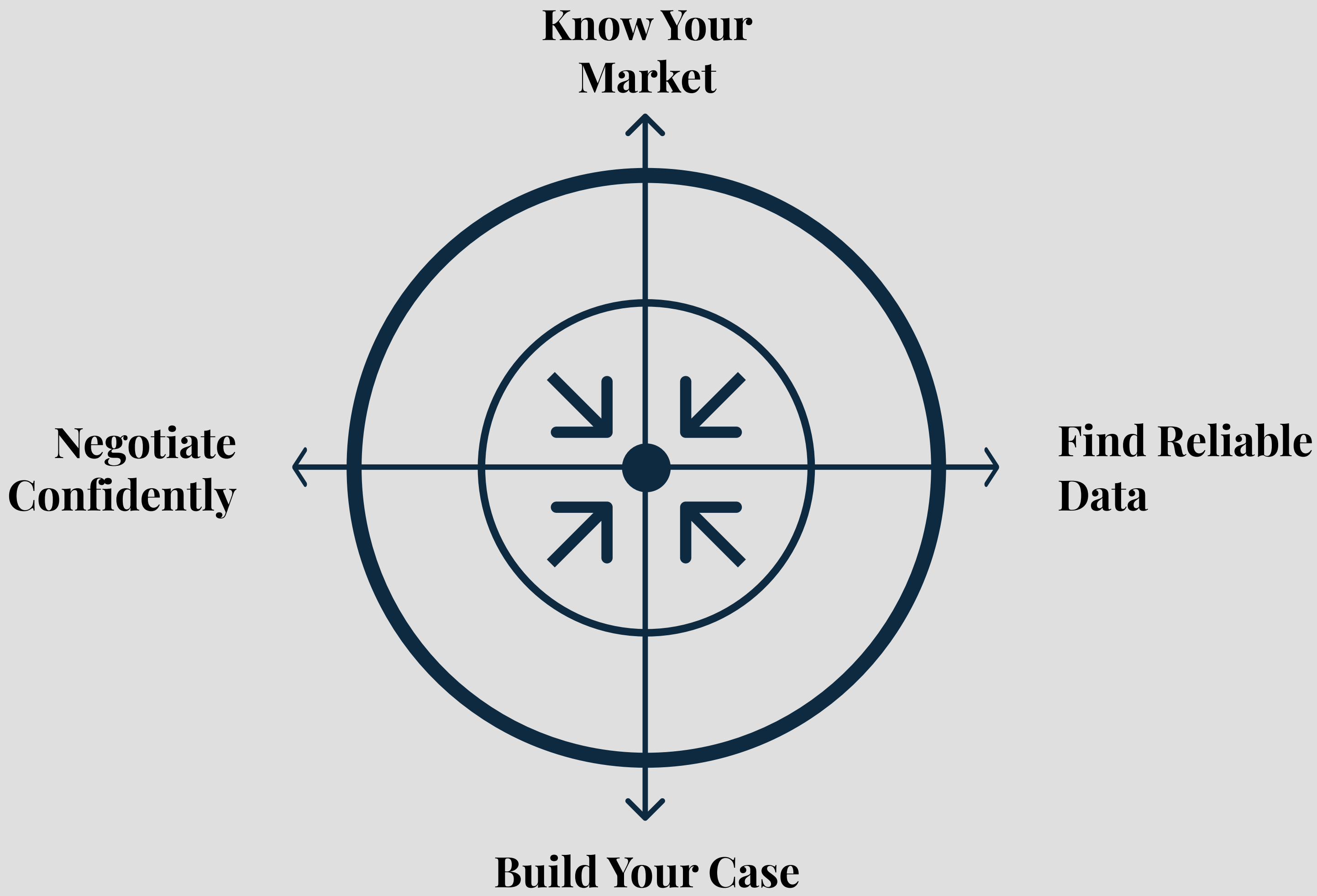
How to Research Salary Ranges Effectively

A practical, step-by-step guide for working professionals — career changers, job seekers, consultants, and managers — who want to negotiate with confidence, benchmark their worth, and never leave money on the table again.



Why Salary Research Is the Career Skill Nobody Taught You

Most professionals spend more time researching a new laptop than they do researching their own market value. The result? Millions of dollars left on the table over a lifetime of work. Whether you're preparing for a performance review, switching industries, accepting a new role, or setting your consulting rate, knowing what the market pays — and being able to articulate why you deserve it — is a foundational career skill.

