



The Salary Survey: An Important Tool

At the heart of most contract negotiations lies a discussion of wages. Often, this discussion becomes the most lengthy and heated part of bargaining. Naturally, Local 17 makes every effort to assure that members are paid a fair salary. While this can be an emotional issue, ultimately, the union's arguments must rely on full and accurate data to provide evidence for the proposals. The most common way of gathering and presenting this information is by way of a salary survey.

This article will provide information on what a salary survey typically contains, how Local 17 gathers and presents this data, and what members can do to help if such a study is done for your group.

The First Step

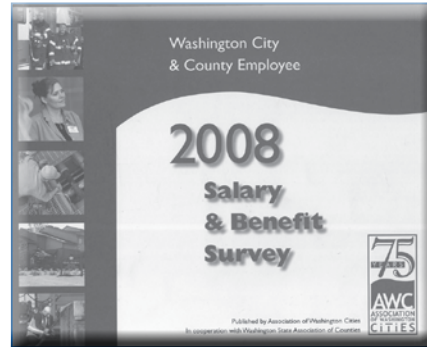
An initial step in a salary survey is determining comparable employers to be used in a data set. Generally, salary surveys aim to use other public employers of comparable size within Washington State.

It is desirable to have a mix of both slightly larger and slightly smaller employers in a comparable list, as limiting to perfectly equivalent agencies can reduce the number of matching positions. In rare exceptions, data outside of Washington must be used, such as in the case of public utility professions in which there are very few comparable local employers.

However, because of the introduction of cost-of-living differences and the need to resolve these discrepancies, in-state data is preferred. Further, within Washington, data is gathered around geographically similar areas, as this data is usually more important for recruitment and retention arguments.

Once a list of employers is assembled, collection of job descriptions and salary data begins. This information comes from a variety of sources, but most often human resources departments can provide a starting point for finding comparable jobs. Unless a match is certain, a job description is important in determining the true similarities between two positions.

Basing a comparison on job title alone is seldom accurate, since, for example, two employers may have different duties assigned to a group due to organizational differences such as size and scope of service. When a series of positions is being surveyed (ex: Administrative Specialist I, II, and III), it is sometimes necessary to consider the range of salaries across the series, rather than on a position-by-position basis, as precise alignment of steps can be impossible.



Comparing Apples to Oranges

While private sector data is an interesting comparison and is often favorable to arguments for higher base wages, there are three large difficulties with including such information in our research.

First, while public sector employers are bound by public information laws, private companies are under no such requirement to fulfill requests for job information, and in fact are often secretive. While sometimes it's possible to gather pieces through professional associations and job postings, it is rare to have both a salary range and full job description for private positions. Secondly, while salaries might be possible to compare dollar-for-dollar, differences in other benefits such as premium pay, profit sharing, and retirement plans make comparisons between the public and private compensation less clear. Lastly, while private sector data is important in determining market wages, many public employers refuse to consider this information in wage discussions.

The Next Step

Once matching job classifications have been collected, the process of assembling them into something useful during negotiations begins. How this information is used in bargaining is specific to each situation. In some cases, this involves calculating market averages and percentage differences. In others, such as when perfect matches can't be found, data also contains information about similarities and differences in each match. Generally, job descriptions and other facts are available if discussion of the matching classifications at the table is necessary. The best way members can be involved in the salary survey process is to pay attention to other jobs in the area that appear similar to their own. If you know co-workers who have left your employer to take a job elsewhere, have seen a job advertisement, or have access to information through a professional association, these can all help make the initial steps of gathering data more targeted.

Further, in some instances, a temporary committee to review job descriptions can be formed to help with the matching process. Member input in this process is often helpful because job descriptions do not give a full account of what is involved in the day-to-day duties, and employees' experience with the job in question can lead to stronger arguments for using or not using certain matches.

While they are not conducted during every negotiation, salary surveys are important projects for setting fair wages for employees. Local 17 strives to provide accurate data and member involvement in this process which is very helpful in gathering and presenting the best possible information. - *By Elliot Levin, Local 17 Research Director*

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