fairly low on the priority list, and the CEO asked me to throw together a demo for the sales meeting on Friday."

If you decided you don't want do it:

1. Explain why you don't want to do it in the context of project and organizational goals. "That's a great feature idea, and I'd love to do it, but this bug is breaking the app for 10% of our customers and so I really need to focus on getting it done."
2. Provide an alternative, which can include:
  - Deflection: "Why don't you talk to the product manager about this?"

- Queuing: “Why don’t you add it to the backlog, and we can see if we have time to do it next sprint?”
- Promise: “I’ll do it next, as soon as I’m done with my current task.”
- Reminder: “Can you remind me again in a couple of weeks?”
- Different solution: “Your original proposal would take me too long, given the release-blocker backlog, but maybe if we did this other thing instead I could fit it in. It seems like it would get us 80% of the functionality in a fraction of the time—what do you say?”

## 4.2 Skipping a meeting

Since the process above was somewhat abstract, let’s see how you can apply it in a very specific situation.

Your manager has invited you to a meeting. Some meetings are short and useful, but not this one; it’s long, boring, and a complete waste of time. Your goal in this negotiation is to avoid going to the meeting.

Let’s go over the steps we covered above:

**1. Know your goals:** Your personal goal is to avoid the meeting, and to prevent wasting your limited time. But you also likely have the personal goal of keeping your manager happy. And then there are your various project and organizational goals, which may or may not be advanced by your going to the meeting.

**2. Listen and ask questions:** Why was this meeting called? How many people will be there? Are you expected to contribute? Why did your manager invite you?

Answering these questions will help you understand which arguments are likely to work. Perhaps your manager thought you'd be interested in the meeting's topic, but she doesn't need you to be there. In that case excusing yourself will be easy. On the other hand, if the meeting's purpose is a post-mortem of some disaster, excusing yourself would suggest you're not taking the problem seriously. You might need to go to the meeting even if it seems like a waste of time.

**3. Make a counter-offer based on your goals:** Imagine the purpose of the meeting is to check the status of some important component you're working on. As a counter-offer you could say "I'm almost done, I'll have it finished by end of day if I'm not interrupted by this meeting." That will satisfy both your goals and your manager's, presuming you really are almost done.

Or perhaps you're an individual contributor and your manager wants you to report something to a group, which will then discuss it without further feedback from you. You can suggest giving the report at the beginning of the meeting and then leaving "to get back to coding."

Remember to *emphasize the value* of your proposal, by reminding your manager that if you're not at the meeting you'll be doing your main job. If you're a team lead you'll probably have to go to more meetings, since your job isn't just about coding. But you can still try to figure out if the meeting is relevant to you and bring up other pressing work when it's not.

## 4.3 Canceling a meeting

Once you've practiced avoiding meetings, the next thing to try is helping everyone else get more work done. Pick a meeting that everyone hates and convince your manager to cancel it, make it more useful, or move it to another time where it's less disruptive. Make sure you understand the situation, make a valuable offer, and ensure your offer is perceived as valuable.

Consider the best time and place to discuss this with your manager: a private discussion might be more effective than

a public one. Think about why your manager has this meeting, don't just focus on your own goals: is there some other way to achieve your manager's goals for the meeting?

## **4.4 Unilaterally decreasing work hours**

If you're currently working long hours you can try reducing your hours unilaterally. Reducing your hours from, say, 50 hours to 45 hours will have no impact on your output, while still freeing up a few hours of your time.

This has its risks, of course. If your manager doesn't like you, your organization values long hours, or you otherwise feel this is a risky move—then don't do it. Or at least only do it if you are confident in your ability to find another job, or you're financially secure enough that you don't need another job. But if you're happy with your fallback position if things go badly, it's worth trying and seeing the impact on your output.

It's best to reduce your hours in phases. Try working a couple hours less than you normally do for a week. Did anyone notice? Were you less productive? How do you feel about it? Are you getting bad vibes from your manager?

If everything is going OK, reduce your hours by a couple more hours the next week. You can stop at any point, or repeat the process until you hit the 40 hour/week limit (or the typical workweek for your country). You shouldn't go below 40 hours a week, though, without reaching an explicit understanding with your manager.

Be careful: look for signs that reducing your hours further might be a problem. And remember that success in negotiating comes from understanding the other side's point of view. If the problem you have is your manager's negative perception of short hours, rather than your actual productivity, there are ways to finesse the issue.

For example, maybe there are legitimate reasons that require you to do an hour's work in the evening: checking on a critical cron job, or dealing with time zone differences. If you leave promptly or on the early side but you're logging on later, some bosses look favorably on your dedication, even if you're not actually working longer hours. I'm not suggesting lying about how many hours you work. But if your manager cares more about hours worked than productivity, there's nothing wrong with highlighting some work you did outside the office.

## 4.5 Negotiation practice: working from home

If you don't already have this benefit, you can try to negotiate working from home a day or two a week. This will:

- Save you time on your commute.
- Help you practice the additional communication and coordination you might need if you reduce your working hours.
- Help train your manager to value you by your accomplishments, not your hours in the office.
- Serve as evidence you don't need to be closely supervised.

If your manager doesn't agree, you also have an opportunity to figure out how your manager views your work. If your manager has specific worries about you, they would be even stronger if you asked for reduced hours, so better to find them out earlier with a less controversial request. You can ask "what do I need to do to get this approved?" to find out what your manager is thinking.

## Chapter 5

# The Dimensions of Negotiation: Time, Money, Benefits

Once you've gotten some practice negotiating, it's time to start thinking about the main event. While the main focus of this negotiation will be on getting more time for yourself, there are other things you'll want. You'll want the highest salary you can manage, the benefits you need, and in some cases an intellectual property agreement that allow you to work on your own projects. All of these are things you can negotiate.

# 5.1 Time

**How short of a workweek do you want?** The closer you are to a full workweek, the more likely you'll succeed. The specific number to go for depends on your situation: at an existing job where you are trusted and valued you might be able to get down to much lower hours than you would at a new job.

**How will you structure your workweek?** There are a number of different ways you could define a shorter workweek. Some options:

1. A fixed number of hours per week; for example, you might work 35 hours per week instead of the standard 40 (or whatever the standard is in your country). On the plus side, you know exactly how many hours you'll be working. The downside of this approach is that it forces the question of what a full workweek really is. Many companies in the US consider 45 hours or even 50 hours to be a standard full workweek, in which case your prorated salary might be lower than it would at a company where 40 hours are the norm.
2. A fixed number of days; for example, you might work 4 days a week instead of 5. On the plus side, if your company considers a longer (45 or 50 hour)

workweek to be the norm you will get paid more than if you structured your agreement as a fixed number of hours. The downside of this approach is that you might end up working more, say 4 days of 9 hours each. However, you may be able to ignore the company's assumption of a 9-hour day if you're productive enough in 8 hours.

3. You could also get a large number of unpaid vacation days, with an unofficial understanding that you spread them out so you're only in the office 4 days a week.
4. You might also be a normal full-time employee, but with the understanding that if you get your work done, you can work fewer hours. See [Section 11.1](#) for details.

There's also the question of when exactly you'll take your additional time off:

MIKE: "The easiest ones to negotiate are the ones which are 80% time, especially one day a week off. Usually I'd say Monday or Friday, and get a longer weekend and go to the mountains. But one of the people I inspired got himself an 80% contract, and he said "you've got to take Wednesday off." With Wednesdays, you only ever work two days in a row. It

was awesome.”

**How will you accommodate your employer’s needs?** You could choose any arrangement you want, but you are going to have to convince your manager (or hiring manager) that it’s workable. If Monday is your team’s planning day you probably don’t want to ask for Mondays off. If you often need to answer teammates’ questions, then your manager might prefer you work 5 short days rather than 4 days a week.

## 5.2 Money

If you’re going to explicitly reduce your working hours, you’re likely going to have to pro-rate your salary. If you’re working 80% time, you’ll only get 80% of your full-time salary.

Even if time is more important to you than money, getting your full-time salary as high as possible has multiple benefits:

1. It increases your actual take-home pay.

2. It makes you seem more valuable to prospective employers.
3. You can use the higher full-time salary as a negotiating aid at future jobs.
4. As we discussed in the previous chapter, the more money you can save, the stronger your negotiating position.

So even if you're focused on negotiating for time, you still want to maximize your full-time salary. If an employer is cash-constrained (a very small company, say), you can aim for a competitive full-time salary, and then reduce your hours until the actual cost is affordable to the company.

I'll talk more about ways to maximize your salary in [Chapter 11](#).

## 5.3 Benefits

The benefits your company provides also have some value. In the US they can be critical: paying for health insurance yourself can be extremely costly, and (depending on where you live and changing laws) has at times been impossible to

purchase<sup>1</sup>.

Some useful facts to know:

- Under the Affordable Care Act, large employers are required to provide health insurance to all employees working at least 30 hours a week or 130 hours a month<sup>2</sup> (if they don't, they have to pay additional taxes).
- I have encountered employer-provided health insurance plans that stated they were only for employees working at least 30 hours a week.

As a result, you may find it useful to have your contract be for 30 hours a week or more.

More broadly, you should think about which benefits are important to you, and how you'll feel about your employer pro-rating them.

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<sup>1</sup>I've lived in a country with socialized medicine, and it's far better than the massively expensive, half-broken system we have in the US. If you're an American, I encourage you to learn more about the [Medicare for All](#) campaign.

<sup>2</sup><https://www.irs.gov/affordable-care-act/employers/identifying-full-time-employees>

## 5.4 Intellectual property and non-competes

You should always read the intellectual property (IP) and non-compete agreements for a job. Especially if you want to work on personal projects in your spare time, you should also run them past a lawyer if there's anything that looks problematic, and if necessary negotiate a better version.

In the US my experience is that you'll only get these after you've negotiated the rest of your package. It's a little tricky to get them changed, and probably difficult at larger companies, but it can be done with smaller companies: I've done it at a couple of jobs.

Sometimes the company will tell you "our lawyers say this is not a problem." If that happens you'll have to hire your own lawyer: the company's lawyers work for the company, not you. But hiring your own lawyer can also be helpful in other ways. Often the difficulty you will encounter is the hassle of making changes, not the actual content of the changes you've requested. You can minimize the hassle, and increase your chances of success, by hiring a lawyer who can provide an easy to apply, legally correct set of changes.

