

Salary negotiation and job offers: career skills covered at AELO Swiss Academy

Last spring, a participant in one of our career workshops, I'll call her Lena, forwarded me a job offer minutes after receiving it. Project manager role, Zurich, CHF 92,000, and her finger was already hovering over the accept button. She was thrilled to have the offer at all and genuinely worried that asking for more would make her look ungrateful. We spent twenty minutes on research, another twenty on a role-played conversation, and she sent back one short, polite email. The company came back at CHF 96,000 with a written six-month salary review built into the contract. Eleven minutes of discomfort, roughly CHF 4,000 a year, and every future raise calculated from a higher starting point.

That single conversation is essentially the course we teach at AELO Swiss Academy, spread across a full module. Salary negotiation and offer evaluation are learnable skills, not personality traits, and most people underestimate by half how much improvement a few structured practice sessions can produce. Here is how we think about it, and what we actually cover in the classroom.



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Why so many capable people never ask

The fear is almost always the same: asking looks greedy, and the company might withdraw the offer. In practice, rescinding an offer because a candidate negotiated politely is extremely rare, and recruiters will tell you the same thing off the record. Hiring managers build a band into every requisition. If the band runs from CHF 90,000 to CHF 105,000, they open near the bottom third and expect movement. When a candidate accepts the first number instantly, nobody celebrates the savings. What actually happens, according to the recruiters we work with, is a quiet shrug and a small mental note that this person may need coaching on self-advocacy later.

Surveys differ in method, but a consistent pattern shows up across them: somewhere between a third and half of candidates never negotiate at all, and the share is even higher among first-time job seekers and career changers. The cost compounds. Suppose you leave CHF 4,000 on the table at hire, and raises of around 3 percent are applied to your base each year. By year five, that gap has grown to roughly CHF 4,600. By year ten, closer to CHF 5,400. Add bonuses and pension contributions that scale with base salary, and the first number you agree to quietly sets the trajectory for an entire career.



An offer is a package, not a number

One of the biggest mistakes we see is evaluating an offer as a single figure. A Swiss employment offer usually bundles several components, and each one is negotiable to a different degree. Base salary gets the attention, but the 13th month pay, which is customary here though not legally required, is worth 8 percent of your annual income on its own. Bonuses need close reading: a "target bonus" of CHF 10,000 and a "discretionary bonus" are very different animals, because discretionary means the company can legally pay zero.

Beyond cash, look at pension contributions above the legal minimum, vacation beyond the statutory four weeks, a GA or Half-Fare travel card, learning budget, remote days, relocation support, equipment, start date, and title. Title matters more than people expect, because it becomes the anchor for your next negotiation somewhere else. There are real trade-offs here. A volatile bonus on top of a [Reddit](#) modest base can produce less money over three years than a slightly lower offer with a strong guaranteed base. We make participants score two sample offers side by side, and the "better" number loses more often than you would think.

Finding your number before anyone asks for it

You cannot negotiate well against a blank page. Before applications go out, we have participants build a personal range from at least three sources. The Federal Statistical Office's Salarium tool is free and lets you filter by occupation, region, and industry, which makes it the best starting point for the Swiss market. Staffing firm salary

guides add current-year context, job ads that publish ranges help, and honest conversations with peers or recruiters fill in the rest.

The spread is enormous. A mid-level software engineer in Zurich often lands somewhere between CHF 90,000 and CHF 125,000, while the same profile an hour away may sit CHF 10,000 to 15,000 lower. Pharma and finance pay above the national median, which itself sits roughly in the CHF 6,500 to 7,000 per month range, while non-profits and smaller firms pay below it. Your target range should sit slightly above what you would genuinely accept, because the first credible number spoken tends to frame everything that follows.

One edge case deserves honesty: if you are moving to Switzerland from abroad and need sponsorship, your leverage shrinks. It does not vanish. When sponsorship is involved, we coach participants to shift the conversation toward scarce skills, total package, and start date flexibility rather than pretending the dynamic is symmetric.

