

BostonWorks

VIEW FROM THE CUBE

Our co-workers' salaries are worthy of our measure, gossip

By David Whitemyer
GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

Psst! Did you hear the latest? Marsha, upstairs in the ad department, is making \$55,000 a year, and she was just hired three months ago. Greg — you know Greg, from human resources — well, I heard that Greg, who has been with this company for five years AND has a master's degree, is still only pulling in \$48,000 a year."

"Oh my gawd! Really? But I've been here for 11 years. You know as well as I do that this place would be lost without me. How come I'm only getting \$46,000? That's not fair."

Unless you're running for political office, employed as a Major League Baseball player, or the head of a publicly traded company, it's likely that your annual salary is not publicly known. Most people keep this information guarded, discussing it with no one except their spouse.

Sharing personal salary information is a workplace taboo, though many of us feel quite comfortable discussing the wages of others. We're fascinated with how much cash people rake in. It's a staple of water-cooler conversation.

In the most extreme cases, like with Bill Gates or basketball superstar Michael Jordan, we do it because it's an easy way to fantasize about what life might be like in the world of the super-rich. It's really no different than pretending we've won the lottery. But back on earth, we chat about what our friends and colleagues are making as a way of gauging our self-worth. Money is quantifiable, and a quick unit of comparison with our peers.

Some companies have tried to implement policies prohibiting informal office conversations about pay and benefits. Not long ago, the National Labor Relations Board ruled that these policies are illegal.

So, you are now free to run around the office, blabbing about everyone's wages. Go ahead — during tomorrow's meeting, why don't you tell the project team about your big raise? The repercussions are yours to deal with. Your company can dis-

courage you from chatting about money with your co-workers, but they cannot forbid it.

My wife manages a staff of 20. Recently, a few of her employees were near revolt after gossiping with one another about how much money their co-workers were making. It was a classic "he said, she said" situation, with everyone talking about what they heard from "so and so" about "you know who." It started to get out of hand.

Through the rumor mill, employees were discovering that certain people were receiving 25 cents or 50 cents an hour more than they were, with no obvious reason. The unhappiness came to a head as staff members began storming into my wife's office demanding an explanation as to "why she's making that much more than me since I've been here longer."

As anyone in a hiring position understands, determining wages is more of an art than a science. You can objectify things like education, years of experience, and even skills. However, when you finally have to offer a dollar amount to a candidate, it often comes down to things like maturity, the current job market, their previous salary, or simply how bad you want them. Justifying that to an existing employee can be difficult. Especially if they're already feeling cheated.

But the issue here is not about the reasons one person makes more than another, but about the salary-related gossiping that takes place in an office, and the damage it creates.

As disco diva Donna Summer says,



ILLUSTRATION/ANTHONY SCHULTZ

you work hard for your money. The worst feeling at work is being underappreciated — and underpaid. And when you discover that a colleague, on seemingly equal status, is making more money than you are, that's exactly how you feel. Underappreciation turns to resentment and outrage. There's not much you can do about it, other than quit or moan to your supervisor.

Your other option — the more popular one — is to gossip. You're annoyed because the new guy on your project team is making \$5K a year more than everyone else. Why should you be the only one who feels like a pushover? So, at the office watercooler, you share this information with a few co-workers, in a whispered tone, of course. Now they're angry too, and you feel better.

There's an entire Web site devoted to

tracking national salary ranges. Salary.com advertises their site as a great way to find out what others are making in your field and then use that information when asking for that big raise.

I sometimes surf Salary.com when I'm feeling low and want to be reminded that, on a level playing field, I'm still making more money than folks in Toledo, Ohio — one of the perks of living in a big East Coast city. This pastime periodically backfires: I sometimes discover that my industry counterparts right here in town are making, on average, a ton more than me. Then I feel lousy, and I'll gossip about what I've learned.

"Hey Joe. Do you have any idea how much they're making at that firm over on Boylston Street? Come here, I'll tell you." Interestingly, the origin of the word

"gossip" comes from the same roots as godparent and "god sibling." By Middle English times the word had been altered to mean simply "close friend." And then during the 16th century, some bright person realized that it was human nature for close friends to indulge in idle chat, so the word was changed to the meaning we know today: to spread rumors of an intimate nature.

So why do we care so much about what our officemates are making? We know it makes us feel lousy. Do we enjoy the masochism? If we're making enough cash to live reasonably well and feed our children, shouldn't we just be happy with that? Apparently not. We want the same amount of money as that other guy. Not because we necessarily deserve it, but because we think it's fair to have the same salary.

My soon-to-be 4-year-old son is in the early stages of the "no fair!" phase. I make a sandwich for him and give our other son a bowl of cereal. "No fair," he complains. He asks to stay up late and watch a video. We say no. "That's not fair," he whines.

His feelings are sincere. He's angry. But his "no fair" reasoning isn't based on any type of logic. He is too young to comprehend the larger picture. So, he chalks his frustration up to simple inequality and grumbles as he walks out of the room.

His behavior parallels that of salary gossip and its effects. The human brain is wired such that it's easier to get angry than it is to analyze something. It takes less energy, and our bodies are hardwired to conserve their energy for things like finding food and surviving long, cold winters.

I, for one, will probably always continue to judge myself based on a salary comparison of my peers. I understand that it's not useful and that it's based on incomplete information. But heck, it makes me feel good — at least when it's not making me feel bad.

David Whitemyer can be reached at bethany320@aol.com.