The problem isn't that professionals don't care about compensation. It's that the process of researching salaries can feel opaque, uncomfortable, or even taboo. People worry about asking for too much and losing an offer, or asking for too little and undervaluing themselves. Without a structured approach, guesswork fills the gap — and guesswork rarely serves you well.

This guidebook changes that. It gives you a clear, repeatable system to research salary ranges with confidence, triangulate data from multiple sources, and walk into any compensation conversation prepared and grounded in facts — not feelings.

What This Guide Solves

- No more guessing what to ask for
- No more accepting the first number offered
- No more imposter syndrome at the negotiating table
- No more confusion about which data sources to trust

How to Use This Resource

1

Read Through

Follow the full guide from start to finish to build your complete salary research system before your next job search or review cycle.

2

Reference Mode

Jump to the step or checklist you need right now. Each section is self-contained and actionable on its own.

3

Worksheet Mode

Use the fill-in templates and reflection questions to build your personal salary data file that you update over time.

Your Roadmap: Six Steps to Salary Clarity

This guidebook is organized into six focused steps. Each builds on the last, but you can reference any step independently. Together, they form a complete research framework you can use before any salary conversation — whether that's a job offer, a promotion discussion, a consulting engagement, or a performance review.

Step 1: Define Your Research Scope

Get specific about role, location, industry, and level before searching.

Step 2: Find the Right Data Sources

Know which platforms to trust, and which ones to use with caution.

Step 3: Triangulate Your Range

Cross-reference multiple sources to identify a defensible salary band.

Step 4: Gather Human Intelligence

Tap your network and recruiters to validate what the numbers tell you.

Step 5: Calculate Your Target Number

Factor in your experience, skills, and total compensation to land your ask.

Step 6: Document and Update Your Research

Build a living salary file you return to with every career move.

Define Your Research Scope Before You Search

The single biggest mistake professionals make when researching salaries is searching too broadly. Typing "marketing manager salary" into a search bar will return a range so wide — sometimes $40K to $150K — that it's practically useless. The research process only becomes valuable when you get specific. Your scope should include four key dimensions: **role, level, location, and industry**.

The Four Dimensions of Scope

🎯 Role Precision

Don't search for "project manager." Search for "Technical Program Manager, SaaS, B2B." Job titles vary wildly by company — match to the actual function you perform, not just the title you hold.

📊 Seniority Level

Mid-level vs. senior vs. lead roles can differ by $30–60K. Map your responsibilities to the level descriptors in job postings, not just your current title.

📍 Geographic Market

A digital marketing manager earns differently in Austin vs. New York vs. remote-first companies. Specify your target market — and if remote, research both local and national benchmarks.

🏭 Industry Vertical

Finance pays more than nonprofit. Tech pays more than retail. The same role title can carry dramatically different compensation depending on the industry vertical you're targeting.

Scope Definition Worksheet

📝 Use this to anchor every search you do. Fill in before opening any salary platform.

My target role title(s):

____

Closest equivalent titles in the market:

____

My seniority level (Circle one): Entry / Mid / Senior / Lead / Director+

My target location / market:

____

Target industry or company type:

____

Company size preference (employees): Startup (<50) / SMB (50–500) / Enterprise (500+)

Find the Right Salary Data Sources

Not all salary data is created equal. Some platforms aggregate self-reported data with no verification. Others draw from actual compensation surveys, employer submissions, or recruiter networks. Knowing where each source gets its data — and what its limitations are — helps you weight the information correctly when you synthesize it in Step 3.

🟢 Tier 1: High Reliability

- **LinkedIn Salary Insights** — Verified member data by role, location, and company
- **Levels.fyi** — Best for tech roles; real offer data by level and company
- **Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS)** — US government occupational wage data
- **Radford / Mercer Surveys** — Employer-submitted; often available through HR contacts

🟡 Tier 2: Useful with Caveats

- **Glassdoor** — Large sample size but self-reported; good for directional ranges
- **Payscale** — Useful for broad benchmarking; may lag the market by 12–18 months
- **Indeed Salaries** — Good for high-volume roles; less useful for senior/niche positions
- **Salary.com** — Decent for US roles; methodology varies by category

🔵 Tier 3: Contextual Intelligence

- **Job postings with pay ranges** — Now required in NY, CA, CO; increasingly common
- **Recruiter conversations** — Real-time market intelligence (covered in Step 4)
- **Professional associations** — Many publish annual salary surveys by specialty
- **Your own network** — First-person data from peers in similar roles

Pro Tip: Always use at least one source from each tier. Tier 1 gives you the anchor. Tier 2 adds volume. Tier 3 gives you the real-time market pulse that no database fully captures.

