Max Paradox

PROBLEM? RELAX. YOU'VE GOT THIS!

A tongue-in-cheek guide series ;)

I Found Out How Much My Colleague Earns and Suddenly My Salary Looks Different

How to Separate Comparisons from Facts, Assess Your Market Value, and Prepare for a Salary Conversation Without Turning Your Colleague into Your Personal Benchmark



We've got a problem. But relax.
It can be solved—and we'll even have something to laugh about.

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INTRO

It happens at 12:43 on an otherwise unremarkable Tuesday. You're having lunch with a colleague, discussing an upcoming project, when the conversation drifts toward money. Perhaps they're talking about a recent raise, a mortgage application, or an offer they nearly accepted from another company. Then they mention their salary. Casually. Without dramatic music, a warning label, or the slightest awareness that they've just detonated something inside your head. You smile, nod, and continue eating. Outwardly, you're a functioning adult enjoying a perfectly normal lunch. Internally, an emergency meeting has been called. The finance department is demanding answers, your self-esteem has requested legal representation, and someone appears to be preparing a resignation letter.

Until that moment, you weren't particularly unhappy with your pay. You had your complaints, naturally. Everyone does. But your salary seemed reasonably connected to your responsibilities, experience, and the complicated business of remaining financially solvent. Now you've discovered that someone sitting three desks away earns considerably more. Suddenly, the number on your payslip looks suspicious. The amount hasn't changed. Your rent hasn't increased, your employer hasn't reduced your salary, and your bank hasn't sent you a message saying, "Following recent developments, we regret to inform you that you're less successful than previously believed." Yet something feels different. The money that seemed adequate an hour ago now feels like evidence in a case against your professional judgment.

This is the peculiar power of salary comparisons. We rarely evaluate money entirely in isolation. We look for reference points, especially when trying to determine whether our compensation is reasonable. A colleague's salary offers an apparently convenient benchmark because the two of you share an employer, perhaps a job title, and possibly an impressive collection of complaints about the same internal procedures. It feels like a fair comparison. Unfortunately, feeling comparable and actually being comparable are different things. You may know your colleague's salary without knowing the circumstances behind it. Even when the figure is accurate, it doesn't automatically tell you what someone with your responsibilities, skills, and employment conditions should earn.

And let's acknowledge something important: being upset doesn't make you petty. Money matters. It affects security, choices, relationships, and the opportunities available to you and the people who depend on you. Discovering a substantial pay difference can raise legitimate questions about fairness, recognition, and how your employer makes decisions. Perhaps you've been carrying responsibilities that have never been properly reflected in your compensation. Perhaps your salary has fallen behind comparable market rates. Or perhaps you're missing information that would explain the difference. None of these possibilities should be dismissed simply because discussing money makes people uncomfortable. Telling someone to stop caring about compensation is particularly unhelpful when their electricity provider continues to demonstrate such passionate interest in being paid.

The difficulty begins when your reaction becomes your conclusion. You hear that a colleague earns more and immediately assume the company values them more highly. Then you remember every late evening, demanding deadline, and last-minute request you've handled. Your colleague's ordinary mistakes suddenly become remarkable. You find yourself wondering how someone who once attached the wrong spreadsheet to a company-wide email could possibly command a larger salary. Before long, you're conducting an imaginary performance review of a person who never asked to participate in your investigation. Meanwhile, the question that could actually improve your circumstances gets pushed aside: what reliable evidence would help you evaluate your own compensation?

There are several reasons why two employees might earn different amounts. Their responsibilities may differ in ways that aren't immediately visible. One may have joined during a particularly competitive hiring period. Another may have negotiated different terms, accumulated specialized experience, or accepted particular demands in exchange for higher compensation. Sometimes a pay difference reflects inconsistent decisions that deserve closer examination. Explaining how a difference arose, however, is not necessarily the same as establishing that it's fair. An employer may have a perfectly understandable history behind its pay decisions and still need to review whether those decisions remain appropriate. Understanding that distinction is more useful than automatically deciding either that you're being cheated or that every difference must have a reasonable justification.