## Take action!

Before you start negotiating, it's good to know what you're aiming for. In particular, you should know:

1. What is the worst offer you're willing to accept. You need to be willing to walk away if you get an offer that is worse than that.
2. What you'd like to get, if you can. You should aim to get more than just your minimum, otherwise you're unlikely to get it.
3. What parameters you're willing to be flexible about. These are things you can use to make your offer more valuable when negotiating.

Come up with answers to these three questions for time, salary, benefits, IP, and non-competes. You might find it useful to write them down for reference during your actual negotiations.

## Chapter 6

# The Value of Being an Existing Employee

You've started saving money and practicing negotiation, and you know what your goal is. Next it's time to choose where to negotiate.

The easiest place to get a shorter workweek is at your current job. You are more valuable, communicating your value is easier, and research is easier—so unless you work for an awful company, this is where you should start.

In this chapter we'll cover:

- Why you're more valuable as an existing employee.

- Making sure your manager knows you're valuable.
- Why research is much easier, too.
- The possibility of increasing your leverage by getting another job offer.

## **6.1 Existing employees are more valuable**

As an existing employee you are far more valuable than a potential replacement. Why? Because during your time at your employer you have acquired a variety of organization-specific knowledge and skills. It can take quite a while for a new employee to acquire these, and during the ramp-up period they will also take up their colleagues' time. Here are just a few of the things that you've likely learned during your time as an employee:

- The existing codebase.
- Local best practices, idioms, and coding conventions.
- The business processes at the company.
- The business domain.

- The informal knowledge network in the company, i.e. who is the expert in what.

Not only do you have hard to-replace skills and knowledge, you also have your work record to build on: your manager knows what you can do. Once you've been working for a manager for a while they'll know your skills, and whether they can trust you.

In my own career, being an existing employee has benefited me on multiple occasions:

After a number of years working as a software engineer for one company, I got a bad case of RSI (repetitive strain injury). I could no longer type, which meant I could no longer work as a programmer. But I did stay on as an employee: one of the managers at the company, who I'd worked for in an earlier role, offered me a position as a product manager.

In part this was because the company was run by decent people, who for the most part took care of their employees. But it was also because I had a huge amount of hard-to-replace business and technical knowledge of the company's product, in a highly complex domain.

I worked as a product manager for a few years, but I never really enjoyed it. And with time my hands recovered, at least partially, potentially allowing me to take up programming again. After my daughter was born, my wife and I decided that I'd become a part-time consultant, and take care of our child the rest of the time, while she continued working full-time.

My manager was upset when I told him I was leaving. I felt bad—but really, if your boss is unhappy when you're leaving, that's a good thing. In fact, he offered to help me find a less-than-full-time programming position within the company so I wouldn't have to leave. I'd already made up my mind to go, but under other circumstances I might have taken him up on the offer.

Notice how I was offered reduced hours, even though companies will never advertise such positions. That's the value of being an existing employee.

## **A caveat: salary increases**

The one downside of negotiating at your current company is that often it's much harder to increase your salary substantially. I can only speculate on why this is, but in general if you want a large bump in your salary you'll be better served by finding a new job.

## **6.2 Ensuring your manager knows you're valuable**

Being valuable isn't enough, of course. You also need to make sure your manager knows that you're valuable. Just because you're doing good work doesn't mean your manager quite realizes that: they have plenty of other things to worry about.

So you should take the time to remind them occasionally how useful you really are. You should do this before you start negotiating, but also afterwards, to make sure your manager stays happy.

Once a quarter, look back at what you've accomplished and figure out the most impressive thing you've done. Not impressive to you, impressive to your manager: pick one or

two things that would make your manager happiest. If at all possible, figure out how to quantify it. Then, present it in a 1-on-1 meeting, and also send them an email sharing what you've done (if they easily show it off to *their* manager, all the better).

Here's an email I once sent to a manager:

Hi

I've made many different improvements to <what I've been working on> over the past 4 months, so I figured a summary of the results would be interesting.

Dataset 1:

Start of period: BAD% of results correct

End of period: GOOD% correct

Dataset 2:

Start of period: BAD% correct

End of period: DECENT% correct

I'd talked about individual improvements over this period,

but the email highlighted the overall impact of what I'd done. The particular metric I used was very important to my manager and the project as a whole, which is why I'd been working on improving it—and why I chose to highlight it in my email.

Why do I still have access to this email? Because I forwarded a copy to my personal account. You should do the same:

1. It will remind you later on what you've achieved at your job, to help you with your negotiations.
2. When it's time to look for a new job, this information will make it much easier to update your resume (though you'll need to remove any proprietary information).

## **6.3 Research is easier**

Beyond being more valuable, and therefore starting from a stronger negotiating position, being an existing employee also makes it much easier to gather the information you need:

- You have a better sense of what company management prioritizes, what the company needs,

and how the company is really doing.

- You know, or can find out, which managers you want to work for.
- You can talk to your co-workers and get a sense of their salaries and working conditions.
- Sometimes HR will be willing to share information like salary ranges for each job title (make sure you phrase it in a non-threatening just-curious kind of way).
- You have a sense of whether the company is having a hard time—or an easy time—hiring new employees.

All of this makes it easier for you to learn what's easily possible, what's harder to get, and the leverage points available to you.

Is the company having a hard time hiring people with your particular skills? Excellent news.

Are you underpaid? That's a point to bring up when negotiating.

## 6.4 Increasing your leverage

The ultimate reason your boss may agree to your terms is because they're afraid you will leave. The more valuable you are, the more of a pain it will be to replace you. This reason may well go unstated: you can simply express your unhappiness about the current situation, and explain how your proposal will make things better for everyone. A thoughtful manager will realize that the longer you're unhappy, the likelier you are to leave.

But it's also possible to make this reason explicit, by getting a competing job offer from a different company. In particular, you need to get a job offer you're willing to accept. Given a credible job offer in hand, your fallback goes from "stick around a job I want to change" to "switch to new and better job".

This shouldn't necessarily be your first step in the negotiation, but at times this can be an extremely useful technique. Here's how a software engineer named Adam used this technique to improve his working conditions. He wasn't trying to negotiate a shorter workweek, but his story is instructive nonetheless:

ADAM: “There were a couple of things that motivated me to start looking around for another job. We had a salary transparency system, an opt-in system: if you put your salary on the spreadsheet you could see everyone else who put their salary in. My salary was significantly lower than some people who I thought were at an equivalent level to me. I didn’t feel my salary was progressing as it should be in relation to my colleagues.

I also wanted to work from home some of the time. I quite like having an office and being around people, but some days it’s not necessary and commuting over an hour during the day—I wanted that time back. My personal sleep schedule doesn’t fit in with 9 to 5, sometimes I get up late, sometimes I get up early. If the office only opens at 9 and you got up at 6 AM you might be really tired at end of day.

I liked working at this employer, so I tried to get both of those problems solved by asking for a higher salary and to work for two days from home. I didn’t think it was unreasonable since there were remote people. And I’d been there for a couple of years, so I hoped it was clear I wasn’t someone who wouldn’t do any work just because I was at home. Management said no and

said I was on a fair salary. I felt this was wrong based on the internal spreadsheet, Glassdoor, and talking to some people.

My plan was to find a job offer as leverage, a full time remote job offer with a 25% higher salary. I figured I'd get the offer, and then I could ask my current employer to match the offer, or at least it would act as leverage. Because management's response wasn't "you don't deserve it," it was "your idea of what is fair compensation isn't correct." So I wanted evidence that I was correct.

As a UK employee I've found that UK programmer salaries for a good programmer are in the £40-60k range usually. However, US companies often pay double that.

I got an offer from the first company I applied to which was fully remote, at a US company, at almost double my salary. My employer didn't offer to come close to that, and I thought the job looked pretty good. It wasn't my ideal job, but I couldn't say no to double the money and fully remote.

So I left for the new job."

Notice that you need to be willing to take the new job if necessary. Otherwise your bluff might be called, and you might find yourself leaving for a job you didn't want to take.

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## **Take action!**

**Research your company** The larger your company the more likely it is someone has negotiated reduced hours; you may even discover a whole group of people working less than full time. Working parents' groups can be good resources for finding employees who've done this before. Be discreet: you don't want your manager hearing about your goals from someone else.

If you can find existing employees with shorter workweeks, chances are your Human Resources department has procedures in place for dealing with this situation: find out what they are, and you'll be able to present them to your manager as part of your request. Plus, you'll be able to point to the other reduced-hours employees as examples that demonstrate that your request is possible, and even normal. For large enough companies there's a good chance HR already has standard procedures, so you can just talk to them and find out.

You should also figure out if you're underpaid: look at some online salary calculators like [stackoverflow calculator](#), check out the salary for your company on [Glassdoor](#), and talk to your coworkers.

**Get some evidence of how valuable you really are** Go through your accomplishments at your job since you started, figure out the most impressive, and if possible distill them into a quantitative number. Keep a copy on your personal computer to put in your resume (though remember you likely can't share proprietary data).

If you're going to be negotiating in the near future, don't bother sending this to your manager—just have it available for your negotiation.

# Chapter 7

## Negotiating as an Existing Employee

In this chapter we'll cover the specifics of how to negotiate for reduced hours as an existing employee. Before we move on to the process, let's go over some stories of people who negotiated shorter hours at an existing job, and see what you can learn.

## 7.1 “I tried to quit”

We'll start with Mike's story; Mike has been working reduced hours for over 15 years, at many different companies. This is how he got his first job with reduced hours:

MIKE: “I started that first job when I was in university, and I stayed on for several years part-time while I was in school. My contract was 10 hours a week, not very much but I was also going to classes and had to do homework and shit. I suppose that got me used to being able to go cycling or climbing or hiking on fairly short notice.

They were terrible at planning at this company, when a contract deadline was coming up everyone was working 60 to 70-hour weeks, having dinner at the office all the time. I wasn't forced to get caught up in that, since I had my excuse of going to school. I worked a lot more than 10 hours I was contracted to, though.