How to Search Each Platform Like a Pro

Knowing which platforms to use is only half the battle. How you search those platforms dramatically changes the quality of data you get. Each tool has filters, quirks, and settings that most users never adjust — and those defaults often return misleading averages. Here's how to get the most out of the top three platforms professionals rely on most.

LinkedIn Salary — Best Practices

1. Navigate to "Salary Insights" from any job posting — not just the main salary tool
2. Filter by **seniority level** first — this single filter changes results by $20–40K
3. Filter by **company size** to separate startup vs. enterprise ranges
4. Use the "Top skills" filter to see how certifications or tech stacks shift compensation
5. Check both base salary AND total compensation tabs — equity and bonus matter

Glassdoor — Best Practices

1. Always filter by **specific city**, not just state — metro pay differs from state averages
2. Look at "Salary Range" not just median — the range tells you what's negotiable
3. Cross-check the number of data points — fewer than 20 reviews means low confidence
4. Read interview reviews alongside salary data to understand offer timing and process

Levels.fyi — Best Practices

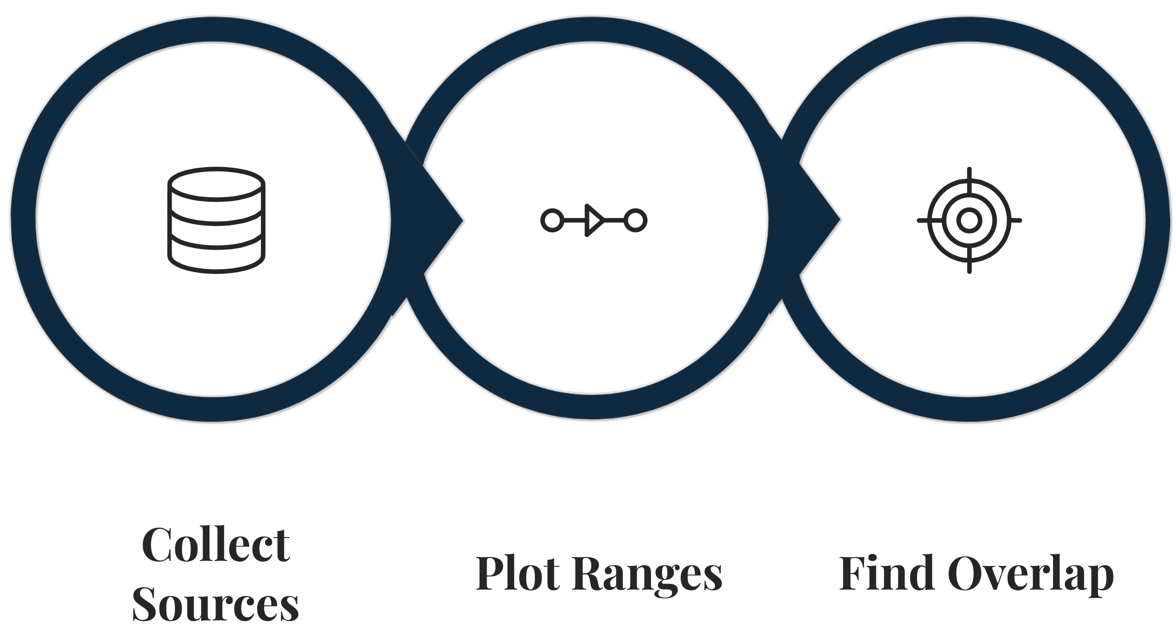
1. Best for software engineering, product, and data roles at tech companies
2. Filter by **exact level** (e.g., L5, Senior II) — this is the most granular data available
3. Use the "Total Compensation" view — stock grants can double base salary in tech
4. Compare across 3–5 similar companies to understand the true market band

Job Postings — Best Practices

1. Search roles in NY, CA, or CO where pay transparency laws apply
2. Save 10–15 relevant postings and note the stated ranges in a spreadsheet
3. The low end of a posting range often represents "minimum viable candidate" — you likely qualify for the midpoint or higher
4. Look at posting dates — older postings may reflect outdated ranges

Triangulate Your Salary Range From Multiple Sources

Triangulation is the art of using multiple independent data points to identify a defensible, accurate range — rather than relying on any single source that may be outdated, biased, or unrepresentative. Think of it the way a navigator uses multiple landmarks to fix their position: no single landmark is the answer, but together they tell you exactly where you are.



