

The Salary Question

'Below Scale' is 'B.S.'

by Don Berliner

"This is the range of salaries we use here," the personnel man says as he pushes forward a piece of paper with loads of numbers carefully worked out by some assistant in the wage and benefits department. "Every title has an average or scale salary and a maximum salary associated with it." The question of why no minimum dashes through my mind a split second before he supplies the answer—"Minimum is about 20 percent lower than the scale salary." To keep an applicant's blood pressure from rising violently at the sight of a mediocre salary figure, the minimum salary is not even placed in the neatly columned list.

"Most people think there's something wrong in getting a starting salary below scale," he continues, carefully shunning the use of the word *average* at this point because of its negative connotation. (Average? I'm not average, the other guy is!)

"But, actually, it's preferable. If you are hired at a salary below scale, your scheduled raises," he points to the chart, "come quicker. Thus, at below scale, you might get a raise after working 11 months, while at scale or above, it might take 14."

It seems that the personnel department wants you to infer that the situation will be like in figure A.

The salary fairy tale says that, at time T, the below-scale tortoise overtakes and vanquishes the unfortunate hare hired at scale. In reality, it's more like in B or C.

Let's face it: Being hired at below-average (sorry, below scale) salary implies that the company wasn't really too sure of you to begin with and wanted you to churn extra hard to prove yourself (and of course get those raises). If you tend to do just enough, you will chug along getting the normal raises and still trail the scale starter. Should you do either exceptionally well or exceptionally poorly, you probably

won't remain long. Doing poorly eventually gets you fired. Doing well brings you the realization that you would probably benefit from a job switch. Either way it isn't exactly beneficial for you to start below scale at this company.

From the personnel department's point of view, the use of this below-scale system is an obvious application of some simple psychological "facts." People want lots of raises very often. So, don't give them healthy raises that they might merit. Rather, split the raises up into smaller chunks in order to give more raises more frequently and, in turn, foster more happiness. Imagine the lunchroom scene:

"Hey, George, did you get that raise you were pulling for?"

"Oh, not yet, the paperwork from last month's raise is still tied up. But they said it would come through in another week or so."

"That'll be your seventh raise this year, huh?"

"Yeah, don't rub it in, I know you're ahead of me. Milligan's just slower than your boss in the paperwork."

"Well, you've got plenty of time to pull ahead of me. It's only May, you know."

I suppose that someone in personnel must have had at least some sense of humor to think of using the term *scale* instead of *average*. This way, when a company offers you a salary *Below Scale* (accompanied by the aforementioned reasoning), what it's giving you, most definitely, is *B.S.* □