After university I worked full time at that job for about 1 year, and then I tried to quit. But they basically offered me more money, so I was like, “what if you

gave me 75% of that, and I worked less?” Since I’d been working there part-time [previously as a student], I’d already proven to them I could work part-time and be productive. And I guess they wanted to keep me around and they went for that.

At that job I was on payroll as a full time employee, but I got a bunch more holidays. So I got a quarter of my time in holidays; 72 days off a year? I was constantly booking time off, which was interesting.”

Here’s how Mike applied the four principles of negotiation we covered in [Chapter 2](#):

1. **Employment is a negotiated relationship:** Mike actively set out to get a better job by quitting. When he got a counter-offer of a higher salary he realized he had some leverage, and he deliberately moved the conversation towards a very different direction.
2. **Knowledge is power:** Mike knew what he wanted—more time for himself.
3. **Negotiate from a position of strength:** Mike was willing to quit outright. And when he got a counter-offer of a higher salary, he also had evidence

his employer was willing to make an effort to have him stay on.

4. **Use the right tactics:** Mike expanded the negotiation from a single dimension to two dimensions: salary and working hours. This allowed him to make a proposal trading off between the two.

Quitting with the hope your company tries to keep you on is a problematic tactic—what if they don't? But it does illustrate the benefit both of being an existing employee, and of being willing to walk away if necessary.

## 7.2 “The first thing [my boss] said was ‘absolutely not.’”

Next, Brian's story: Brian is a front-end developer based in Germany with 5 years of work experience. You'll recall from an earlier chapter that Brian prepared in advance by cutting his living expenses. He also had some sense of what was possible in the company:

BRIAN: “For a few months we had one employee who worked 4 days for my company, 3 days for a startup.”

But that was an arrangement she had from the beginning; no one had transitioned to part time. And there is one guy who works from home 2 days a week. I actually thought they'd be more flexible than they were.”

Here's how the negotiation process went:

BRIAN: “I told my boss I wanted to talk, and asked him if he would entertain the idea of me working every other week. I picked half-time because it would be financially viable for me, and I would have lots of time to pursue my interests.

The first thing he said was ‘absolutely not.’ There aren't a lot of frontend developers at my company, and hiring experienced developers has been challenging for us. So I guess he was worried by the amount of work we have, and expect to continue having, combined with the impact of me working less. Another factor is that my boss didn't see it coming. My fault for not being as open about my goals. So he was surprised, and it took a little time for him to process

the idea.

My company is not very big, about 30 people total, still run by the founders. We don't have a HR department, the company doesn't hide behind standard procedures. They try to understand the motivations of the employees. So we had a few meetings talking about what my motivations were, and why I was thinking about doing this.

My boss and I sat and down and talked through my motivation. I explained I wasn't making enough progress in the company, that it wasn't in the best interest of my professional future to continue full time. He didn't believe me, we talked for about two hours and he was really trying to understand my motivation. From his point of view if he had the same motivation he wouldn't want to work less: he thought my best chance at improving skills and advancing professionally was staying there.

We didn't see eye-to-eye, our positions were pretty far apart. He offered me a 10% raise on the premise I would drop my request for working less. I didn't flat out reject it, I just said it wouldn't help me meet my goals. I was also intending to negotiate a raise at some

point, though my first priority was working hours. I was going to ask for 40% more. I wasn't earning boatloads of money, salaries in Germany are not like the US. 40% more wasn't even unrealistic, but I didn't mention that at this point.

Next thing I did was seriously thinking about switching to another company, but I got a rejection from the company I applied to. There was a stalemate between my boss and me, there was a bit of tension in the air, we had some unsettled business.

Eventually he scheduled another meeting. At this point I thought about what compromises I wanted to make, and I suggested working 4 days a week. At that point I was still planning on applying to other companies if I couldn't come to an agreement with my boss. He immediately agreed to it, 4 days a week was doable but would still have to work out the details. I then asked for 10% raise he'd offered earlier; my goal had been 40%, but realizing our positions were that far apart I didn't think 40% was going to happen. He didn't agree to that immediately, but suggested it would probably work out.

In exchange he asked for a longer termination period if

I wanted to leave in the future. In Germany it's normal to have 3 months notice; he asked to increase that to 5 months. I told him that would make it harder for me to apply elsewhere. If there are less companies able to hire me because of my notice period, my value in the market goes down. I told him I was heavily against that.

He said he'd think about it. The next day we had another meeting to agree on actual terms. We settled on my working 4 days a week (so 80% pay), receiving a 10% raise, and no change in the notice period.

I worked my last Friday today, I'm pretty excited."

Here's how Brian applied the principles of negotiation we covered earlier:

1. **Employment is a negotiated relationship:** Brian asked for shorter hours, and his boss told him "no"—but Brian knew that negotiation is a process, not just a one-time event, so he kept the conversation going.
2. **Knowledge is power:** Brian had some sense of what his company was willing to offer. He also knew he was

underpaid, and that his company was having trouble hiring experienced developers.

3. **Negotiate from a position of strength:** Brian reduced his living expenses in advance, and applied to other jobs while he was negotiating. Since his company had lots of work and was having trouble hiring developers, he was also more valuable and hard to replace as an employee.
4. **Use the right tactics:** Brian asked for more than he could get (half-time), and eventually got 20% off. He also negotiated multiple things at once: salary, hours, and notice period.

One of this book's reviewers—a former manager—thinks Brian's original goal of alternating weeks was untenable. Brian would have missed big chunks of the decision making and design process for new projects, unless his group totally rearranged the way they did things in order to accommodate him. So he might have done better if he'd come up with a more viable offer.

## 7.3 “It was pretty straightforward”

Quite often the negotiation for a shorter workweek at your current job is a simple, easy process. Here’s Gabriel’s story:

GABRIEL: “I graduated from an engineering school in France in 2007, with a major in CS. After school, I went to work for a bank in London, building applications for traders. Then I worked for another bank, and in 2010 I joined a hedge fund in New York.

I worked at the fund from 2010 to 2016 as a full-time employee. It was small in the beginning, but it grew very fast. The tech team remained small though (<10 employees), so I was doing a lot of different tasks: building financial models, making applications, maintaining databases, Outlook add-ons, fixing PDFs, making deployment mechanisms, pretty much anything tech related.

Mostly, I made people way more productive at their jobs.

**Why a shorter workweek?**

I guess that [a shorter workweek was] always something that's been in the back of my mind. I very much dislike office environments (though I like my colleagues), I dislike staying at the office for another hour even though I know I'm not going to start anything new that day. Plus I feel there's only so much I can get done in a day...

Originally, I had all these plans that maybe I'd start a company, but the truth is I really didn't want to work that much.

### **The process of negotiation**

This was pretty straightforward. I asked to see my boss and said something along the lines of:

“My wife wants to go back to Europe, and I would like to have more time to myself, so I've been thinking. You know how we have all these background tasks that we need to do and that we never get to do because they're mostly porting code that already works from one tech to another? Well I believe I could be doing that in the shadows, as a contractor, part time and from Europe. What do you think?”

When I said “as a contractor”, I knew it meant “with a significant pay cut”<sup>a</sup>, so that it was a win-win for me and for them: they didn’t lose my expertise in the systems and they got me to work for them for much less than I was paid before. It was a good deal for them, even though it meant I wasn’t in the office. They told me they’d think about it, and 3 weeks later told me they were ok with it.

It was a long shot, so I did not really think it would work. But I didn’t really have a backup plan either. If that didn’t work I think I’d have looked for some contracting gigs.

Now I only work 2.5 days a week. It’s awesome. I realize now that I can do a lot of things I used to postpone before. Things like fixing things in my apartment, changing insurance plans, planning vacations, seeing my parents, and so on. And my wife’s pregnant, so this will make things a lot more convenient. I’m also much more productive than in the office. I’d say while I’m working 50% less time than in the office, my output is about 80% of what it was in the office.”

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<sup>a</sup>I may expand the book at some point with a chapter on becoming a contractor; I don't think you ought to be taking a significant pay cut. Until then, if you're planning on doing this send me an email ([itamar@codewithoutrules.com](mailto:itamar@codewithoutrules.com)) and I'll explain what you should do.

Can you figure out how Gabriel applied the principles of negotiation?

## 7.4 The negotiation process

Now that you've seen how other people have done it, let's see how you can negotiate a shorter workweek. At this point you should know, or at least tried to find out:

- Whether or not you're underpaid.
- If there are other people working reduced hours at your company.
- If your company has standard HR procedures for reduced hours.
- Any legal rights to shorter hours in your country or state.

The basic process to follow is:

1. Strengthen your negotiating position.
2. Prepare for likely responses.
3. Come up with a valuable offer.
4. Have the conversation.

## **1. Strengthen your negotiating position**

As we discussed in previous chapters, saving more money gives you a better fallback. And getting other job offers can also help—if you're willing to accept them.

But most of all, what makes your negotiation position stronger is how valuable of an employee you are. The more important the tasks you work on, the more you contribute to your project's and organization's goals, the harder it will be for your manager to say no. Presuming, of course, that you've made sure your manager actually knows how valuable you are.

## **2. Prepare for likely responses**

When you ask for shorter hours your manager is going to have some worries about your suggestion. You should try to plan for them in advance, both in your offer and with

suitable responses. The worries will be specific to your team and organization, so you'll need to think this through on your own, but here are some common questions to help you get started. Your manager might not say them all out loud, but they're probably thinking them:

- **“How will you get your work done with fewer hours?”** This is why you'll want to remind your manager of the valuable work you've done in the past: if your work is valuable enough, it'll still be worth a lot even with shorter hours.
- **“Will you be less committed to your job?”** You can address this by emphasizing how much you like your job, and how you want to keep doing it.
- **“Why do you want to reduce your hours?”** This is often just another way of expressing the previous question, so try to give an honest answer that still shows a sense of commitment.
- **“No.”** As in Brian's case, this might just be an initial response. Prepare yourself to be persistent, and demonstrate you are serious.
- **“How will you coordinate with your team members?”** You can address this by making sure your proposal is attuned to the way your team works; see the next section for an example.

