

Negotiating Job Offers – Reviewing Job Offer Letters from the Public, Nonprofit or Private Sector

When you receive your offer letter, there are a number of issues to focus on: some of these may be an important part of your career and professional development, and some may be important to you on a more personal basis. The table below lists the common components of a nonprofit, public or private sector offer letter, and also briefly discusses how you might address these various components when it comes to negotiating. Taking the time to review your letter carefully will allow you to evaluate all the aspects of the total package of your job offer and determine what is best for you. Some negotiating is expected once offers are made, but you should think carefully about which terms of employment you want to negotiate, since not all of them may be negotiable. It is important to understand the conventions of the specific field and industry to which you have applied.

Component of offer	What the offer letter should say	Considerations
Start date	Does the letter specify the start date for the position?	This is a standard component of any offer letter, and is usually agreed upon before the letter has been sent, i.e. during a prior interview.
Compensation	Does the letter provide the specific salary and other compensation you have been offered, how often and in what form you will be paid, and when payment will begin? Are bonuses included? If so, what are the criteria?	To successfully manage this issue, you should have a clear idea of the appropriate salary level for positions similar to yours. Remember, however, that there are regional differences in salaries, as well as many different combinations of salary vs. bonus plans, including signing bonuses or bonuses for exceeding professional service to the field, or pro bono work.
Relocation Reimbursement	Does the letter include any specifics about relocation assistance? Are temporary housing costs included? If you are a homeowner and have to move to a different city, is there support for selling your home?	Although this issue may have been discussed informally before you receive the offer letter, it is important to establish when this money can be available and whether there are any provisos about its use.
Reimbursement for Professional Development	Does the offer letter state what money will be made available for professional development and/or related costs?	Many businesses and other organizations will subsidize or share the costs of your professional development. This can include money allotted for conferences and/or continuing education.
Equipment and Other Resources	An offer letter may also include other items that have been informally discussed or promised after a verbal offer is made, but this is likely to be situation and context specific.	Examples could include the cost of a new computer or books, access to a designated parking space, or availability of other resources specific to your job (e.g., staffing support, confidential data or other information resources).

Maternity/Family Leave	Does the letter include information on maternity or family leave policies?	Although this is an important component of any job, a number of organizations handle this on a case-by-case basis, rather than adapting a standard policy. It is important to clarify this as much as possible, however.
General Benefits	Does the letter describe the benefits package or provide links to where this information can be found? Does this information include information on whether the benefits (e.g., health and dental insurance) cover just you or your eligible dependents as well? Is there information on how much of the premium the employer will pay? Do the benefits include a retirement or stock option plan?	In general, benefits are non-negotiable – you might be able to choose from a menu of different plans, but organizations usually “purchase” benefits packages from outside vendors, and may offer a limited range of options. Specific details about these plans are not always provided in offer letters, but links to this information on the HR webpage often are. Even though there may be little room for negotiating, you should review all options carefully and consider your longer-term needs.
Vacations & Holidays	Does the offer letter list the number of paid holidays offered, and describe the organization’s vacation policy? Does it include other information, like guidelines for scheduling vacations and the policy for “using up” vacation days within a given calendar year?	You should be able to find information about vacation policies on the organization’s HR website. A common issue related to vacation days is what to do about pre-existing obligations (e.g., you might have already scheduled a personal or professional commitment that will occur shortly after you are meant to start your new position). If vacation days or personal days cannot be used for the first 3 months (which may be a standard policy), and you have pre-scheduled travel or commitments during this period, this should be discussed as soon as possible. One solution might be to take unpaid leave, but other options may also be possible.
Personal & Sick Days	Information about the policy surrounding the number and use of personal days or sick days may be included in the offer letter, but is not always specifically addressed. It may be included in the section on Vacations and Holidays, however.	Specific guidelines about personal and sick days can often be found on the organization’s HR website, and links to the relevant sources of information are often included within the offer letter.
Performance and Salary Review	Does the letter specify details about the timing of performance or salary reviews?	This information may be included, especially if the organization has a “probationary” period of employment (usually the first three months) or an accelerated performance review process has been previously discussed and agreed upon.

Intellectual Property and Non-Competes	Does the letter define the organization's policy on ownership of intellectual property (e.g., patents, copyrights, royalties, etc.) and the terms of a non-compete agreement?	Where relevant, it will also be important to identify policies relating to conflicts of interest, as well as the disposition of income generated by consulting and other professional activities.
Title	Does the offer letter specifically state the title you will be given?	This will often include the division or department where you will be assigned, as well as whom you will report to.
Work Visa Assistance	If you are an international candidate, does the offer letter specify the type of visa assistance that the organization will provide?	As part of this issue, it is important to determine who is responsible for the costs involved.
Degree Completion	Does the letter state the date by which completion of your degree is required? If there is no expectation for you to finish your degree before starting, does the letter state any consequences of not completing it?	It is always worthwhile to finish your degree before starting so that you can begin your new position focusing on your new responsibilities and the opportunities that lie ahead.
Dual Career Issues	If formal career-related arrangements for your spouse will be provided, then these should be noted in an offer letter.	Career support for spouses may include organizational resources referrals to recruiters. These are likely to be offered on a case-by-case basis, however, and may not follow a particular pattern

This list of components is not exhaustive, and there may be other specific topics relevant to your subject area or to the organization that has offered you the position. Also, not all of these components may be relevant to your situation. Remember, once you receive an offer letter, you are at your strongest point for negotiating – and some degree of negotiation is expected. Once you sign and return your acceptance letter, though, your ability to negotiate is much diminished. When negotiating, focus on what is most important to you, and do not try to negotiate for everything that is listed.