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You Can Get a Raise in Troubled Times

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The economy is flat. Some 4,800 Pillowtex workers are losing their jobs in the Carolinas, and you're probably thinking you're lucky to have a job.

Yet, the price of gas has jumped. Cable TV costs more than it used to. Kids' braces still cost \$4,000. And the car insurance payment always comes due at the worst possible moment.

So a raise would definitely be nice, especially given all the 11- and 12-hour days you've worked with no overtime, the extra work you did so the company didn't have to fill a vacancy and even the money you saved them by not charging for your cell phone time.

"We haven't seen a lot of people who've gotten a raise lately," said Randy Ferrell, Charlotte market vice president for K-Force, a staffing firm that specializes in finance, accounting and information technology. "What I'm seeing in this economy is people trying to hang on to what they have.

"Still, the economy is starting to improve. And even in these times, it is possible to get a raise.

But you have to know how. You can't just waltz into the boss's office and make demands. To increase your chance at landing a raise or perk, we asked career counselors and others to offer the following 10 techniques:

1. START EARLY

"Winners get raises as an outcome of a really good plan," says Joan Wright, a Charlotte executive coach and consultant, who says the best way to get a raise is to begin the effort a year in advance by articulating what you can do for your company and what your performance expectations should be. "Update the boss on a quarterly basis," she said. "Articulate the value of your work -- customer retention, sales, product development -- and get feedback

"The raise comes because at the end of a year, the employee has met the expectations of the boss and the company. "A raise is the outcome of a very good agreement between an individual and a boss and an organization," she said.

2. TIMING IS EVERYTHING

"Make sure the timing makes sense," said Denise Dwight Smith, director of UNC Charlotte's career center, which advises students on internships and employment. Smith said the worst time -- at least for a company that does accounting on a calendar year -- is the end of the year, because "everybody is trying to tighten up" and also is working on the budget for the following year.

Early September, however, typically is a good time, she said.

3. PROVE THAT YOU ADD VALUE

"The key is being able to show that you have gone beyond the usual and customary work that you're expected to do," said Andrea Kay, a Cincinnati career counselor, author and editor of career advice site andreakay.com. "This was the case before this economy (slumped), but it's even more so now." One of Kay's clients recently received a promotion and more responsibility, but no raise. The client, who works in information technology, wanted to ask for a raise on the basis of the promotion. Kay said that was the wrong tact. She told him: "What you need to do is

figure out what you have done that has made this company better -- more efficient, more profitable, more effective."

He got the raise, four months later, after his boss went to a higher boss.

4. DON'T BE SHY

Most people are hesitant to negotiate for raises and initial salaries, Kay said: They usually take what is offered. "Especially today, most people say, 'I'm just happy to have a job; I'm not going to rock the boat,'" she said.

Don't be overly hesitant. If you have gone beyond the call of duty, and can prove it, then go ahead and ask.

5. MAKE IT YOUR MEETING

"Winners are effective at conducting the meeting where they ask for a raise," Wright said. First off, they have a pre-meeting contact so their boss will know what is coming. They bring the right documentation to the meeting. But they don't make demands. Says Wright, "Be assertive and manage the relationship at the same time."

Pick a time that's convenient for your boss, then make an appointment. "Say I'd like some time on the calendar: I'd like to schedule an hour," Kay said.

And remember: This is a sales meeting. Reminds Ferrell: "You've got to realize you will be trying to sell them on something."

6. RESEARCH AND DOCUMENT

Experts agreed that this is the most important step you can take.

Show that you have gone beyond the usual and customary work you are expected to do, Kay said. Additionally, know what comparable positions pay in your company and at other companies.

"If I was trying to find out what market pay is for a financial planner, I would know what the range was, but I would also know that if I worked for a nonprofit, that (range) would not be as significant," Wright said.

Be able to document your accomplishments.

"Keep them as quantifiable as possible, such as, 'I improved the billing process, which expedited bills going out the door, reducing the days outstanding on receivables by 30 days, which improved our cash flow,'" said Ferrell.

And please, Smith said, get beyond "I'm doing a good job and I'd like more money," she said. "You really need to show performance."

Smith advises a one-page summary with bullet points, documenting your performance and the value you add, as well as a comparison of salary data.

7. IT'S NOT JUST THE MONEY

There could be other things you would just as soon have, things that are easier for a company to offer in a tight economy. Said Smith: "Really consider whether salary is what you're going for. You might look at some other things to negotiate, such as some other tools, or maybe even work space or maybe six hours of doing some work from home -- most employers are open to virtual offices, if you can prove you are still going to produce."

8. STAY POSITIVE: NO DOES NOT ALWAYS MEAN NO

Sure, we've heard Lorrie Morgan's "What Part of 'No' Don't You Understand?" But the biggest thing is to stay positive.

If the boss begs off because of the economy, that might be the time to seek something besides money, such as a one-time bonus or an investment in training or tuition, Wright said. Or you might be able to get a small increase now with an agreement to consider a subsequent increase.

Even if you get nothing, be positive. "Maintain the relationship at all costs," she said. "You don't want to burn any

bridges by your reaction to a `no.'"

Someday, you may even need your boss as a reference.

9. DON'T DO THIS

Sometimes workers look around for other possibilities, get a better offer elsewhere and then bring it to their boss as a rationale for getting a raise. "I would be very cautious about using that as a lever just to get something internally," said Smith. "You can become known as somebody who does that. "Many industries are relatively small groups -- such as Charlotte's banking community -- and word can get around quickly.

10. BEING OLD DOESN'T MAKE YOU WORTHLESS

Remember, older workers can get raises, too.

Kay said one of her clients, who is 49, recently received a promotion and a raise. "She is highly valued because of her in-depth knowledge of the business," Kay said.

She said every worker, particularly an older worker, should present answers to these questions: "What could they not do without you? How is it that you do something better, faster, more efficiently or more effectively?"

That, after all, is what makes you valuable -- not your youth.

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