- **“This won’t work in our HR system.”** Your manager doesn’t want to say “no”, so they’re looking for excuses. Advance research on HR procedures can help here, as well as an explanation of the various ways to implement it (e.g. taking one day of unpaid leave a week).
- **“I don’t care how long you work, so long as you get your job done.”** If your manager is bad at time management, this is just another way of saying “no”. If you have a good manager, you might have hit the jackpot: go read [Section 11.1](#) for details.

### 3. Come up with a valuable offer

Before you have your conversation with your manager you should come up with the offer you’re going to make.

Remember that you should ask for more than you want, if possible negotiate for multiple things, and that your offer has to be valuable to *them*, not just to you.

The basic story you want to tell has the following structure:

1. **Value:** Look at all the value I’ve provided to the team and organization in the past.

2. **Misfortune:** Unfortunately, there's this thing I'm unhappy about.
3. **The happy solution:** So, I'd like to suggest a solution that should work for all of us!

Let's say you want to work 4 days a week (i.e. 32 hours). In addition you've discovered you're underpaid—you'd be happy with a 15% raise. Finally, your team has a planning meeting every Tuesday and Friday morning.

Your offer might go something like this:

As you know, I've been here for a couple of years, and I feel like I've really contributed to the team. You'll remember I cut down our server usage by 30%—I did the math, and it look like that's saving us \$200,000 a year. And I managed to implement that feature we weren't ever able to ship for BigCustomer, and [etc etc].

The reason I wanted to talk to you is that there's a couple of things I'm unhappy about, and I hoped we could solve them. First, I feel like I'm due for a raise: I

know we've upped the salaries for new hires recently, to be competitive, and I know some developers here with my experience level are getting paid 25% more than I am.

Second, I want to be spending more time with my kids—I only seem them for a couple of hours in the evening, and it's really not enough.

I don't want to have to choose between my kids and my job, so here's what I propose:

1. I get a 25% raise, just to keep things fair.
2. I cut my work hours down to 30 hours a week, so my salary is 75% of what it'd be if I was full time. I checked with HR and apparently that's how they deal with reduced hours; did you know Janice has a short workweek? And Matt over in accounting does too.

I was thinking I'd spend Wednesdays with my kids. And then I'd also go home a couple hours early on Friday, since I'm usually less productive then anyway. That way I can make it to all the planning meetings.

Notice how this offer is:

- Asking for more than you want (higher raise, even shorter hours).
- Negotiating for multiple things at once.
- Addressing potential concerns in advance (HR logistics, meeting logistics).
- Suggesting that your output won't be reduced linearly with your hours ("I'm usually less productive Friday afternoons anyway").

That's the basic template; you will need to customize it to your situation. If you're not actually underpaid, omit that part. If you think your manager will ask about knowledge only you have, point at all the great documentation you've been writing lately.

Once you've written your offer, it's time to have your first conversation with your manager.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>If you're asking for a raise too, make sure you do so at the right time of year: a month or two *before* raises are usually announced, so you can influence the decisions made beforehand. See Adrienne Bolger's guide to negotiating a raise, which you can find on my blog: <https://codewithoutrules.com/2018/08/22/engineer-a-raise/>

## 4. Have the conversation

Here's what you do:

1. Schedule a meeting with your manager.
2. If you're nervous, practice what you'll be saying in advance.
3. Bring a printed version of your offer along, since it's more formal.
4. Recap your offer verbally.

And then—you wait for a response. It might be a “yes”, in which case you're done.

Or it might be a counter-offer, in which case you can say “I'll think about this and get back to you”. You can spend the evening deciding if this offer is sufficient, or if you want to come back with a compromise.

Or the response might be a “no”, in which you can ask why, and under what circumstances they did think it would work, and try to address their concerns. Don't give up just because you got an initial “no”: recall from Brian's story that persistence can pay off. But if further conversations don't get anywhere, your choices are:

1. Give up.

2. Get a competing job offer you're willing to accept (with higher pay, if at all possible) and then try renegotiating with your manager.
3. Start looking for a new job.

# Chapter 8

## What Makes You Valuable?

Negotiating a shorter workweek at a new job is harder. You have less credibility, and you're competing against other people with less unusual demands.

That means you'll have an easier time if you're extra-valuable as an employee, if the team you're interviewing for *really* wants you. You need to know what makes you valuable, and then communicate that to prospective employers: in your resumé, your cover letter, and your job interview.

Some important points to keep in mind as you read the

chapter:

- You won't have all the skills mentioned below—neither do I, nor does anyone else. That's fine. Your goal is to figure out what *your* strengths are, and then make these strengths as obvious as possible whenever you communicate with potential employers.
- Tools and technologies are only one way out of many to provide value to an employer. As programmers we tend to over-emphasize technologies: you should certainly make your knowledge of particular technologies explicit, but don't overlook your other strengths.

Here are the different ways you can be valuable as an employee:

- Your productivity.
- Your empathy and communication abilities.
- The technologies you know, your ability to learn new technologies, and the breadth of your knowledge.
- The way you explain your value.

## 8.1 Productivity

The more value you can produce in a given amount of time, the more valuable you are as an employee. Your job as a programmer is *solving problems*, not writing code: software is a tool, a means to an end. Software becomes valuable because of the problems it solves. Productivity is how much valuable work you produce over a specific amount of time.

You can think of productivity as three progressive stages you will go through in your career. Randal Koutnik<sup>1</sup> calls these three stages Implementers, Solvers, and Finders.

**Implementer:** As an inexperienced programmer your tasks are defined by someone else. You just implement small, well-specified chunks of code. Because you need everything to be specified, there's a lot of overhead in managing you. Plus, you might be stuck implementing the wrong solution and not realize it.

**Solver:** As you become more experienced, you are able to come up with solutions to well-defined problems. Someone is still choosing which problems you should work on. You no longer need to be closely managed, but you might not

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<sup>1</sup>As far as I can tell we both came up with this gradation independently, around the same time. His article is a great overview: <https://rkoutnik.com/2016/04/21/implementers-solvers-and-finders.html>

notice there's another, more fundamental problem you ought to be working on.

**Finder:** With more experience, you can work completely independently to further the goals of your project, team, and organization. You begin finding and identifying problems on your own and figuring out their underlying causes.

As you progress from Implementer to Solver to Finder, you require less supervision, you work on more valuable tasks, and you can more easily prevent unnecessary work. In short, you become a more valuable employee.

## **Communicating your productivity**

Being productive isn't sufficient: you also need a prospective employer to know you're productive. If you're still an Implementer you are not yet especially productive, and your chances of negotiating shorter hours at a new job are fairly low. Better to focus on improving your skills before trying.

## As a Solver

If you have enough years of experience most employers will assume you're at least a Solver. But earlier in your career you might want to make more of an effort to make it clear you're a Solver:

- Describe yourself as “working independently”.
- Give specific examples of projects you did on your own.
- Get a promotion at your current job—Senior Software Engineer or Senior Developer often indicate you've reached this point.

## As a Finder

If you're a Finder, you need to make an explicit effort to demonstrate your productivity, regardless of how experienced you are. If you're not careful, it's very easy to give the impression you're a Solver.

Let's say you noticed that all the servers your company is running are one-off, hand-maintained unique snowflakes. So you decided to switch to an automatically built, deployed, and restarted system using Kubernetes, a

popular open source deployment and scheduling system.

Here's one way you could describe this in your resume: "Switched from manually managed virtual machines to a Kubernetes cluster." The problem with this description is that it's not clear who made the decision to make this change—perhaps someone else identified the problem, and you just did the grunt work.

To make it clear you're a Finder, you need to make it as clear as possible you were one who found the problem and pushed for the solution. Here's an improved version: "Identified the need to switch from manually-managed virtual machines to a scalable, automated system. Researched alternatives, chose Kubernetes, learned how to use it, championed its use, and implemented the switch-over."

## **8.2 Empathy and communication skills**

Software is written for a user or customer: you are attempting to address someone else's needs. Users will need to communicate those needs to you; you will need to communicate your solutions. Additionally, writing software

is a group effort, done in an organizational context, with many people: you'll have coworkers, managers, perhaps subordinates.

Communication with other people is always hard. And for good and for bad, emotions are part of being human, and so they are something you need to notice and understand. The better you are at understanding what other people are feeling and thinking, and what you are feeling and thinking, the better you'll be able to work with others, and the more value you'll add to the team.

You should be able to automatically demonstrate your communication skills when interviewing in-person. In written communication, like your resume or cover letter, you can mention them explicitly and give some concrete examples, e.g. helpful interactions with customers.

## 8.3 Tools and technologies

Another set of valuable skills you have as a programmer is your knowledge of particular tools technologies. There are actually three different ways you can provide value:

- **Expertise:** You know ReactJS, or Python, or how to build iOS applications. Or maybe you've got

experience with image processing algorithms, or distributed systems, or databases. All of these are valuable to employers that use those technologies.

- **Ability to learn quickly:** The technologies you already know limit you to a certain subset of employers. However, the faster you can pick up new technologies the faster you can provide value with technologies you don't know. If you're good at this, make sure you mention it—especially when applying to a job where you don't know all the relevant technologies.
- **Broad knowledge:** Finally, knowing about the existence of many technologies is also useful. When you see problem X, you know that Y and Z are potential solutions. I'm not certain how you'd convey this in a resume, but it's definitely useful in interviews: when asked about a problem you haven't dealt with yourself, you can at least say “I haven't encountered that personally, but I understand Z is a good solution for that.”

## 8.4 Other skills

Here's a grab bag of other skills that might be relevant at different jobs:

- Project management.
- People management.
- Design, sales, marketing.
- Public speaking.
- Human languages.
- Biology, if you're applying to a biotech company.

And so on and so forth. All of these will be valuable to certain employers.

## 8.5 Marketing

Value isn't just about what you can do, it's also about your ability to understand what an organization needs, and explaining your skills in a way that reflects those needs. Which is to say, the interview process for a job is in large part a process of marketing yourself. For example, often a company will say they need a particular technical expertise,

but what they really mean is “we need someone to start contributing quickly”. If you can emphasize both that you have the basic necessary knowledge, and how quickly you can ramp up, you can get past that threshold.