The goal of triangulation isn't to find "the right number" — it's to identify a credible salary band with a floor, midpoint, and ceiling. Your floor is the minimum you'd accept given your circumstances. Your midpoint is what someone with your profile typically earns in this market. Your ceiling is what top performers or candidates with scarce skills command.

The Triangulation Worksheet

Source	Low End	Midpoint	High End	Confidence
LinkedIn Salary	$___	$___	$___	High / Med / Low
Glassdoor	$___	$___	$___	High / Med / Low
Levels.fyi / BLS	$___	$___	$___	High / Med / Low
Job Postings (avg)	$___	$___	$___	High / Med / Low
Network / Recruiter	$___	$___	$___	High / Med / Low
MY TARGET RANGE	**$___**	**$___**	**$___**	**MY ASK: $___**

Gather Human Intelligence: Your Network and Recruiters

Data platforms give you numbers. People give you context. The most accurate and current salary intelligence available to any professional comes from conversations — with peers who hold similar roles, recruiters actively placing candidates in your target space, and mentors who've recently navigated the same market. Human intelligence fills the gaps that no database captures: company culture premiums, current hiring urgency, and what's actually being offered in real conversations right now.

How to Ask Peers About Compensation

Asking a colleague or peer about their salary is still awkward for many professionals — but it's becoming more normalized, and it's among the most valuable data you can gather. The key is framing and reciprocity.

The Reciprocity Frame

"I'm doing some market research on compensation for [role] in [industry]. I'm happy to share what I find if you're open to comparing notes — no pressure either way."

The Range Frame

"I've been seeing ranges of $X–$Y for roles like mine. Does that match what you've experienced or heard?" — This removes the pressure of asking for an exact number.

The Mentor Frame

"I'm preparing for a compensation conversation and trying to calibrate my expectations. Based on your experience in this field, what would you consider fair for someone at my level?"

How to Work With Recruiters

Recruiters — both in-house and external — are paid to know what the market pays. Even if you're not actively looking, a 20-minute exploratory conversation with a recruiter in your specialty can yield better salary intelligence than hours of platform research.

- Connect with 2–3 specialized recruiters in your industry on LinkedIn
- Be transparent: "I'm not actively searching but staying informed about the market"
- Ask: **"What are you seeing for [role] at [company size] in [location] right now?"**
- Ask about total comp, not just base: bonus structure, equity, signing bonuses
- Note the date of the conversation — recruiter data is time-sensitive

Remember: Recruiters benefit from placing you at a higher salary (their fee is often a % of your package). Their data skews toward active candidates — but it's often the most current data available.

Salary Research Conversation Tracker

Every salary conversation you have is a data point. Track them systematically so you can identify patterns, spot outliers, and build a cumulative picture of market reality. Use this tracker during your research phase — aim for at least 5–8 data points from human sources before finalizing your target range.

Person / Source	Role / Company	Date	Range Shared	Key Context / Notes
Recruiter — TechTalent Co	Placing Sr. PMs, SaaS	___/___	$130K–$155K	Active market; demand high Q1
Peer — former colleague	Sr. PM, FinTech startup	___/___	~$140K + equity	Equity was significant portion
___________________ _	___________________ _	___/___	$___ – $___	____________________
___________________ _	___________________ _	___/___	$___ – $___	____________________
___________________ _	___________________ _	___/___	$___ – $___	____________________
___________________ _	___________________ _	___/___	$___ – $___	____________________

Pattern Check: After 5+ conversations, look for the number that appears most frequently — that's likely your market median. Outliers (very high or very low) usually reflect unusual company circumstances, not the true market.

Calculate Your Personal Target Number

Market data tells you what someone in your role earns. Your target number tells you what *you specifically* should ask for — and those two numbers are often different. The gap between average market pay and your individual ask is determined by a set of personal multipliers: the premium factors that justify positioning you at the midpoint or high end of the range rather than the floor.

Experience Premium

Years of experience matter, but **relevant** experience matters more. If you have 7 years total but 4 of them are directly in this role and industry, that specificity commands a premium. Quantify this: "4 years leading $5M+ product portfolios in B2B SaaS."