Your colleague also isn't obliged to become the central character in your salary negotiations. They may have shared

their pay voluntarily, but that doesn't mean they've agreed to have their personal finances discussed throughout the office. You can respect their privacy while asking serious questions about compensation policies, job requirements, and your own opportunities. In fact, moving the conversation away from individual personalities often makes it more productive. Instead of demanding to know why a particular person earns more, you can examine what determines pay for your kind of work. You can investigate market conditions, understand the value of your responsibilities, and assess whether your current arrangement remains appropriate. All without appointing yourself the unofficial detective of the payroll department.

Of course, knowing what to investigate is considerably easier than doing it. Salary surveys can be confusing. Job advertisements may display wildly different ranges for positions with similar titles. Recruiters can offer useful insights, but their perspective depends on the roles and employers they work with. You might discover an impressive salary advertised online, only to realize that the position requires skills you don't possess, responsibilities you don't want, or a working schedule that would leave you on affectionate terms with your home mainly through photographs. A meaningful assessment of market value requires more than collecting the largest numbers you can find. It means identifying genuinely comparable opportunities and understanding the differences between them.

Then comes the conversation with your employer. Perhaps you've avoided it for years because asking for more money feels uncomfortably close to admitting that money matters to you. Perhaps you've tried before and received a

warm speech about your importance to the organization, followed by absolutely no change to your compensation. Or perhaps you're ready to ask for a raise but cannot explain the amount you want beyond the fact that someone else earns it. A useful salary discussion needs a clear request, credible reasoning, and an understanding of what might happen if the answer isn't yes. You'll learn to prepare for those conversations without apologizing for having financial expectations or treating your manager as an opponent who must be defeated.

Some situations are genuinely difficult. Your employer may have limited resources. You may receive a promotion offering greater responsibility but no immediate financial improvement. You might discover that leaving would be financially risky because you support a family, have significant commitments, or live somewhere with few comparable opportunities. There may also be circumstances involving potentially unlawful unequal treatment that require appropriate professional advice rather than another attempt at cheerful negotiation. This book won't pretend that every obstacle disappears when you choose the perfect words. Sometimes the sensible course involves patience, gathering evidence, protecting your financial stability, or accepting that one employer cannot offer what you need.

Nor will it promise that achieving a particular salary will permanently resolve your dissatisfaction. People can become accustomed to improved circumstances remarkably quickly. The pay rise that once seemed life-changing may eventually feel ordinary, especially after you discover someone with an even larger one. There's nothing wrong with ambition or wanting better financial conditions. The problem is allowing another person's compensation to

dictate your sense of progress indefinitely. You need standards that remain useful when the people around you receive bonuses, change jobs, negotiate brilliantly, or buy something expensive enough to make your imagination start calculating their annual income.

By the time you finish this book, the aim is for you to approach compensation with greater clarity and independence. You'll be better equipped to distinguish assumptions from evidence, evaluate realistic opportunities, describe the value of your work, and make decisions that account for your actual circumstances. That might lead to a raise, a job change, a revised career plan, or a more informed decision to remain where you are. The outcome cannot be guaranteed, and your personal worth was never going to be settled by a figure on somebody else's payslip.

So your colleague earns more. Perhaps that information matters enormously. Perhaps it matters rather less than it first appeared. Either way, you don't need to turn the next office lunch into a financial interrogation or spend your evenings mentally auditing another person's lifestyle. You have your own career, your own responsibilities, and your own decisions to make.

And if this whole adventure began because someone casually mentioned their salary over lunch, remember one thing: you came to the table to eat a sandwich, not to appoint that person chairman of your financial self-esteem.

Chapter 1 - The Number That Changed Everything Without Changing Anything

At 4:26 on a Thursday afternoon, Eleanor discovers that her colleague Daniel earns $18,000 more than she does. The information appears during a conversation about career progression, and Daniel mentions it without hesitation. Eleanor manages to respond with something vaguely appropriate, possibly involving the words "Oh, that's interesting." She later struggles to remember exactly what she said. Her brain has already abandoned ordinary conversation and begun conducting an emergency investigation. Within seconds, it has established that she works harder than Daniel, possesses more experience, and deserves a substantial financial correction. Unfortunately, the investigation has neglected to interview any witnesses, examine the employment contracts, or establish what the two jobs actually involve. These are apparently minor administrative details when your sense of professional worth has just been struck by a falling piano.