You can therefore improve your value by:

- Practicing listening to others and understanding their needs.
  - Interviewing at a number of companies (or just do practice interviews, see below). Then, reflect on how you interviewed and what you can do better next time.
- 

### **Take action!**

Before you start applying to jobs:

1. Make a list of ways in which you are valuable.
2. Update your resumé to reflect your list.
3. Have someone else review your resumé, to make sure you’ve actually succeeded in explaining your value.
4. Reflect on past job interviews and how you could have done better, and consider doing a few practice

interviews with a service like [Pramp](#).

# Chapter 9

## Finding Jobs and Interviewing

Once you know what makes you valuable, the next step is finding some jobs to apply to. In this chapter we'll cover:

1. The best way to find a job: via someone you know.
2. Finding jobs on your own.
3. Some suggestions on applying to jobs.
4. Tips on interviewing.

## 9.1 A friend on the inside

The best way to find a new job is via friends and acquaintances: a friend who works at a company will be able to tell you what's really going on. That is, what work conditions you can actually expect, which managers and departments to avoid or seek out, and so on.

They can also help you with the application process, allowing you to bypass irrelevant requirements, and in general improve your chances at getting hired. For example, when I was just starting out, my lack of a computer science degree meant Google recruiters would automatically throw my resume in the trash. But I got to interview there anyway because I was referred by a Google employee. (They chose not to hire me.)

## 9.2 Finding jobs on your own

In addition to relying on friends and former colleagues, you can also find jobs on your own. Some criteria for choosing potential jobs to apply for:

- Favor places where you would be particularly valuable. That might mean knowledge of a particular

technology stack, or a particular problem domain, or a particular industry.

- You'll have an easier time interviewing at jobs you're excited about than jobs you find boring.
- Avoid companies that publicly advertise long hours.
- Remote-first companies are more likely to agree to unusual arrangements like a shorter workweek, since they've already given up the notion that hours-in-office is a useful stand-in for productivity.
- If you hate whiteboard algorithm interviews, you can try to avoid companies that hire that way (see *Resources* at the end of the chapter).

Once you've found a potential job listing, do some digging to figure out what it's really like to work at the company.

For companies where you don't have contacts [Glassdoor](#) and similar sites can be a great resource. Glassdoor is a site that lets employees post anonymous salaries and reviews of their company. The information is anonymous, so you have to be a little skeptical: some companies have apparently asked employees to post positive reviews. You also need to pay attention to the reviewer's role, location, and the year it was posted. Once you take all that into account the reviews can often be very informative.

After you've checked out Glassdoor the next thing to look at is the job posting itself, along with the company's website. These are often written by people other than the engineering team, but you can still learn a lot from them. Sometimes you'll get the sense the company is actually a great place to work. For example, Memrise has this to say in their Software Engineering postings:

If you aren't completely confident that you fit our exact criteria, please get in touch immediately. Humility is a wonderful thing and we're not interested in hiring 'rockstars' or 'ninjas'.

On the other hand, consider a less inviting job post for an Automation Test Engineer position:

Must be able to execute scripts during off hours if required. ... This isn't the job for someone looking for a traditional 8-5 position, but it's a great role for someone who is hungry for a terrific opportunity in a fast-paced, state of the art environment.

The only positive from my perspective is that they are upfront about the work conditions. Other job postings from the same company were less informative, which suggests it's worth skimming all of a company's job postings.

Read everything you can about the company. Sometimes the benefits will give you hints: free catered dinners are a bad sign—why do they want you working so late?—and sometimes even the company values will give you some ideas. Companies that claim to “Work Harder and Smarter” often seem to want long hours, for example. Beyond helping you avoid bad companies, the better you understand the company, the better you'll be able to sell yourself when you're interviewing.

## 9.3 Applying to jobs

The ideal when looking for a new job is to get multiple offers at once. This makes you look more valuable: look at all the companies that want to hire you! And it also means you can go to a company that's offering you less money and say “that other company offered me 10% more, but here's something *you* could do...”

That means you may want to apply to more jobs than necessary, just to make sure you have multiple offers at the

same time. Even being able to say you have other interviews in progress can be helpful to make you seem more valuable.

You also want to maximize your chances of getting invited in for an interview. Once you've found some companies or other organizations to apply to, you will submit your resume and cover letter. Based on your research, you should customize your resume and letter to demonstrate your value to that particular organization, and that particular position.

Here's how one software engineer does it:

ADAM: "I found that setting myself apart from other candidates in a particular way really worked. A lot of companies have plenty of money to spend but they just don't want to feel that they are overpaying; in particular this applies to startups. However, there is no 'normal' budget for an abnormal candidate so I try to pitch myself as abnormal.

Pick one thing from what they talk about that you think is probably the least pitched-to aspect. E.g. if they're a Python shop everyone will say that they know Python well. Most engineers who apply to startups pitch only their coding skills. But many

startups want to grow a team quickly but they have no idea how to do that. I pitched myself to one company as someone who could both code and help them grow their team, and that seemed to really set me apart.

Other less-common pitches I've gone with include 'My expertise is making your shitty codebase half decent.' In reality this is much of what engineers do. But people seem to pitch only what they've built: features, products. When I've told managers that in the past what I've done is decreased the number of fires they love that."

## **9.4 When should you mention you want shorter hours?**

Sooner or later you're going to have to discuss the fact that you want to work shorter hours. You can mention it during the interview, or only after you've received a job offer. I once tried both approaches in parallel:

“A couple years after I started my first job with a shorter workweek, I quit and started looking for another job. My goal was to find another 32 hours/week job. I was tired of being a remote worker and wanted to have coworkers I saw face-to-face, so as a first pass I only looked for local jobs.

I tried two approaches:

1. Working with a good recruiter who I told in advance about my criteria.
2. Applying to normal job postings, and not telling the company in advance that I wanted short hours.

Going via a recruiter didn't work very well. He had an ongoing relationship with the companies I was applying to, which I didn't want to jeopardize. So I had to tell him upfront that I wanted a shorter workweek, and he had to explain my requirements to the company, before I'd proven my value.

The recruiter wasn't sure I'd be able to find a less-than-full-time job, but he did manage to get me one interview. But after a phone interview the company decided I wasn't quite the right fit, and given

that I wanted to work shorter hours they decided not to continue with the interview process. The truth is I probably would have done just fine if they'd hired me, but given my unusual demand they weren't willing to give me a chance.

The second approach, applying to jobs without a recruiter and without specifying my requirements upfront, was how I landed a job.”

I recommend not telling the company upfront that you want a shorter workweek. If you do they'll just drop you for a more typical candidate. And they'll do so *before* you've demonstrated how valuable an employee you'd be.

Mentioning you want a shorter workweek in the middle of the interview process is also problematic. You'll be forced to spend some of your limited interview time on justifying your request, instead of focusing on selling yourself and learning about the job.

Once you have a job offer, they know you're valuable, and you know you want to work there. Now you can start asking for what you want. One possible exception: if you want a really short workweek, e.g. half-time, you're asking

for a fundamentally different kind of position, and might want to state it earlier in the process.

## 9.5 Interviewing

If all goes well you will eventually get a job interview. Make sure you spend most of your time demonstrating your dedication, work ethic, and potential value to the company.

Some of your time, however, should be spent trying to learn more about the company and figuring out if you want to work there. Beyond the usual criteria (do you want to work with these people? do you want to work on this product? do you want this commute?) you'll also want to figure out your chances of reducing your work hours.

At this point you still don't want to broach the subject of a shorter workweek, but you do want to find out what the work environment is like. So to get more information you should ask some more-or-less tactful questions, depending on how confident you are in your ability to get a job.

The easier it is for you to get job offers, and the less time you want to spend on interviews, the earlier and more explicitly you can ask about work/life balance. Thus if you really want to prevent wasted time, you can ask about

work/life balance in the initial phone screen. If you have a hard time interviewing, you can ask more oblique questions later in the process.

Whatever questions you come up with, make sure you prepare them before the interview, so you don't have to come with them on the spot. Ideally you should direct these questions at both a manager and line staff, so you can get more realistic answers. Here are some questions you can ask:

- “What does a typical week look like here?” This is open-ended enough that it doesn't peg you as focusing on hours, but the answers might give you a hint.
- “How do you deal with deadlines? How are they chosen?” If the answer involves “working on weekends” and “the sales department” then you'll know there's a problem.
- If this is relevant, “How do you deal with production failures? What does on-call look like?” A well-run organization will put an effort into preventing problems from recurring. A badly-run organization will compensate for bad software by having the on-call engineer work all weekend applying more duct tape.
- “How often is crunch time? What causes it?” Software has bugs, emergencies happen, and you will

sometimes have to work longer hours. The question is whether crunch time is rare, occasional, or the default mode of development.

That last question is borrowed from a [cheat list of interview questions](#) posted on the CS Career Questions Reddit. It's worth your time to read the whole list, though many of the questions will be harder to ask until you've become a very valuable hire. Another useful list is [Culture Queries](#), which suggests questions based on your goals and values.

If you don't like the answers try not to show it, even if there's no way you're going to work there. You still want to get a job offer, because having an extra job offer in hand can help you negotiate a better deal with a different company. So even if the company failed the interview, do your best to get that offer.

“As I've been blogging about work/life balance, and the negative impacts of long work hours, this has started to impact my job interviews. At one company the Director of Engineering indicated he'd read my blog, and wanted me to know upfront that the company was in a situation where people needed to work 50 to 60 hours.

At that point I knew I wasn't going to work there, but I kept my mouth shut and went through 5 hours of whiteboard puzzles (without a break for lunch!). They did eventually give me a job offer—but I politely declined, once I'd gotten the job I actually wanted.”

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## Resources

- *The Passionate Programmer: Creating a Remarkable Career in Software Development*, by Chad Fowler, has some good career advice. I dislike the title, though: alliteration is nice and all, but [being passionate is not a good thing](#).
- [Key Values](#) allows you to search for programming jobs based on values, including work/life balance. Read the detailed descriptions, since the company's definition won't always match yours. Also included is the company's interview process.
- [Hiring Without Whiteboards](#) is a list of companies that don't use whiteboard algorithm puzzles when hiring.

- [They Whiteboarded Me](#) is a list of companies that *do* use whiteboard algorithm puzzles when hiring.
- [We Work Remotely](#) and [Remote OK](#) are two of many job boards specializing in remote jobs.
- [FlexJobs](#) is a job board for flexible jobs, not necessarily programming jobs.

