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By Tiare Rath

Know how much the other guy earns?

(LifeWire) -- If you're angling for a raise or hunting for a better-paying job, chances are you've wondered what your peers are earning. Salary Web sites claim to tell you just that, but whether or not you're getting a clear picture of the money depends on who you ask.

According to experts, these online resources have helped level the playing field between employees and employers somewhat. Yet the information that consumers receive is more general than the compensation figures many companies buy.

"It's like the old saying: 'You get what you pay for,'" says Bob Kustka, president of the Norwell, Massachusetts-based human resources consulting firm Fusion Factor and a 28-year veteran of the human resources industry.

Employees negotiating based on information found on salary Web sites "have very little leverage," Kustka maintains, because the research usually isn't as strong as the data that companies purchase for hundreds or thousands of dollars.

Bill Coleman, senior vice president of compensation for Salary.com, sees things differently. Such Web sites, he says, have encouraged people to have more meaningful dialogue about pay and performance. "We're providing information that used to be very difficult to get, and we're providing information in a way that is respected by the employer," Coleman says.

Free, or for a fee?

Waltham, Massachusetts-based Salary.com has roughly 3 million visitors per month and 7,000 paid subscribers. Its data is based on 25 million employee salaries from more than 15,000 employers. Salary.com syndicates its salary information to several other Web sites, including Monster.com.

Like many salary and jobs sites, Salary.com offers free salary reports for employees and employers that provide limited information such as salary ranges and median benefits. Its free salary wizard calculates salaries based on national pay averages for particular jobs and factors in pay differentials by city or region. Individuals can pay between \$29.95 and \$79.95 for more detailed reports that factor in the size of the employer and the industry, as well as salary data from jobs in a given city or region.

Salary.com also offers businesses a variety of data services geared toward employers, starting with a custom single job and salary report for \$79.95. Like a paid consumer report, the custom salary report for employers provides hiring strategies and includes information on pay by region and company size. Companies can also pay up to \$100,000 for services such as executive salary data reports and software to manage hundreds of surveys or company-wide salary reviews.

Another site, SalariesReview.com, provides a wealth of fee-based data ranging from custom reports aimed at job seekers to industry-wide surveys aimed at companies and journalists. Reports start at about \$19. The site is owned by ERI Economic Research Institute of Redmond, Washington, which has approximately 10,000 employers that subscribe to its salary, cost-of-living and other survey reports. The institute charges a range of prices for annual corporate subscriptions for its data products.

E. James Brennan, senior associate at ERI, notes that most workers aren't willing to pay hundreds of dollars for specialized salary data -- such as its Salary Assessor, which starts at \$899 -- as companies do, and that salary survey firms

won't provide such specialized reports for consumer prices.

"We would not supply a Web service for individuals that would steal away our employer business," he says.

Still, the online salary surveys put "a lot of pressure on employers because they've got employees who come in swaggering with a number that they think they can parlay into a pay increase," Brennan says.

Putting salary web sites to work

People researching compensation should rely on more than one salary Web site, and they should research the methodologies the sites use. Laurence Shatkin, author of the forthcoming "Salary Facts Handbook," recommends that consumers first use the Department of Labor's America's Career InfoNet, which provides free salary data based on government data. Such data, Coleman and Brennan caution, may be up to three years old, however.

Shatkin also recommends that consumers look for sites that have local salary data and offer specific job descriptions or data on jobs with multiple levels of experience. If you're an accountant, for example, salary ranges should be available for entry- to senior-level positions.

He also cautions consumers not to use sites that provide data based on self-selecting surveys. A Web site that compiles its statistics by asking users how much they make isn't producing scientific data, Shatkin warns.

Employees should also check salary ranges with professional associations or colleagues in the same field, experts say. They also agree that employees and job-seekers should consider benefits and perks like flexible working hours when calculating their compensation.

"At the end of the day, it's not just about money," Kustka says. "That should be only one of the things that you're negotiating."