Eleanor returns to her desk and opens a report she was supposed to finish. Nothing on the screen makes sense. She reads the same paragraph four times while mentally calculating the salary difference over five years. The result is sufficiently upsetting that she calculates it again, this time including hypothetical investment returns. By the end of the afternoon, she has imagined several confrontations with her manager, rewritten her entire employment history, and considered applying for jobs she hadn't wanted yesterday. The remarkable thing is that her circumstances haven't changed. Her salary is still the amount she previously

accepted. Her responsibilities are identical to those she had that morning. Yet her assessment of those circumstances has been transformed by a single new piece of information.

This reaction illustrates something important about how we judge our working lives. We don't experience compensation as an isolated number. We interpret it through expectations, comparisons, needs, and ideas about fairness. A salary that seemed generous when you accepted a job may eventually feel inadequate as your responsibilities increase. A reasonable wage can also become emotionally disappointing when you discover someone earning considerably more. Neither reaction automatically proves that your compensation is appropriate or inappropriate. It reveals that your judgment depends partly on the reference points available to you. When a particularly striking reference point appears, it can temporarily dominate everything else.

When comparison becomes a verdict

Imagine you earn $72,000 a year and discover that a colleague earns $90,000. Your first thought might be that you're underpaid by $18,000. But the difference between two salaries isn't automatically the amount by which yours should increase. That conclusion requires further information about responsibilities, relevant experience, compensation structures, and the external employment market. The $18,000 difference is an observation. The belief that you deserve precisely $18,000 more is an interpretation. The decision to request an increase is a possible response. When those three things become tangled together, it becomes surprisingly difficult to determine what you actually know.

The emotional force of the comparison often comes from what we think salary represents. We understand intellectually that employment compensation is shaped by budgets, negotiation, hiring conditions, and organizational decisions. Emotionally, however, it can feel like a public assessment of our abilities. When someone earns more, the mind readily translates that information into a statement about competence or status. Perhaps your manager trusts them more. Perhaps the organization considers their work more valuable. Perhaps you've spent years congratulating yourself on a career that everyone else secretly regards as mediocre. A simple salary difference has suddenly become an elaborate judgment of your entire professional identity, despite the fact that nobody has actually made that judgment.

This is why advice such as "Don't compare yourself to other people" usually accomplishes very little. Comparison is one of the ways we understand our circumstances, especially when information about compensation is difficult to obtain. There is nothing inherently unreasonable about wanting to know whether similarly situated employees receive comparable treatment. The difficulty arises when comparison stops being a source of questions and becomes a machine that manufactures certainty. You may have discovered something genuinely important. You haven't necessarily discovered its meaning. Learning to tolerate that distinction is less satisfying than immediate outrage, but considerably more useful.

There can also be a sharp sense of embarrassment. You remember the salary discussion during your original interview, when the recruiter accepted your requested amount without negotiating. At the time, you felt relieved.

Now you wonder whether you should have asked for significantly more. You reconsider annual reviews, past promotions, and occasions when you volunteered for extra responsibilities. Perhaps you were too agreeable. Perhaps you believed promises too readily. Perhaps every professional decision you've made since joining the company was secretly a financial mistake. Once the mind starts revisiting the past with new information, it can make almost any earlier choice look foolish.

But yesterday's decision deserves to be judged using yesterday's available information. When you accepted your salary, you may have faced different financial pressures, possessed less experience, or lacked access to comparable offers. The fact that you now know someone earns more doesn't establish what opportunities were available to you then. You can learn from earlier negotiations without pretending that your past self had access to a time machine. Retrospective certainty is wonderfully inexpensive because it arrives after all the difficult decisions have been made.

The stories that attach themselves to money

The mind dislikes unexplained differences, particularly differences that appear personally threatening. It therefore supplies explanations, often with remarkable speed. If Daniel earns more, perhaps he's the manager's favorite. If he receives more favorable assignments, perhaps the entire department operates according to an invisible hierarchy of preferred employees. A delayed response to Eleanor's request for training suddenly becomes evidence supporting the theory. An ordinary compliment directed toward Daniel acquires political significance. Before long, Eleanor has developed a comprehensive model of workplace favoritism

based on a handful of observations and considerable creative determination.