# Chapter 10

# Negotiating a New Job Offer

In this chapter we'll cover:

- The easy way to get an offer at a new job.
- Some stories of successful negotiations.
- The process of negotiation at a new job.

## **10.1 The easy way**

Negotiating for shorter hours at a new job is more difficult than at an existing job, but there are exceptions. In particular, if you have a preexisting relationship with the hiring manager you're a lot closer to being an existing employee: they know who you are and what you can do. For example, my first job with reduced hours started out as a contracting gig. Eventually they offered to hire me as an employee, and at that point they knew what I could do, and even if I wasn't working full-time they were still getting more of my time.

Consulting isn't the only way to do this. Over time, managers and colleagues will leave your current employer and move on to other jobs. These people know you and trust you: you'll have a much easier time convincing them to hire you with reduced hours than you would a complete stranger.

## **10.2 From failure to success**

Much of the time, however, you'll need to find a new company with people you don't know. That's how I got my second job with reduced hours; you'll recall from the

previous chapter that I'd tried using a recruiter and failed. I then started applying to companies directly, without telling them I wanted shorter hours:

“One of the companies I talked to was potentially interested in hiring me, but was a little worried that I might be bored with the initial work they had. I said I'd think about it, in the hopes of getting two parallel offers. The second company, a small startup, was very interested: at the end of the day of interviews the recruiter told me how enthusiastic everyone was. I made sure to mention that I was far along in the process with another company.

They also asked for my previous salary. Sharing your salary can be a bad idea, but in this case it was higher than I was likely to get, based on some research on local salary ranges. My previous salary was more in the way of a negotiating point, then. Initially, however, I didn't share it.

When they called me with a verbal offer I explained I wanted to work 32 hours/week. I also shared the salary I'd have gotten if I was working full time at my previous job, and pointed out how much higher it was. I deliberately didn't share the fact that my previous job

prorated my salary based on a 45-hour workweek: if I was going to prorate my salary at the new job, I wanted to do so based on a 40-hour workweek.

I went back and forth with the CEO, with their internal recruiter acting as a go-between. The CEO wanted to know why I wanted to work fewer hours, and I explained that I wanted to spend time with my daughter. The key point, really, was that I wasn't going to be running a consulting shop on the side or some such: I would be a focused employee during my working hours.

Eventually they came back with an offer: 35 hours/week, and a higher salary that was quite good for the area. 35 hours wasn't as low as I'd hoped for, but it was still a good offer, so I accepted the job."

Let's see how I did on the negotiation principles we covered in [Chapter 2](#).

**Knowledge is power:** Saying I wanted a shorter workweek upfront was a mistake—I did better when I only shared it after I got an offer. I also shared my previous salary, deliberately, because it was higher than I was likely to get,

but I didn't mention the problematic way in which it had been prorated.

**Negotiate from a position of strength:** I had a fairly strong negotiating position:

- The company was very interested in hiring me, since I had a particular combination of skills that is hard to find.
- I could point to successful less-than-full-time work at a previous company.
- The salary at my previous job, had I been working full time, was high by local standards. This was another good way to signal my value.
- I had another company that was interested in hiring me.

The higher previous salary was also useful in giving me flexibility in negotiation. I could accept a lower salary and still do OK, especially since I was willing to work slightly longer hours than the previous job, thus scaling up my income. As long as the new salary wasn't too low my actual take home pay wouldn't change that much.

On the other hand, I had quit before looking for a new job. This weakened my negotiating position, since I didn't have a job to fall back to.

**Use the right tactics:** I should have asked for a 30-hour workweek, not the 32 I wanted—I would have been more likely to get a lower counteroffer. I did however use the fact I was going down from a high salary, which also allowed me to get them to raise their initial salary offer.

## 10.3 “Here’s my counteroffer”

Next, we’ll hear the story of David, who lives in Munich:

DAVID: “My previous job was a major investment bank, with over 200,000 employees counting all the daughter companies. Our development team was part of a cost center, which basically defined the whole atmosphere.

I wanted to be in a mid-size to smaller company in order to fit me. I grew tired of working in this huge enterprise, where you’re not even recognized as a life form. Maybe as a necessary evil. The shorter week was an additional benefit, but was not the most important one.

The salary I was getting at the bank is not the typical salary of a developer where I live. It was at least 20% higher than I would normally get. I was looking at a pay cut when I decided I was getting a new job.

In my first couple of phone screens I mentioned my salary, but that was definitely a mistake. In both cases that led to abrupt end of conversation.

In one case they were hiring for BMW, where I didn't think it would be such a big deal, but the recruiter didn't let me pass the screen, even though before speaking about money I did impress her quite well. But as soon as she heard what my salary was she said it's not going to work, even though I didn't expect them to match it, even though I didn't care if they match it.

So I decided it wasn't good to reveal my old salary even though it's higher than market. I also had one real coding interview over Skype, which I immediately failed, miserably failed. It was this situation where you have to write this typical boilerplate code, which you never end up writing in the real world, and you couldn't use an IDE with auto-completion. And although the interviewers told me it could be

pseudo-code, didn't have to be real code, I still felt compelled to have be something that could run. I kept worrying about this code too much, I had the imp of the perverse on my shoulder, making me blurt out the wrongest response to every question, I kept doubting myself, feeling panicked about what the interviewers were thinking of me.

[At the job I did get] it was not a technical interview. This was just a head of development getting my CV from one of his programmers. He liked that CV, so he called me up, we had an informal conversation where he told me about himself, about the company. It was mostly about them, not so much about me.

I did tell some things about myself, obviously, but I felt relaxed, I didn't feel threatened or judged. I kinda managed to simply be myself, and that's really the key I think to a successful interview. That's what failed me in that coding interview, because I was trying to impress; in this company I just had a laidback conversation and we decided to give it a try.

I said I had a high salary, but I didn't expect them to match it since they weren't a bank. In that conversation I didn't bring up 32 hours at all, it just

ended in them offering me whatever they could offer, which was 30% less than my previous salary, we shook hands and I went home. And I was supposed to tell him what I thought about it the next day.

The next day here was my idea. I said: “here’s my counteroffer—same salary as what you offered, but 4 days a week.”

The company is located outside of town, bit of a longer commute, three times as far as all the other potential jobs. The head of development had told me that this company was having a hard time finding suitable candidates.

And obviously the manager liked me as well, so I just thought this would make all the difference. If what they offered me for five days a week they would offer me for four, that would also solve the salary gap.

I justified the 4 days a week as well, I said that I think I would be as at least as effective as if I had a 5 day week. Either I would spend that extra day off-screen, and then I would be more relaxed the next working day. Or if I spend it on-screen coding at home, I would learn more and be more prepared.

I emailed him with my counteroffer, and in a couple of days I got a positive response and a contract in the mail.

To decide when to work I asked some questions of my new boss, and he said he'd probably prefer me to take my day off on Fridays, although he's flexible on that.

Six months later, I love my new job and the free Fridays. I've used them for hiking in the Alps, for reading up books on various technologies that are used at work, for dentist appointments and car repairs and all manner of errands.”

At this point you should be able to start figuring out on your own how David applied the negotiation principles. Give it a try, and then compare your answers to my version in [Section 11.4](#).

## 10.4 “You get better with practice”

Next, Alex's story:

ALEX K: “I studied math at UC Berkeley, graduated in 2009, didn’t know what I was going to do, so I started doing data analysis for credit card fraud: SQL, reports about what it meant. I taught myself Java because I was bored, got a web development job, spent a few years doing web development, and then spent the past four years at a startup that was doing building a platform for running simulations in the cloud.

But I wanted more time to work on personal projects. I want to solve problems for *me*. It doesn’t have to be valuable for other people, just for me. I don’t need it to make money, I can just start from the ground up and build the way I want to build it.

First I thought about going into consulting: 3 days consulting a week, 2 days on my projects, and use projects and blogging to market myself. I spent a year trying to make that happen. There are some skills like networking, advertising yourself, people-oriented stuff that I was not as good at, you know? And I wasn’t willing to leave without something lined up.

It may have been around that time that I heard of your blog—I saw something on Hacker News about a 4 day workweek, and I may have been thinking about this

myself, about negotiating a shorter workweek.

And I read what you said, don't bring this up until you have an offer. I thought it was good advice. I would be able to make the case better after I had an interview, having had a chance to demonstrate my skills and value-add.

At the time I wanted to leave my current job, I was pretty frustrated, felt I wasn't being valued for what I brought to organization. So I was looking to leave.

The whole timeline from start to finish was 4 months. One of my longer job searches, but not outside the realm of possibility. And you get better at negotiating with practice.

Initially I applied to some big name companies like Lyft, and then I found something called Triplebyte, a place that does a technical screen and forwards you to a bunch of companies. That flooded me with interview requests. I did 20-30 phone interviews, being conservative.

At first I was accepting them, and all my free time was filled up, so I started turning them down. This led to a few on-site interviews—probably 6 through Triplebyte.

It just kinda happened and took all my time.

I got 4 offers from that process, and none of them went for the 4-day workweek. They would offer a salary. And each time I would respond with “what I’m looking for is a day off a week, I’m willing to accept a lower salary for that, how about \$X and every Thursday off.”

- The first one the hiring manager gave me the offer over the phone, I gave my counteroffer, and they said “let me go talk to CEO.” They came back with “if it was up to me it would be yes, but the CEO said no.”
- Same thing happened at the next company, the CEO comes back with no. People have this concern with how it will play with the rest of team, maybe thinking “if he gets four days everyone else will too.”
- The other two were flat out no.

It was disappointing, I spent a couple weeks recovering. Then I went on another hiring platform.

But the hiring platforms are set up to give an informational and negotiating advantage companies to the employers. So I also thought: I’ll apply to this

company where I love the product, and I know they need data analysis. I checked and they had a job, so I submitted an application to them too.

Time goes on, I have an interview with this company I'm excited about, but I also start thinking about "what if none of this works out, I will need to stick around at current job." And a few days later my boss at my then job said "I've noticed you've been checked out, what can we do to help you stay engaged?"

