PRESS CUTTING

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The state of pay

We are all thinking about it, but none of us want to actually talk about it. So why arent we more open when it comes to discussing our salaries, asks Ellie Levenson

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Discussing how much you earn is considered even more vulgar in France than in the UK

Politics and religion are the two topics that you are traditionally supposed to steer clear of in polite conversation, but there is a third subject that the British also rarely discuss: how much we are paid for our jobs.

In part, this is because many employers want to avoid their employees competing with each other. "The English view is that internal competition within a workplace can be very destructive," says Ronnie Fox, a specialist employment lawyer at City law firm Fox. He points out that this is particularly true when comparing yourself with other people in your office, rather than in society generally. "People often seem more concerned about the differential between what they are earning and what their colleagues are earning than the differential between what they are earning and what people outside their organisation are earning."

In fact, many firms feel so strongly that they forbid employees comparing their salaries and bonuses. The reason this happens is, Fox thinks, part of a wider cultural attitude. "I think that English people are naturally reserved and attach a lot of importance to privacy. If you've ever been to Australia or Canada and you're waiting for a bus and there's someone else waiting for the same bus it's inconceivable that you don't talk to each other. Here, if you talk to someone, they call the police. I think it's part of the same thing."

But it's not just British workers who are reluctant to divulge their cash worth. Discussing salaries is considered even more vulgar in France than it is in the UK, says Louise Bolotin, who has worked in corporate communications in France and Holland. "In France, however, even though it's not discussed, salary scales are generally known and it's easy to work out what colleagues are earning."

By contrast, Bolotin says, Dutch people discuss money openly: "The Dutch are pretty upfront about most things. Dutch women will start telling you about their abortions within half an hour of meeting you and money is no different. All the companies I worked for there publish the salary scales annually, so if you know what band a colleague is in, you can work out what they are earning. But they'll probably tell you if you ask them."

Janet Davies, a management consultant and editor of careers website www.newlifenetwork.co.uk, agrees that keeping our earnings under wraps is deeply ingrained in our culture: "Traditionally, we're brought up to believe that boasting and immodesty are undesirable qualities, simply bad manners generally, and disclosing your salary could potentially reveal something about you best kept private, such as where you stand in the social pecking order - and it may also offend others. It can feed jealousy in our society and invite others to judge us, too."

But just skirting the subject completely can cause its own problems, particularly within groups of friends who graduated together, and initially earned similar salaries. "After a few years some people had trebled their earnings and others were still on entry-level salaries, or had gone back into studying," says Claire, 27, a researcher. "Money started to be a problem because no one wanted to admit they couldn't afford things, but every time we ate out together choosing the restaurant became a real issue. We started off with everyone knowing what everyone earned, but now we are very hush-hush."

Keeping your earnings secret from friends and family isn't necessarily a bad thing, says Angela Mansi, lecturer in occupational psychology at Westminster Business School. "Until you have joint commitments like a mortgage or going on holiday together, how much you earn really is none of anybody else's business," she says. However, not speaking about it may be indicative of other problems: "Certainly where there are problems with money in a relationship or friendship there are usually other problems."

But blaming our reluctance to discuss salaries on wanting privacy or on British reserve allows discrimination to quietly thrive, says Jenny Westaway, project manager on the Women's Financial Assets team at the Fawcett Society. "It makes it really difficult for women to find out whether they are being paid unfairly. How on

earth would you, if you've no idea how much your colleagues are earning? For pay systems to be fair, they've got to be transparent and rational, based on what you do, not on whether you have the confidence to ask for more."

One country trying to do this is Portugal. According to a European Commission report on the gender pay gap published last year, all employers in Portugal with the exception of central, regional and local administrations, public institutes and other collective public entities, as well as employers of domestic service workers, are obliged during the month of November to display in a visible place (or for online consultation) for a period of at least 30 days, the list of their staff indicating each employee's earnings. This information must be made available to the public authorities, as well as, on demand, to trade unions and employers' associations. Non-compliance is considered a minor offence that may lead to a sizeable fine.

Westaway would like to see compulsory pay audits for all organisations in order to reveal pay inequalities. This would help women in particular, as they are usually the losers when it comes to colleagues earning different amounts for similar jobs.

Janet Davies agrees: "Women are less likely to apply for jobs where the salary is undisclosed and often feel uncomfortable about having to give their salary details upfront, for fear of being offered less than they are worth. And if women do find out they are earning less then men doing the same job they are more likely to lack the assertiveness and self-confidence to do anything about it."