Timing: how to steer the money talk

Swiss recruiters often ask about salary expectations in the first phone screen, which surprises people used to slower processes. Have your researched range ready and deliver it calmly: "Based on my research, roles like this usually sit between X and Y, and I'm confident we can align there." If you would rather defer, one deflection is fine: "I'd like to learn a bit more about the role first before committing to a number." Deflecting twice starts to feel evasive, so prepare the range regardless.

Current salary is a separate question, and you are generally better off not leading with it. If pressed directly, the safest ground is the truth plus context, because misstating it can surface later in reference checks. What you can always do is redirect from what you earned to what the role is worth: "My current package reflects a smaller scope. For this role, I'm targeting X."

The conversation itself

The live negotiation follows a simple spine: thanks, enthusiasm, one clear ask, a reason, then silence. Imagine the offer lands at CHF 88,000 and your target is 95,000. The email or call might sound like this: "Thank you, I'm genuinely excited about this role and the team. Based on the scope we discussed and my market research, I was targeting CHF 94,000 to 96,000. Is there flexibility?" Then stop talking. The pause after your ask is where offers move. Count to five in your head before you fill it.

If the base is genuinely fixed, trade rather than retreat: "If the base is fixed, could we look at a sign-on bonus, or a written salary review after six months?" Realistic movement in a normal negotiation sits around 5 to 10 percent of the offer, more when you hold a competing offer or a rare skill. Asking twice, politely, is entirely acceptable. Asking a third time usually costs goodwill, so we teach participants to read that line clearly.

Some employers have less room than others. Public institutions and large banks with strict salary bands rarely move much on base, and pushing hard there mostly creates friction. In those cases, negotiate the variables that are movable: title, start date, review timing, training budget, or an extra week of vacation.

Five phrases worth memorizing

- "Thank you, I'm very interested in the role."
- "Is that figure flexible?"
- "Based on my market research, I was targeting the CHF X to Y range."
- "If the base is fixed, could we look at a sign-on bonus or an earlier review?"

- "Could we put the agreed details in writing before I resign?"

Each phrase does a specific job. The first protects the relationship, the second tests flexibility cheaply, the third anchors, the fourth trades, and the fifth converts promises into paper. Many negotiations here happen in German, French, or English depending on the company, and while the words change, the structure survives translation perfectly well.

When the answer is no, or not yet

Sometimes "final offer" really is final, especially in structured organisations with published bands. Test it once, gracefully, and then decide with full information. If you accept a lower number, secure something in return: "I accept, and I'd like to agree on a written review at six months tied to the goals we discussed." That sentence has saved more disappointment than any clever argument.

Counteroffers from your current employer deserve special caution. If you were job hunting, some important reason probably pushed you there, and money rarely fixes it. Staying after a counteroffer can work, but only with the changes in writing and a genuine development plan, and you should expect the relationship to be watched for a while. And one rule has no exceptions in our classroom: never invent a competing offer. The Swiss market is small, recruiters and HR people meet at the same events and comment in the same LinkedIn threads, and a bluff that gets found out burns bridges you did not know you had.

Before you sign: the contract matters as much as the number

Once numbers are agreed, slow down before signing, because the contract is where vague promises get tested. Probation in Switzerland runs for one month by default and is commonly extended to three by contract. During probation, notice is just seven days, which cuts both ways. After probation, notice periods typically range from one to three months depending on seniority and tenure, and many professional contracts simply set three months. Check yours before resigning, because it dictates your earliest possible start date.

Non-compete clauses are legal here but capped at three years, and they are only enforceable when they protect a legitimate business interest. Swiss courts routinely trim overly broad clauses, though no compensation is automatically owed to you, which is exactly why the clause deserves a conversation before you sign rather than after. Look closely at bonus wording, the 13th month, pension arrangements, and any intellectual property language if your work involves inventing things. Above all, get every verbal promise into the offer letter. "The recruiter mentioned" is not a payslip line, and six months later nobody remembers the conversation the same way.

How we teach this at AELO Swiss Academy

At AELO Swiss Academy, this module is built around practice rather than lectures. Participants work in small groups, and