Some of her suspicions might eventually prove justified. Organizations can make inconsistent decisions, and unfair treatment does occur. The problem is that an explanation can feel convincing long before it has been verified. Once Eleanor believes her employer systematically undervalues her, she may notice information supporting that belief more readily than information that complicates it. A successful project she led becomes evidence of exploitation. A colleague's promotion becomes evidence of favoritism. Even neutral events can begin to look suspicious. The more often she repeats the story, the more familiar and therefore believable it becomes.

A useful response is to separate what happened from what you believe it means. Suppose you write, "Daniel told me his annual salary is $90,000." That describes the information you received, though you may still need to clarify what the amount includes. Now consider, "My manager thinks Daniel is better than me." That is a possible interpretation, not an established fact. Finally, "I need to understand how compensation is determined for my role" identifies a question you can investigate. The distinction may seem almost painfully elementary, particularly when you're annoyed. That's precisely when it matters most. Emotional certainty has an unfortunate habit of presenting itself as completed research.

You don't need an elaborate journaling ritual. A short note identifying the information, your interpretation, and the unanswered question will do. If you discover that most of your conclusions belong in the interpretation category, you haven't failed. You've identified where additional evidence

would actually help. You might need information about job responsibilities, salary ranges, or the criteria used to evaluate your position. You probably don't need a detailed assessment of Daniel's personality, choice of car, or ability to remember meeting agendas. Those details may be fascinating, but their relationship to your compensation is questionable.

Another useful question is whether the salary revelation exposed an existing dissatisfaction or created a new one. Perhaps Eleanor had already been concerned that her duties were expanding without appropriate compensation. Daniel's salary might have brought an unresolved problem into sharper focus. Alternatively, she may have been genuinely satisfied with her working conditions until the comparison appeared. Both reactions deserve attention, but they suggest different starting points. In the first situation, there may be a long-standing issue to examine. In the second, it is particularly important to understand why a new reference point has transformed her judgment.

Envy is information, not an instruction

Let's address an emotion people often prefer to disguise as professional concern: envy. You can like your colleague, respect their achievements, and still feel annoyed that they earn more. Those feelings can coexist without making you dishonest or unpleasant. Envy sometimes reveals something you want for yourself, such as financial security, recognition, or greater freedom to choose your next career move. The emotion becomes less useful when it shifts your attention from that desire toward proving that the other person doesn't deserve what they have.

Consider what happens when Eleanor begins scrutinizing Daniel's work. She notices that he sometimes arrives later

than she does. She remembers a presentation where he struggled to answer a question. She compares the number of emails they send, as though compensation were awarded according to a national championship in inbox productivity. None of these observations necessarily establishes that their roles have equivalent value. More importantly, Daniel's mistakes don't increase Eleanor's market value. She can spend weeks establishing that he isn't perfect, only to discover that his imperfection has no effect whatsoever on her salary.

If you catch yourself mentally competing with a colleague, ask what you would actually gain by winning. Would you have better evidence for a compensation discussion? Would your financial circumstances improve? Or would you simply enjoy the temporary satisfaction of feeling superior? There is nothing mysterious about wanting that satisfaction, but it is worth recognizing its limitations. You may achieve a small emotional victory while doing nothing to address the practical concern that started the whole process.

The temptation to act immediately can be equally strong. You might want to send a confrontational email, stop volunteering for assignments, or announce that management has lost your trust. Sometimes your workload or working conditions genuinely need renegotiation. Nevertheless, important decisions deserve more than the emotional momentum of one difficult afternoon. Giving yourself time to understand the facts isn't surrender. It's a way of preventing a reasonable concern from becoming an avoidable professional problem.

This doesn't mean waiting indefinitely or suppressing legitimate complaints. If you have credible reasons to suspect discriminatory treatment, serious inconsistencies, or

another significant workplace problem, appropriate action may be necessary. But the action should reflect the nature of the issue. A concern about market compensation calls for different evidence from a formal complaint about unlawful treatment. Treating every disappointing salary comparison as an emergency can make it harder to recognize the occasions that genuinely require urgent attention.

Eleanor eventually realizes that the revelation has given her one useful thing: a reason to reassess assumptions she hadn't questioned for some time. She still feels disappointed, and she hasn't suddenly developed an enthusiasm for Daniel's financial success. But she stops treating the initial difference as a final judgment about her abilities. She can investigate whether her compensation is appropriate without first establishing that Daniel is overpaid, incompetent, or personally responsible for every questionable payroll decision in the organization.

