1. Introduction
You studied hard through high school and college to get accepted into veterinary school. In veterinary school, you studied even harder to pass your exams and then studied to pass the licensing exams and boards. Throughout this time, you may have worked numerous jobs in or outside of the industry to pay the bills, have some spending money, and to gain some experience. You may have then gone on to complete an internship and/or residency. Now, you have taken to the journals, on-line listings, and word of mouth to start the process of finding your first associate position and embarking on your career as a veterinarian. When you stop and look back, you had no classes or instruction on how to do so, what things to look for, and how to negotiate your first contract. This article will help both parties come to a better understanding of the negotiation process and potential pitfalls that may be encountered.

2. Discussion
Negotiation is defined by Merriam-Webster Dictionary as a formal discussion between people who are trying to reach an agreement. Typically, some interests are shared and some interests are opposed. The goals of negotiation are to reach satisfying agreements for both parties, to reach the agreements efficiently, and to continue on a positive note.

Often, individuals involved in conversations or disputes do not realize that they are actually in a negotiation process when opinions are not shared. Assumptions are made, tension escalates, and communication breaks down. The result often leaves one side feeling deceived or disrespected; this can only lead to more problems down the road. By realizing that almost everything is negotiable, one can obtain positive outcomes not only in the forms of salary and compensation but also by being truly happy with the process. Almost all of our communications with clients are negotiations. Understanding how to negotiate is more likely to lead to achieving the results you aspire to reach.

So you find yourself lucky enough to interview at a practice and have an offer extended to you. Now you must decide to take it, refuse it, or to negotiate it. If this offer is for a position you truly are interested in, you are left with accepting the offer or negotiating the offer further. Have you considered what your compensation needs are? What are your salary requirements? Do you need benefits? Which ones? What expenses will you incur moving to this area? Living in this area? Working at this practice? Benefit packages vary between practices and among individuals. The following package is typical of many practices.
• Health care coverage (single coverage) and a dental plan
• Professional liability insurance (AVMA plan)
• Disability insurance ($1000 toward coverage)
• Continuing education and training expenses (in-house sessions and conference registration, hotel and travel up to $1500)
• Paid time off for continuing education (5 days minimum)
• Professional organization dues (e.g., AAEP, AVMA, state VMA)
• State veterinary license and DEA license
• Paid vacation (2 weeks or 12 days)
• Uniform allowance (up to $500 per year, practice logo wear)

The above package totals over $12,000 in benefits. This figure is part of your compensation package and will need to be taken into consideration by both parties.

So the process begins. It must first start with an understanding that almost everything is negotiable. Once the offer has been extended, YOU are in the driver’s seat. Or one might say, “The ball is in your court.” When I polled second- and third-year veterinary students from one veterinary school this past year concerning their comfort in negotiating and their knowledge of how to do so, 73% responded they were uncomfortable doing so.¹

The process of negotiation can be broken down into five steps: preparation, entry, exploration, clarification, and closure.² By following some simple guidelines for each step, you can be prepared to negotiate your first associate position for yourself as well as be able to negotiate for anything else in your life.

Preparation
The first step is to know what you want. If you can detail exactly what you want, you have a better chance in attaining it. This means you must have a budget in hand. You cannot accept a job that does not allow you to pay your bills and still expect to be successful and positive every day. Your budget should include all the absolute items such as rent and utilities, automobile payments, expenses, groceries, clothing, cell phone and/or Internet plan, student loan obligations, and a small entertainment expense. This is the absolute minimum that you must receive to pay your bills. Additionally, medical and/or dental insurance, disability insurance, professional liability insurance, continuing education, and licensing fees should also be tallied. How these last few items will be addressed by your compensation may affect your bottom line: the least you can settle for. I do not recommend referencing what others are getting paid or comparing with similar positions because these do not necessarily pertain to your circumstance and can be misleading.

You also must know your potential employer’s interests. Find out if they looking to fill a position, expand services, get someone to share emergency coverage, find someone with new and current ideas, or some combination of all of these. It is much easier to know their interests if they have communicated them to you during the interview process. If not, be prepared with questions to ask. These questions may include getting clarification about after-hours duties, weekend horse show details, night checks, availability of mentoring or not, and openness to new ideas and procedures. It is also helpful if you know your potential employer’s style of negotiation: are they open to discussions, or are they difficult to question? You may be able to get a better idea by asking other associates, having a case discussion with your potential employer, or by asking a few nontreating or soft questions initially. A soft question may be something along the lines of “What’s the top of your budget?”, “How are you going to pay for your first few months?”