Skills Scarcity

Certain technical skills, certifications, or domain expertise carry above-market premiums. If you hold a PMP, AWS certification, CPA, or proficiency in a high-demand tool (Salesforce, dbt, Figma), factor that in. Search for your skill specifically on salary platforms — the premium is often visible.

Measurable Impact

Candidates who can quantify their contributions — "grew pipeline by 40%," "reduced churn by 12 points," "led a 15-person team through 3x growth" — command higher offers because they reduce hiring risk. The more specific your proof points, the stronger your position at the high end of the band.

Total Compensation View

Base salary is only one element. Before settling on a number, map out the full compensation picture: annual bonus targets, equity (stock options or RSUs), healthcare premiums, 401(k) match, PTO, remote flexibility, and professional development budgets. Sometimes a lower base with strong equity and bonus is the higher offer.

Your Total Compensation Calculator

Use this worksheet to build a complete picture of your compensation — and to make apples-to-apples comparisons between offers. Fill in current values and target values so you can see exactly how a new role stacks up against your baseline.

Compensation Element	Current Value	Target Value	Notes
Base Salary	$___	$___	Annual, pre-tax
Annual Bonus (target %)	____%	____%	% of base, at target performance
Equity / Stock (annual value)	$___	$___	Vesting schedule matters
Signing Bonus	N/A	$___	One-time; negotiate if leaving unvested equity
Health Insurance Premium (saved)	$___	$___	Employer contribution value
401(k) Match	$___	$___	Effectively part of your comp
Remote / Flexibility Value	$___	$___	Commute savings, time value
Professional Development	$___	$___	Courses, conferences, certifications
TOTAL COMPENSATION	**$___**	**$___**	**True apples-to-apples comparison**

Insight: Many professionals discover their current total compensation is significantly higher — or lower — than they realized once they include all elements. This full picture changes what you ask for and what you'd accept.

STEP 6

Build Your Living Salary Research File

Salary research isn't a one-time activity you do right before an interview. The most strategically minded professionals treat compensation intelligence as an ongoing practice — something they update every 6–12 months regardless of whether they're actively job searching. A living salary file means you're never starting from zero when an unexpected opportunity arises or a performance review conversation opens up.

What Goes in Your Salary File

- **Your scope definition** (role, level, location, industry)
- **Dated screenshots or exports** from each platform you searched
- **Your triangulation worksheet** with the derived target range
- **Your conversation tracker** from recruiter and peer discussions
- **Job posting archives** — saved PDFs of relevant postings with pay ranges
- **Your total compensation calculator** for current role and any offers evaluated
- **A running log of your achievements and impact metrics**
- **Revision dates** so you know how fresh each data point is

When to Update Your File

Every 6–12 Months

Routine market check, even if you love your current role. Markets move fast — especially in tech, healthcare, and finance.

Before Any Review Cycle

Refresh your data 6–8 weeks before performance reviews so you can walk in with current market context ready.

When You Get a New Certification or Skill

New credentials can shift your market value significantly. Re-benchmark whenever you level up meaningfully.

During an Active Job Search

Update weekly during active search — the market moves fast and your data needs to be live.

Your Salary Research Pre-Flight Checklist

Before entering any salary conversation — whether it's a new job offer, an internal promotion, or a consulting rate discussion — run through this checklist. Check every box before you state your number. Incomplete preparation is the primary cause of under-negotiation.

Research Preparation

- ☐ Completed scope definition worksheet (role, level, location, industry)
- ☐ Searched at least 3 platforms — including one Tier 1 source
- ☐ Filtered each platform by my specific seniority level
- ☐ Noted the number of data points behind each source
- ☐ Saved or exported search results with date stamps
- ☐ Searched for open job postings with stated pay ranges
- ☐ Reviewed at least one professional association salary survey

Human Intelligence

- ☐ Had at least one conversation with a recruiter in my specialty
- ☐ Compared notes with at least one peer in a similar role
- ☐ Logged all conversations in my salary conversation tracker
- ☐ Identified any outliers and noted likely reasons

Number Calculation

- ☐ Completed triangulation worksheet with 4+ sources
- ☐ Identified my personal premium factors (skills, impact, certifications)
- ☐ Completed total compensation calculator for current role
- ☐ Identified my floor, target, and ceiling numbers
- ☐ Confirmed my ask is above midpoint based on my profile

Conversation Readiness

- ☐ Can cite 2–3 specific sources if asked how I arrived at my number
- ☐ Have 3 specific impact statements ready to justify my ask
- ☐ Know which non-salary elements I'm willing to negotiate
- ☐ Have rehearsed my salary ask out loud at least once
- ☐ Know my walk-away number and have committed to it

Reflection Questions: Know Your Narrative

Salary research isn't just about finding the right numbers — it's about building the narrative that connects your market data to your personal value. These reflection questions are designed to help you articulate why you sit where you do in the range, so you can speak about your compensation expectations with conviction and specificity rather than hesitation.