I hadn't thought of bringing it up, since I wanted to leave, but I said to myself I may as well try. They had been hinting about a raise, since they raised [investor] money, so I said "how about a day off instead of a raise."

My boss comes back and says "we can do the day off thing" and I was surprised, and the next day the new company I was interviewing with came back with an offer.

Initially I had a phone call where they made the first offer, and I said "I'm also negotiating with my current employer on 4 days a week." I said I wanted 4 days a week, and I would take a 20% (prorated) cut. I feel like I will be generating as much value as someone

working full time, and the salaries in SF are pretty high, I'm willing to take the cut in order to facilitate taking this day off.

I was talking to someone in the recruiting department, and they said "you should talk to your next boss." By then the old company had come through on 4 days a week. So I told the manager at the new company about that, and I was much more confident, "I'm happy to say no since I can stop looking and have 4 day workweek."

I was selling myself as: "I'm a really skilled engineer, I will accomplish a lot even if I have every Thursday off." It took running into someone who would understand that. When we were negotiating he was like "do you expect you can do a full work's week in 4 days?" and I said "yes, I do" and he said "OK, I believe you."

He did say he didn't want it to become the norm, the expected thing, but it was his job to manage that with other employees. And the fact that I was making less was a key aspect. If another employee comes to him he can say "Alex is making less money."

That went through, it was pretty smooth.

So I told my boss at my old company, “I’m too excited about the new job to stay, I would’ve accepted 4 day a workweek.” I liked him, I felt like we had good rapport. So I was a little bummed, the timing was a little unfortunate, he went out on a limb negotiating for me, and I was leaving. But I was ready to leave, I’m glad I left, the whole culture is completely different.

I had been at my old job a long time, and at the time I didn’t negotiate too hard on salary. When I started I knew I was underpaid a little bit, but the magnitude between market rate and my salary was increasing, and I wasn’t paying attention. My pay was [very large sum] less than the offers I was getting.

Now I’m making more—even with the 20% prorated reduction—and I have a day off. Past a certain point the money doesn’t affect me too much. You want to be valued and salary is part of that, and not feel you’re being ripped off, but having Thursday off every week seems much more valuable to me than the extra money.”

Can you spot the various ways Alex K applied the principles of negotiation we’ve covered?

## 10.5 The negotiation process

Once you have the job offer in hand, it's time to start negotiating. The basic process to follow is:

1. Strengthen your negotiating position.
2. Come up with a valuable offer.
3. Have the conversation.
4. Listen to their response.
5. Respond to their counter-offer.

### 1. Strengthen your negotiating position

There are a number of things you can do to strengthen your negotiating position.

First, stay at your existing job if you have one, especially if it already offers a shorter workweek. This gives you a stronger negotiating position since you always have the implicit counter-offer of your current job.

Second, as covered in the previous chapter, don't tell employers up-front that you want a shorter workweek; wait until they really want you. If and when you've gotten an

offer, you've reached the point where the company thinks you are valuable enough to hire.

Third, if you got an offer from a company you don't want to work for, try to stall, without saying no, and keep looking. Having the extra offer will help you negotiate a better deal at a company where you do want to work.

## **2. Come up with a valuable offer**

Your offer should have the following structure:

1. "I'd love to work for you."
2. "I am a very valuable employee."
3. "I'm also a hard-working, dedicated employee."
4. "But, I'd like to work a shorter workweek."
5. "Here's why that's good for you (or at least, less bad than you think)."

**First, you want to make clear you're enthusiastic about the job.** At least in the US, enthusiasm is a cultural

expectation for employees, so make sure you sound enthused and engaged.

**Second, you need to show how valuable you will be to your prospective new manager, new team, and new employer.** Of course, value is a culmination of the whole interview process: how you were introduced, how you wrote your resume, how you pitched yourself during the interview, what you learned from upfront research and your interview.

But it's useful to summarize this value, and remind the hiring manager of why they want to hire you, because this value is what is going to help you overcome the resistance to your demand. This is also a good time to mention that you're in the process of interviewing elsewhere, have competing offers, or better yet have competing offers with higher pay, better benefits, or a cooler industry.

**Third, make sure to show how dedicated you are, so that the request for shorter hours doesn't come across as laziness or a lack of desire to work.** You might explain that you work hard, that you're very focused, note your willingness to work during emergencies, and so on. Cite specific occasions you've done so in the past. Only promise this if it's true; if you're worried that crunch time or emergencies are a permanent feature of the company, you probably shouldn't accept the offer.

**Fourth, tell them that you want to work shorter hours.**

This request is often going to confuse and surprise the person you're talking to, so you may want to give a reason or explanation that helps them put you in a known mental slot. In particular, try to make sure this reason will either make you look good, will benefit the company, or both. For example:

- If you want more time to write software for fun, stress how this additional learning will make you a better software engineer during work hours.
- If you want to spend more time with your children, talk about how you're "a very committed person, and that's true of both my family and my work."

**Fifth, explain why shorter hours will be good for your new team, or at least not harmful.** The goal here is to preempt any worries they may have that you haven't already addressed in earlier steps. The most compelling way to do so is to point to a shorter workweek at a previous job, explain how it worked out well for the company, and mention that your references will be able to speak to this. But you can also address specific worries:

- **Initial ramp-up:** To get the initial knowledge transfer, you can offer to work full time for the first month or two.

- **Productivity:** Mike, who we met in an earlier chapter, combines setting boundaries with an assurance that he will be productive, by saying “you’re getting the best 4/5ths of my time, but only 4/5ths. I’m not going to pound out as much code.” In my case, high productivity is part of my pitch to employees, so I’ve been stressing it throughout the interview process.
- **Communication and coordination:** To ensure coworkers can always get the information you need even on your day off, you can explain how you tend to write really good documentation, and are good at communicating in advance. More broadly, you should indicate your willingness to be flexible about when you take your time off.

Obviously this is quite a lot of information to convey, so I recommend spending some time up front writing it up as notes, or perhaps even as a letter you can hand to the hiring manager.

### **3. Have the conversation**

It’s time to ask for what you want. If necessary, practice with a friend or family member beforehand, and use notes to make sure you’ve conveyed everything.

You'll be nervous, but you can do it.

#### 4. Try to understand their response

Next, it's time to listen. You won't always be able to tell how a hiring manager or company feel about your request, so you'll need to keep the full range of feelings in mind when you get a particular response. Here's some possible feelings a hiring manager might have:

**Horror:** Some managers will be insulted by your suggestion and immediately withdraw their offer. Chances are they wanted you to work 60 hours a week, and so you wouldn't have wanted to work there anyway. You can prevent this from happening by filtering out companies with bad work/life balance in advance, before and during the interview process.

**Worry:** Did they make a mistake giving you the offer? Are you lazy, or not committed enough? How will you communicate with your coworkers? What if your coworkers need to know something and you're not available? If they're worried enough, they might withdraw the offer, or they might communicate it obliquely via further conversation. You should try to address these worries in advance in your offer; see above.

**Resignation:** The manager isn't happy about your request, but if that's what it takes to hire you they will agree.

**Stubbornness:** The manager is willing to hire you—but only if you agree to work full time.

In general, unless the response is “yes” you should try to elicit as much more detail as you can at this point, so you can do better either at this negotiation or at future interviews.

## **5. Respond to their counter-offer**

Depending on the answer, you will need to handle the situation differently.

**“We’re withdrawing our offer.”**

You’ve failed. But that’s OK, there are other places you can work.

Try to figure out if this is horror, in which case you’ve failed at filtering out bad companies, or the result of too much worry, in which case you’ll need to do better at making a valuable offer and assuaging worries in advance.

**“I don’t care how long you work, so long as you get your job done.”**

If you’re dealing with a bad manager, you don’t want to take them up on it: they’ll give you too much work, so you’re never going to get your job done.

If you’re dealing with a good manager, however, you might have hit the jackpot. For more details about how to deal with this situation, go read [Section 11.1](#).

**“OK, here’s an updated offer”**

If the answer was “yes”, you need to decide whether to accept the particular offer they gave, or ask for more. If the offer is close enough, you can try to get just a little more. In general, it doesn’t hurt to ask at this point: they’ve established they want to hire you, you’ve established you want to work there, now it’s just about meeting at the happy middle. And for salaries, at least, my experience is you can often get a little bit more simply by asking—the employer has an acceptable pay range, and they will tend to start at the bottom.

So you can say something like “Thank you, I really appreciate the offer, I’d love to work for you, and I feel I could provide a lot of value because of <reasons>. Your

offer is a bit low, though.”

If the offer isn't nearly sufficient, you also want to try to figure out what the problem is:

- Do they not understand how valuable you are? You can mention the offer you got from another company that was much better, or how your previous salary was much higher.
- Do they not have enough money to pay you what you want? You can ask for the same pay, but with more time off to compensate.

If you can't reach an agreement, ask for more time to think about it, and try to use this offer to demonstrate your value to a different employer.

**“But what about X/Y/Z?”, or “We’re not willing to change our offer.”**

These answers can make it harder to tell what the hiring manager is thinking:

- **“But what about X/Y/Z?”** This could indicate worry, in which case you haven't done a good enough job making a valuable offer. Or it could indicate resignation, in which case this is a last ditch

negotiation attempt to get you to back off and work full-time.

- **“We won’t hire you with shorter hours, but we’d still love to have you full time.”** Again, this might be due to worries, resignation, or inflexibility.

If the hiring manager is worried, you might be able to address those worries. If the hiring manager is feeling resignation, you just need to stand firm and you’ll get what you want. If the hiring manager is inflexible, you’re not going to get anywhere—but a job offer in hand is still useful to signal your value to other potential employers.

Whatever they’re feeling, then, you don’t want to walk away from this job offer just yet. Instead, you want to try to respond in a way that assuages potential worries, reminds them how valuable you are, while still indicating you’re serious about your demands.

The general structure of what you’re trying to communicate is:

1. “You don’t have to worry about my commitment: look how enthusiastic I am!”
2. “You really should hire me, see how valuable I

am!”

3. “You won’t be able to talk me out of this, sorry.”
4. “Your particular worries can be addressed.”

Here’s a template you can use:

Dear <hiring manager>,

Thank you again for your offer. I would really love to work for you because <reasons>.