The distinction is worth protecting. Other people's salaries may provide valuable clues about your working environment. They cannot, by themselves, tell the complete story of your contribution, your opportunities, or your worth. If you allow one number to make those judgments for you, you've effectively appointed your colleague's payroll record as your personal career adviser. It knows remarkably little about you and charges a surprisingly high emotional fee.

You can acknowledge that the number matters without letting it become the only number that matters. And you can investigate what it means before reorganizing your professional life around it.

Chapter 2 - Same Job Title, Different Paychecks: Are You Comparing the Right Things?

Two employees at a technology company share the title "Operations Manager." They appear at similar meetings, occupy the same level on the organizational chart, and occasionally cover for one another during holidays. One earns $84,000 a year. The other earns $103,000. When the lower-paid employee discovers the difference, it seems obvious that something is wrong. Surely a company cannot reasonably pay two people with the same title almost $20,000 apart? Before making that judgment, however, consider what the title actually tells you. In some organizations, an operations manager supervises a small administrative team. In others, the same title belongs to someone responsible for critical service delivery across several locations. Corporate job titles can be astonishingly imprecise instruments. They're useful for deciding what to print on a business card, but occasionally less helpful for understanding what someone does between nine and five.

In this hypothetical example, one manager oversees a predictable internal process and has limited authority over spending. The other handles high-value supplier relationships, makes decisions affecting several departments, and carries responsibility for urgent operational failures. Those differences might help explain the compensation gap. But suppose further investigation reveals that both managers actually perform substantially equivalent work, have comparable relevant experience, and meet similar performance expectations. Now the explanation

becomes less obvious. The important lesson isn't that unequal salaries are always justified by hidden differences. It's that you need to establish which similarities and differences matter before drawing conclusions.

This is where salary comparisons become more demanding than they first appear. Your instinct may be to compare job titles, years of service, or the number of projects completed. Each can provide useful information, but none tells the whole story. A more reliable comparison considers the work itself, the employment arrangement, and the circumstances surrounding compensation. Even then, the answer may remain uncertain because employers don't always apply consistent rules. Your goal isn't to construct an excuse for every difference. It's to distinguish a potentially reasonable explanation from a genuine question that deserves further scrutiny.

First, make sure the numbers speak the same language

Before comparing employees, establish what their reported salaries actually represent. Someone who says they earn $100,000 might mean base salary, total annual cash compensation, or an estimated package that includes performance bonuses. Another person might mention the amount they receive after deductions, while you're thinking about gross annual pay. A third might be an independent contractor referring to annual revenue before business expenses and taxes. Without clarification, comparing these figures is like comparing the advertised prices of two holiday packages when one includes flights, accommodation, and meals, while the other includes a photograph of the destination and an optimistic attitude.

Consider two fictional employees, Grace and Oliver. Grace receives a base salary of $88,000 with an employer

retirement contribution and no regular performance bonus. Oliver earns a base salary of $82,000 but may receive a bonus worth up to $18,000 if certain targets are achieved. If Oliver tells someone his compensation can reach $100,000, that statement may be accurate. It doesn't mean he'll necessarily receive $100,000 every year. Comparing his maximum potential earnings with Grace's guaranteed base salary would exaggerate the difference in predictable income. On the other hand, ignoring Oliver's variable compensation entirely might understate the value of his employment package.

A useful comparison separates guaranteed pay, conditional compensation, and additional benefits. Guaranteed salary tells you what the employer has committed to paying under the employment terms. Variable compensation requires an understanding of targets, eligibility, and the employer's discretion. Benefits deserve consideration according to their actual value and usefulness, rather than whatever impressive figure appears in a recruitment brochure. Employer retirement contributions, insurance, paid leave, and other arrangements can matter considerably, but their treatment differs across countries, contracts, and individual circumstances. Accurate comparisons should reflect those differences rather than pretending that every benefit has an identical cash value.

Working arrangements complicate matters further. An employee receiving a lower annual salary may have substantially more paid leave or greater income predictability than a contractor billing a higher amount. A contractor may face expenses, unpaid gaps between projects, and different responsibilities for taxes and insurance. These arrangements cannot be compared reliably by placing two annual figures