1

Your Value Baseline

"If I were hiring for my role today, what would I pay someone with exactly my background, skills, and track record? How does that compare to what I currently earn?"

2

Your Premium Case

"What specific, quantifiable contributions have I made in the past 12–18 months that set me apart from the average person in my role? Can I put a dollar value or percentage on any of them?"

3

Your Market Position

"Based on my research, am I currently paid at, above, or below market rate? If below — what's the gap, and what's my plan to close it?"

4

Your Walk-Away Clarity

"What is the minimum total compensation I would need to accept a new role or stay in my current one? Have I separated this number from emotion and anchored it in real data?"

5

Your Preparation Gap

"What information do I still not have that I need before I'm fully prepared for this conversation? What's my plan to get it?"

Case Study: How Marcus Closed a $28K Salary Gap

Marcus is a 34-year-old operations manager at a mid-size logistics company. He'd been in his role for three years, had taken on significantly expanded responsibilities, and suspected he was underpaid — but he had no data to back it up. When a competing firm reached out for a conversation, he decided it was time to research properly.

1

Week 1: Scope

Marcus defined his scope: Operations Manager, 5–8 years experience, $150M+ company, Chicago market. Not just "ops manager."

2

Week 1: Research

He searched LinkedIn Salary, Glassdoor, and BLS. Found a range of $95K–$130K for his scope. He was earning $97K — the floor.

3

Week 2: Human Intel

Marcus spoke with 2 recruiters and 3 peers. All confirmed: $110K–$125K was market for his profile and responsibilities.

4

Week 3: His Case

He built his premium argument: managed a $12M cost reduction project, led a team of 18, held a Six Sigma Black Belt. Target: $118K.

5

Result

His current employer matched $115K to retain him. The competing offer came in at $125K. He now has both — and chose to stay with a raise of **$18K**.

> "I always knew I was underpaid, but I never had the data to prove it. Once I had the numbers, the conversation changed completely. I wasn't asking — I was presenting evidence." — Marcus, Operations Manager

Common Mistakes — and How to Fix Them

Even well-intentioned salary research can go wrong. These are the most common pitfalls professionals encounter — and the specific corrections that get research back on track. Recognizing these in your own process is often the difference between a research effort that empowers you and one that sends you into a negotiation with false confidence or unnecessary hesitation.

Mistake: Searching Too Broadly

The Problem: "Software engineer salary" returns a $60K–$250K range that's useless. **The Fix:** Add seniority, location, company size, and tech stack to every search. Your range should be $30–40K wide, not $100K+ wide.

Mistake: Using One Source

The Problem: Glassdoor says $80K; you accept that as fact without cross-checking. **The Fix:** Always use a minimum of 3 sources across 2 tiers. Single-source research is single-point-of-failure research.

Mistake: Ignoring Total Comp

The Problem: Comparing base salaries while ignoring equity, bonus, and benefits — leading to false comparisons. **The Fix:** Always complete the total compensation calculator before comparing offers or stating a number.

Mistake: Anchoring to Current Salary

The Problem: Asking for "10% more than I make now" rather than "what the market pays." **The Fix:** Your ask should be anchored to market data, not to your current salary. These are often very different numbers — especially after years without market-rate adjustments.

Mistake: Stale Data

The Problem: Using salary data from 2–3 years ago, especially in fast-moving markets like tech. **The Fix:** Prioritize data from the last 12 months. Note the date on every source. Recruiter conversations are often your freshest data point.

Mistake: Skipping Human Sources

The Problem: Relying entirely on platforms while avoiding the discomfort of conversations about money. **The Fix:** Human data is often the most accurate. Use the conversation scripts in this guide to make peer and recruiter conversations low-friction and natural.