<Recap your value as a normal, standard employee unrelated to your work hours, ideally in specific way to that company>.

Just so you know, I have offers from multiple other companies, and in fact one of them offered me a higher salary.

I would love to get going and work on your project, but a four-day week is still extremely important to me; I believe that we can make it work for you as well.

<Give reasons/suggestions why you think it'll work, tailored to their concerns. "You'll be getting my most productive four days." etc.>

I'd be happy to talk this over further over the phone or in person, and see if we can work something out that'll work for all of us.

Thank you again for your offer,

—<You>

(If you don't have other offers, or higher paid offers, you should obviously omit the relevant sections.)

One specific way you can try to assuage their concerns is to suggest a trial period: offer to work at your chosen schedule for six months and see how it goes. If they accept, by the end of those six months:

1. You will be an existing employee, and therefore far more valuable and harder to lose.
2. Hopefully overcome any potential worries and difficulties from your shorter workweek.

So your negotiating position will be much stronger.

In any case, eventually you'll get a response to your letter and you'll get a better sense of what their real feeling is. Either you'll get the offer you want, or it'll become clear they won't be changing their minds, in which case it's time to focus on a different employer.

## 10.6 If all else fails

As I noted at the beginning of this chapter, negotiating reduced hours at a new job is difficult, especially the first time you do it. The second time you have more credibility, especially if your existing job has reduced hours.

So if you are having a hard time finding a new job that will agree to your requirements, you can switch to looking for a normal, full-time job. Then, once you've been at your job for a year you can negotiate as an existing employee, a much easier task.

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### Resources

- [HOWTO negotiate your salary and benefits - for women](#), by Valerie Aurora. Read this *before* you start

the interview process for a job.

- Patrick McKenzie also has [some excellent advice](#) on salary negotiation.

# Chapter 11

## Maximizing Your Income

Whether you're doing so as an existing employee or at a new job, cutting back your hours can also reduce your income. So in this chapter we'll cover tactics that can help you maximizing your pay, while still reducing your workweek.

At the broadest level, you should be planning not just for your next job, but for your long-term career. In the short term you may not be able to reduce your hours because of financial concerns, but with some advance planning you might be able to do so in a year or two.

## 11.1 Getting paid for value

You'll recall from an earlier chapter that I once had to reduce my working hours because of a repetitive strain injury. Since I was a productive programmer, as far as I know no one even noticed: I was paid a full-time salary even as I worked fewer hours. With some managers at some companies, you can negotiate this deal explicitly.

Here's how I ended up doing this at a new job:

“For this job search I followed my improved process: I didn't mention I wanted a shorter workweek until after I received a job offer. During the interview at the company I ended up with, I made sure to ask about working hours, and one of the software engineers there told me that work/life balance was pretty good.

So when I got a job offer I figured it was worth my time to try, and I asked for a 32-hour workweek. I assumed I would reduce my salary correspondingly, but didn't bring that up.

The response I got from HR was that my prospective manager wasn't willing to hire me with reduced hours—but that he didn't care how many hours I

worked, so long as I got my job done. Given the information from the interview this seemed promising, but I tried to be explicit.

I explained that I planned to work 35 hours a week initially, and then transition down to 32 hours. Again, I was told this was fine. So I accepted, and did just that: I worked a short workweek while still getting paid a full salary.

At intervals I checked in with my manager to see if he was happy with my work; he was. A year after I started I brought up my working hours again, and mentioned I was working 32 hours a week. My manager said he didn't care how many hours I worked, or if I never showed up at the office; as long as I met my goals, he was happy.”

There are three conditions required to successfully negotiate this sort of deal:

1. **You need to be able provide a large amount of value to your employer.** If you recall the categories of Implementer, Solver, and Finder, as an Implementer you can't do this: you will need direct supervision. As

a Solver you might or might not. But as a Finder, someone who can identify problems on your own, you have the ability to create a huge amount of value for your employer by identifying how they can meet their goals.

**2. The organization needs to be reasonably managed.**

If your manager sets unreasonable deadlines, or asks for too many features, or can't say "no" when needed, you will end up being asked to do the impossible. And when you can't, your shorter hours will be held against you.

**3. Your manager needs to judge you by the value you produce, not the hours you work.**

If your manager only cares how long you're in the office, it doesn't matter how valuable your work is. On the other hand, if your organization is fine with working from home or remote work, you might be better placed to do this.

As usual, this will be easier to negotiate at your current job. If all of these conditions are met, you can try and ask your manager if they care how many hours you work every week. If they don't care, you can try working fewer hours and see how it goes.

## 11.2 A higher-paying job

Another option is getting your salary high enough that reducing it by 20% isn't a problem. As a programmer you can almost always find jobs with a higher salary, especially given the rise in remote jobs:

- If you're underpaid, there are local jobs that will pay more.
- If you're in an area or country with lower pay, there are remote jobs with higher pay.
- If your area of expertise pays less well, there are other technologies which pay better.

For example, I live in the Boston area, which has fairly high pay for the US (in part because of a high cost of living). But salaries in San Francisco are much higher, and so the highest (full-time) salary I ever had was a remote job with a company in SF.

Given the potential for higher pay, you have a range of options:

1. If you want to negotiate at your current job, get a job offer from another employer that you're willing to accept—but make sure it's for much higher pay. Now

you can ask your current job to match that offer by reducing your hours without reducing your pay.

2. Get a job offer with much higher pay, and then try to negotiate shorter hours with that company.
3. Get a normal full-time job with much higher pay. After a year, negotiate at that better paying job for a shorter workweek.

And if you currently work at a high-paying job in a high-cost area, you can try the reverse procedure. You can negotiate to turn your current job into a remote job with the same salary, and then move to a lower-cost area.

# Afterword

This book is about how you, as an individual, can negotiate a 3-day weekend. It's not easy, but when you succeed it's more than worth it.

Nonetheless, negotiating on your own has its problems: a new manager might decide to renegotiate your deal. And unless you're sufficiently valuable, you're more likely to get laid off when times are bad. So even once you have the job you want, you will need to keep demonstrating your value, and you will need to keep negotiating in order to hold the line on what your company demands.

What's more, negotiating on your own mostly only helps you: you can inspire other people, and the second person to negotiate at your company will have an easier time, but each worker has to create their own deal.

So here are some things you can do beyond just negotiating

for yourself:

**Unionize:** In the US, as in many other countries, long term organizing efforts by labor unions brought about the now-weakened 40-hour workweek. Since long working hours lower productivity and output, forcing companies to reduce their working hours will actually benefit those companies, even if they don't realize or won't admit it.

**Organize informally:** You can, for example, come up with a way for you and your coworkers to share your salaries.

**Start a business with a competitive advantage:** Starting a business that has shorter working hours can give you a competitive advantage. You'll be more productive, and you'll have an easier time hiring, since you'll be able to provide a sought-after and hard-to-find benefit.

**Speak out:** If you're at the point in your career where you're no longer worried about getting work, speak publicly and loudly about the negative effects of working long hours. The more overwork is publicly criticized, the more likely companies are to do what's in their own best interest: reduce working hours to a reasonable level.

Finally, I would like to ask you to help me: could you share a couple of questions you still have about what I wrote? Please email your questions, and any other comments, to [itamar@codewithoutrules.com](mailto:itamar@codewithoutrules.com).

—Itamar Turner-Trauring

# Solutions to Exercises

## 11.3 Solution to Section 2.4: Laura's negotiation

Here are some of the things Laura could have done to improve her negotiation position:

### **Knowledge is power:**

- While working as a temp, she could have asked her coworkers what they were paid. However, in the US at least asking about salaries can be seen as rude, and this might have been extra-awkward as a temp. So another alternative would've been to try to find some other local software engineers who weren't her coworkers, perhaps via her local friends, and ask them.

- She could have asked the recruiter she was working with about salary ranges for different job titles in Boston, and separately what they thought she could get for this job. Asking for salary ranges removes the recruiter's potential biases. Additionally, if the recruiter had refused to provide any information at all (which is what happened in Laura's case) this would suggest the recruiter was really working on the company's behalf, not hers.
- She shouldn't have let the company realize that she was under time pressure due to her need for a paycheck to get a rental.

### **Negotiate from a position of strength:**

- Since her initial job was just a temporary one, she could have continued interviewing at other companies.
- When asking for higher salary, she could have pointed how she was a known quantity, since she'd already worked at the company. Better to hire her at a higher salary than risk not finding anyone suitable.
- She could've found a sublet or extended-stay hotel, so she had a place to live when her free housing went away.

## **Tactical:**

- The company offered \$90K, and Laura wanted \$100K, so she should have asked for \$110K.

## **11.4 Solution to Section 10.3: David's negotiation**

Here's how David applied the negotiation principles:

### **Employment is a negotiated relationship:**

David got his job via a referral, which means he started out with someone on the team vouching for him; this probably made the interview process much easier.

### **Knowledge is power:**

- David noticed that sharing his high salary too early was a problem, so he stopped sharing it—until sharing it became useful.
- David listened to the hiring manager during the interview, and learned they had a hard time hiring people.
- David didn't say he wanted a 32-hour workweek until he had a job offer.

## **Negotiate from a position of strength:**

- David had previously had a much higher salary.
- The company had a hard time hiring people.
- He made his offer to work 32 hours more valuable to the company, by explaining why it would benefit them, instead of just asking for it. As he put it, “some justification seems needed, the question hangs in the air.”

**Use the right tactics:** David didn't answer the offer he got immediately, he thought it through and answered the next day.

# Credits

First, Jenny: thank you for everything.

Thanks to my interviewees, for sharing their experiences and making valuable suggestions: Adam, Alex K, Brian, David, Gabriel, and Laura. (While all the interviews are with real people, some of the interviewees choose to use pseudonyms.)

Jonathan Lange and Beekey Cheung reviewed parts of an earlier iteration of this book, and provided valuable feedback.

For typo fixes and other comments, thanks to: Adam, AJ Castro-Chandri, Chris Wolfe, Jean, David, Laura.

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# Changelog

## 1.0

- The book is now available in EPUB and Mobi (Kindle) formats.
- Added two new interviews: one about negotiating at an existing job, one about negotiating at a new job.

## Beta 1

- Initial release.