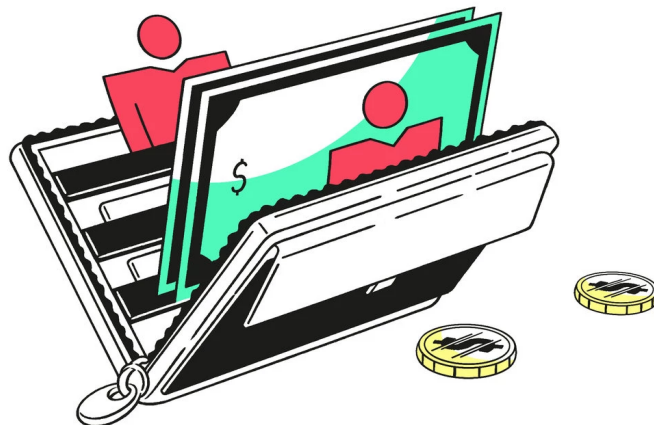


## The New York Times

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# Why You Should Tell Your Co-Workers How Much Money You Make

It's unlawful for private sector employers to prohibit employees from discussing wages and compensation. Take advantage of that protection.

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By **Tim Herrera**

Aug. 31, 2018

So how much do you make?

It's a loaded, deeply personal and often uncomfortable question. Along with our weight and age, our salary is a number to which we've assigned almost incomparable value.

And, when we're asked, what many of us really hear is this: What's your worth as a person?

"Money is so tied up with really complex and difficult emotions, like shame, success, fear of failure and how people view you," said Brianna McGurran, a money expert at the personal finance blog NerdWallet. "So when you're talking about how much you earn, or how much you're saving, a lot of people end up tying that to their self-worth."

She added: "Salary is so close to our identity. It's the core part of all of this."

That money — along with sex, politics and religion — is a topic best avoided in polite conversation is a cultural concept many of us are raised on, and taboos around discussing income can be particularly sensitive.

But unlike not disclosing what's in your savings account or your 401(k), there are direct, concrete consequences for falling victim to salary secrecy, including wage suppression and a lack of transparency around pay inequity, which disproportionately affects women and minorities.

“Let's face it, it's 2018 and there's still serious disparities in pay based on race and gender,” said Angela Cornell, the director of the Labor Law Clinic at Cornell Law School.

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“So policies that discourage or prohibit employees from discussing these are problematic not just because of the National Labor Relations Act's clear prohibition,” she said, “but also because they can make it difficult for employees in the private sector to learn that there are unlawful disparities.”

Yes, it's O.K. — and perfectly legal — to talk about it

What many workers don't realize is that it is unlawful for private sector employers to prohibit employees from discussing wages and compensation, and it has been since the National Labor Relations Act was passed in 1935. (There are exceptions, including for supervisors, agriculture workers and domestic employees.)

Open discussion of salaries among peers and co-workers, experts said, is a powerful tool to fight pay inequity. Not only does it serve both selfish and altruistic means — it simultaneously puts you and your co-workers in a better position during salary negotiations — but pay transparency can even protect companies by “minimizing the risk of disparate treatment claims and increasing job satisfaction for workers,” Ms. Cornell said.

Still, prohibiting or discouraging workers from openly discussing salaries, whether codified or implicitly built into a company's culture, is somewhat commonplace in workplaces.

“It's been the law of the land for many years that employers can't have policies or practices or discipline employees for discussing wages,” Ms. Cornell said. “But that doesn't mean it hasn't been a common practice.”

Horror stories of employees facing punishment for sharing salaries aren't difficult to dig up.

Elizabeth, who requested her last name not be used because of the sensitivity of discussing her salary, worked in sales at an arts company and this year shared her salary with a junior co-worker who was up for a promotion. That co-worker, during her own salary negotiation, let slip to a manager that Elizabeth had shared her salary.

"I got a call on my work phone to come to the board room," Elizabeth said. Her manager was there — "it was very dramatic, with the lights off" — and she told Elizabeth she wasn't allowed to share her salary, and she was creating a "bad environment," Elizabeth said.