Mistake: Not Documenting

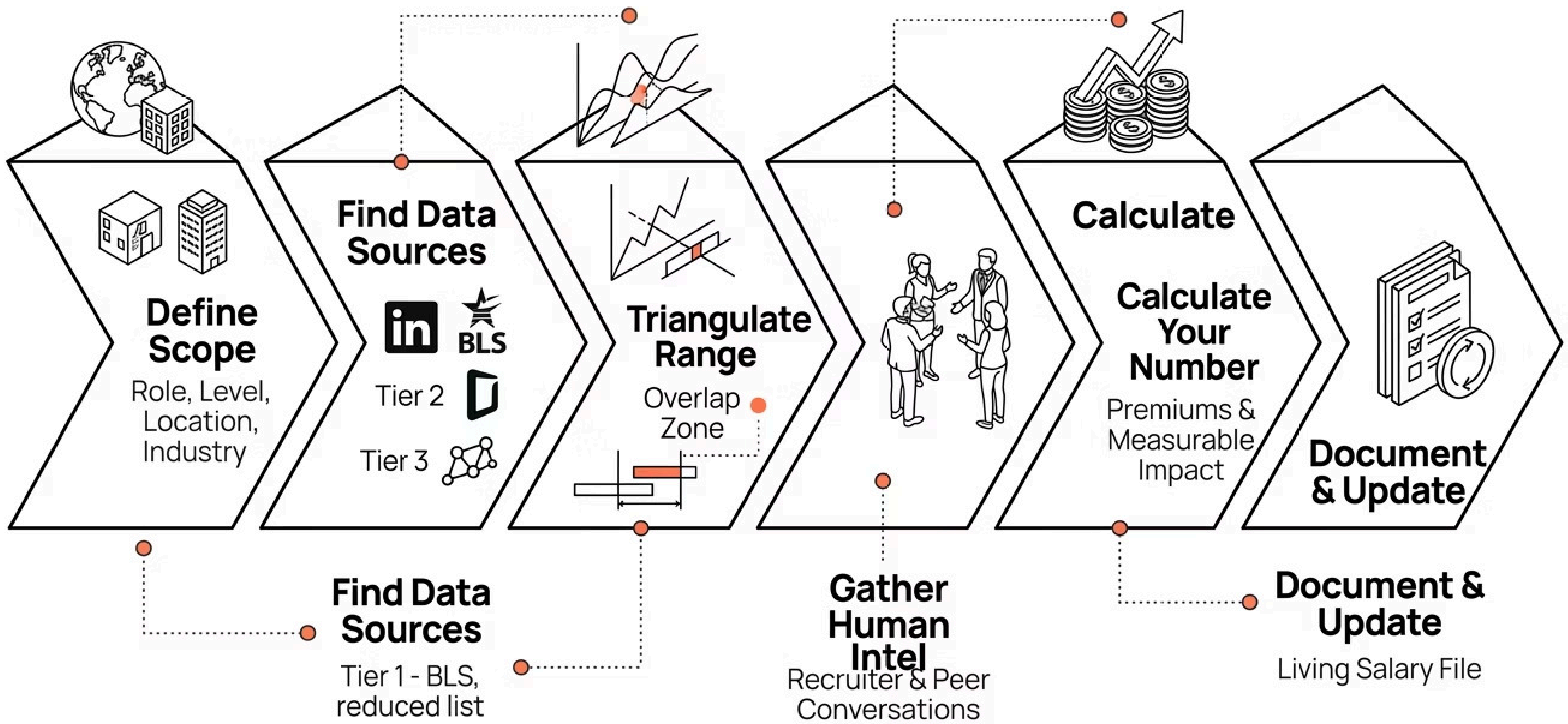
The Problem: Doing good research but keeping it only in your head — meaning you start from scratch next time. **The Fix:** Build your living salary file (Step 6). 30 minutes of documentation saves you hours the next time you need this data.

Mistake: Waiting Until You Need It

The Problem: Only researching when a job offer is on the table — giving you 48 hours to do what should take 2 weeks. **The Fix:** Research salary ranges proactively, every 6–12 months. You'll always be ready for the conversation that catches you by surprise.

The Salary Research Framework at a Glance

This infographic summarizes the complete salary research system — from scope definition to your final documented range. Use it as a quick reference before any compensation conversation.



> **The Golden Rule:** No single step is optional. Professionals who skip scope definition get meaningless data. Professionals who skip human intel miss the market pulse. Professionals who skip documentation start from zero every time. All six steps together create a defensible, confident compensation position.