The best place to start is to rephrase the offer to share your understanding of the contractual terms. It is acceptable to seek clarification of words or phrases that may seem unclear. You are merely trying to understand exactly what has been offered; you are not to challenge the offer at this point. You should have a checklist of items in front of you and then paraphrase your understanding before moving on. This is typically done over the phone, but it should be followed up with an e-mail or written document to confirm the agreement or clarification.

Entry
Entry establishes the understanding of a mutual purpose and should be a brief statement. For example, “You need an associate and this is the place I would like to work.” At this point, you will need to present your reason for negotiating. You may have concerns about finding a place to live on short notice, or your budgeted income requirement is too high for this salary offer. It is very important to remove people from this process and to concentrate on the problem at hand. By now you have prepared and restated what the offer is, so you can accurately identify what the problem may be. If you are specific about your interest or concern, your potential employer will be more willing to listen and understand.

Exploration
To avoid the feeling of being attacked, you should now ask for permission to ask questions. Tell your potential employer why you want to ask questions. Use phrases such as, “I would like to ask you a few questions about your benefit package so I can get a complete understanding of my financial obligations,” or, “Can I ask you about the typical frequency of emergency calls so I can understand how this will impact my home life or my income?” If the discussion is going well you may want to ask how they see you fitting into their organization, and will need to be taken into consideration by both parties.

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Give and Take

This is your opportunity to be creative and show your problem-solving skills. You should have already made a list of your concerns and plausible solutions to them that are beneficial to both parties. It is easy to find problems but much more challenging to find solutions. By showing you have worked through the problems and simultaneously are also looking for solutions will make future negotiations much smoother and minimize anxiety for all parties. Remember to think before talking; this brings much less risk.

A wide range of options should be presented. You may want to offer a willingness to take extra emergency duty, or a willingness to come in on your days off to learn more procedures, or offering your computer skills to help with the marketing of the practice. Listen to options from your potential employer; most likely they are aware of some of the concerns you will bring up and are prepared to offer alternatives. Make sure when you present your offer that you let the other side know how they will benefit by accepting it. This allows them to see that it does not have to be all or none. They still get the person they offered the position to, but with a few concessions. Examples could be taking less salary for the first 3 months before loan payments begin, but then an increased salary thereafter. You may also mention salary increases if you can produce what you promise for the practice, or some sort of profit sharing in the increase profits to the business from new services you can bring to the practice. It is also important to leave salary and economic issues to the end. Keep the emphasis on finding a successful environment where each party can feel some security from the other.

If your potential employer makes an offer or counteroffer you had not yet considered, do not decline it; rather, let them know you would like to consider the offer and also let them know when you will give them an answer. Taking time during a negotiation is called a caucus. If it is acceptable to do so during negotiations until later that day or the next day. Even if you plan to decline the offer, you should let the other side know you will think about the concession and get back to them. This shows you are acknowledging the other side. Taking a little time to think things over will reduce tension, break momentum (good or bad), allow clarification of an item you need to review, and show your potential employer that you are serious about working out a mutually satisfying agreement.

Closure

At this point, you should be in agreement. You should review the agreement with your future employer to ensure complete understanding from both parties. The agreement should be put into writing, whether in a letter or a contract, and signed and/or initialed by both parties. Both parties should feel they negotiated with good intentions and in good faith. Neither party should feel beaten or taken advantage of; rather there should be the feeling of “win-win.”

3. Conclusion

Pitfalls during the negotiating process are many. The first is not realizing almost everything is negotiable, limited only by the parties’ creativity. Making assumptions can be detrimental to finding positive outcomes for either party. Clarification can easily be achieved by rephrasing and asking questions. Emotions must be removed so the problem at hand can be clearly seen. Emotions not controlled during the negotiating process do more to hinder finding resolutions than anything else. Taking time to caucus will help to maintain clear communications and show mature and serious consideration of offers. By not paying attention to the other party’s concerns, feelings of overconfidence or underconfidence may emerge. These feelings from either party could also make it much more difficult to find successful agreements.

As a graduating veterinary student or a professional finishing a higher level of training, you have earned the right to negotiate. Websites such as www.jobstar.org offer tools to help with negotiating. Books such as Negotiating for Dummies (New York: Hungry Minds, Inc.) will help both sides better prepare for successful outcomes. Previous jobs were just that, jobs. You now are embarking on your career and should take the necessary steps to ensure things progress the way you want them to. Similarly, veterinary practice owners have spent years of their time, invested vast amounts of money, and sacrificed much of their private lives to their businesses and are now offering an opportunity for you to start your career. This should be respected and should be evident throughout the interview and negotiation process. I am convinced that there is a solution to every problem; one must keep looking until it reveals itself.

Employers want happy, successful employees. By following the five steps of negotiating, each party can get what they need, what they want, and can ensure both parties enter into the agreement with trust and positive feelings.

References and Footnote