Knowing that she was legally in the right, Elizabeth brushed off the encounter, and 10 minutes later her manager rushed over to apologize.

"She had gotten reprimanded herself from our H.R. department," Elizabeth said. Still, that experience was a major factor in Elizabeth's decision to leave the company a few months later.

Even the savviest among us can get caught up in the pressures of salary secrecy.

"I can remember in the not-too-distant past having been discouraged from talking about wages," Ms. Cornell said. She added that years ago she learned through a conversation about salaries with a male co-worker that he was making about \$50,000 more than her, and that there was "no objective justification for the disparity in pay, but he had been in the position for a longer period of time."

"That is not a good thing," she said. "It can lead to low morale, and there was no objective justification about the disparity in pay."

Kristin Wong, author of "Get Money: Live the Life You Want, Not Just the Life You Can Afford" and a personal finance contributor for The New York Times, recalls when she was reprimanded for discussing her salary with a co-worker:

After a few months on the job, my friend whispered that she'd received a small raise. Armed with this knowledge, I politely made the case for my own, without mentioning anything but my work ethic and commitment. My boss relented, but reprimanded me in the process.

"This is why I don't like my employees talking about money," she said.

You don't have to read too hard between the lines to grasp the real meaning: Employers can get away with paying workers less when those workers don't talk about money.

## Changing tides

In just the past few years, cultural norms and legislation have begun to unravel some of the forces that discourage open salary discussion, sometimes even tilting pay negotiations in favor of employees.

A handful of states, including California, Connecticut and Massachusetts, have banned employers from asking job candidates for a salary history, which shifts some leveraging power back to candidates. In 2014, President Barack Obama signed an executive order “prohibiting federal contractors from retaliating against employees who choose to discuss their compensation.” And in some industries, including the news media, unionization has become a powerful force in fighting for worker wages.

Evan, a social media strategist in Atlanta who also requested his last name not be used, knows firsthand the benefits of open salary discussions.

After interviewing for jobs at competing marketing agencies last year, he realized he was being paid below the market rate for someone at his experience level. He told co-workers his discovery, and he said many of them were in the same situation.

“Eventually rumors started flying about: ‘Hey, this person said this to leadership; this person is also complaining about it,’” he said.

After initially responding with halfhearted gestures and speeches about workplace culture, Evan said, leadership at the agency eventually succumbed to the pressure and gave every employee a raise.

“People got what they wanted,” he said.

Jill Duffy, a writer, said for years she has been open about sharing her salaries, and that she has been able to use that knowledge to “negotiate raises because of the information I got.”

“I went in feeling confident about my worth and my value and what the company could afford to pay me,” she said.

Other times, Ms. Duffy said, having that information is “just sort of confirming suspicions” that a company can afford to pay more than it currently is.

## The best approach: Win-win

Having these conversations is much easier said than done, but there are ways to gain confidence in discussing your salary.

Most important, Ms. McGurran said, is to be open and genuine, framing these conversations as beneficial for everyone involved. She suggests starting with people who are more senior than you, “maybe someone who has helped bring you on, or a previous manager, or someone who you really trust and wants to see you succeed.” This can give you a bigger-picture view of your company’s salaries.

From there, try to approach peers, co-workers or fellow alumni in off-campus, laid-back settings, all while keeping the focus on the salary and not the person.

“Try not to make it about your peer or colleague,” she said. “It’s not about trying to fish around for gossip,” Ms. McGurran said. She added that the websites LinkedIn, PayScale and Salary can be good resources to find a baseline. (For even more advice on salary negotiations, read this article.)

Ms. Duffy, the writer, agreed that a win-win approach is the best way to get salaries out in the open.

“When you come at it from that clear sense of, ‘I’m doing this for both of our benefit, I’m not doing this to shame you,’” she said, “people are generally more willing to share.”

Ms. Duffy added, “It’s important to know your own worth.”

Illustration by Benedikt Rugar

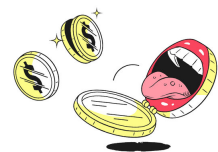
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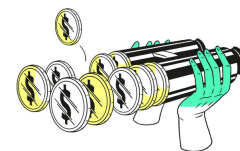


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