Summary: What You Now Know and Can Do

You've just built the foundation of a professional salary research practice. This isn't theory — every step in this guide has been designed for direct, immediate application. Here are the seven core takeaways to carry forward:

1 Specificity is everything

Broad searches return useless ranges. Define your exact scope — role, seniority, location, and industry — before opening any salary platform. The more specific your search, the more actionable the data.

2 Triangulate, never rely on one source

Use a minimum of 3 sources across 2 tiers. Single-source research is single-point-of-failure research. The overlapping zone across your sources is your true market range.

3 Human intelligence fills the gaps platforms can't

Recruiters and peers give you real-time, contextual data that no database captures. Two conversations can be worth more than ten hours of platform research.

4 Your ask should reflect your premium, not just the average

Market data shows what average candidates earn. Your experience, impact, and skills scarcity determine where you sit in the range. Position at midpoint or above — with evidence to back it up.

5 Total compensation is the real number

Base salary is one line item. Bonus, equity, healthcare, 401(k) match, remote flexibility, and development budgets can add $20–50K of value to a package. Always compare total comp.

6 Documentation turns research into a long-term asset

A living salary file means you're never starting from zero. Maintain it proactively, and every future compensation conversation starts from a position of knowledge rather than anxiety.

7 Preparation is the negotiation

The conversation itself is almost secondary. Professionals who walk in with specific data, a clear range, and articulated impact rarely leave money on the table. Your research is your leverage.

Rate Your Salary Research Readiness

Use this self-evaluation to assess your current state of readiness for a compensation conversation. Be honest — this is for your eyes only, and the value is in the gap-identification, not in feeling good about where you are. Score each area from 1 (not at all ready) to 5 (fully prepared).

Readiness Area	Score (1–5)	What Would Move Me to a 5?
I have clearly defined my target role, level, location, and industry	___ / 5	____
I have researched 3+ platforms and noted the ranges with dates	___ / 5	____
I have completed a triangulation worksheet with a target range	___ / 5	____
I have spoken with at least one recruiter and one peer about market rates	___ / 5	____
I know my personal premium factors and can articulate them clearly	___ / 5	____
I have calculated my total compensation (current and target)	___ / 5	____
I have a living salary file I update regularly	___ / 5	____
I can state my salary ask with confidence and cite supporting data	___ / 5	____
TOTAL READINESS SCORE	**___ / 40**	**Focus first on any area scored 1–2**

Scoring Guide: 32–40: You're negotiation-ready. 20–31: Strong foundation — address your gaps before the next conversation. Below 20: Complete the research steps in this guide before entering any compensation discussion.

Your Next 30 Days: From Research to Readiness

Knowledge without action is just interesting reading. This 30-day plan converts everything in this guidebook into a concrete schedule — so that in one month, you'll have a complete, documented salary research file and the confidence to walk into any compensation conversation fully prepared. The total time investment is approximately 4–6 hours spread across the month.

1

Days 1–3

Complete your scope definition worksheet. Open your salary file (a Google Doc or Notion page works perfectly). Commit to the process.

2

Days 4–7

Research 3+ platforms using the platform-specific guidance in Step 2. Save all results with dates. Complete your triangulation worksheet with initial ranges.

3

Days 8–14

Initiate 2–3 human intelligence conversations. Reach out to one recruiter and at least one peer using the conversation scripts from Step 4. Log all data points.

4

Days 15–21

Complete your total compensation calculator. Identify your premium factors. Finalize your floor, target, and ceiling numbers. Refine based on any new conversations.

5

Days 22–30

Finalize your living salary file. Complete the readiness self-evaluation. Practice stating your salary ask out loud — to a friend, a mirror, or your career coach.

Keep Going: What to Do Next

This guidebook is one part of a broader career intelligence practice. Salary research connects directly to performance narrative building, career positioning, and negotiation strategy. Once you've completed your salary file, consider these next steps as part of your ongoing professional development:

- Build your **career achievements log** — a running record of impact statements you update monthly
- Create a **networking cadence** with 2–3 recruiters in your specialty to stay current on the market
- Practice **salary negotiation scenarios** with a career coach or trusted peer before high-stakes conversations
- Set a **calendar reminder** to revisit your salary file every 6 months — treat it like a financial check-in

Remember This

You are not asking for a favor when you negotiate your salary. You are exchanging your skills, experience, and results for fair market value.

The research you've done in this guide is the evidence that supports that exchange.

You did the work. Now go get paid for it.