[WHITE PAPER · 2026]

From $120K to $175K

How freight forwarding producers move their base salary, without moving twice.

The base is a market price, not a reward

Almost every producer we speak to believes their base salary reflects their performance. It does not. A base salary reflects one thing: what the hiring company believed it had to pay on the day the offer was written. Performance since that day rarely re-prices it. Internal raises in freight forwarding cluster between three and five percent — well below the twenty to forty percent step a well-run move produces.

This paper explains what actually moves a base from the $120,000 band into the $175,000 band, and the three mistakes that keep good producers stuck.

What the market is paying

Ranges below reflect U.S. offers written for commercial freight forwarding roles over the trailing twelve months. Commission is separate in every case.

Profile	Typical base	What lifts it
BDE, general freight, under $400K GP	$95K – $125K	Verified GP, named accounts
BDE, verified $500K – $1M GP	$130K – $160K	Lane ownership, portability
Senior producer, $1M – $2M GP	$150K – $190K	Vertical depth, agent network
Vertical or trade-lane lead	$160K – $215K	Team influence, pricing input
Branch / P&L leadership	$175K – $250K	Direct margin responsibility

The step from $120K to $175K is almost never a promotion. It is a re-pricing that happens when a producer is evaluated by a company that needs exactly what they already do.

The three things that re-price you

1. Provable gross profit

“I produce about a million” is worth less than a one-page ledger showing GP by year, by lane, by account type. Producers who arrive with documentation are negotiating. Producers who arrive with a résumé are being assessed.

2. A lane or vertical the buyer cannot hire twice

Generalists are compared against a market of generalists. A producer who owns ex-Vietnam air, LATAM consolidation, cold-chain pharma or touring freight is compared against nobody, because the buyer has already failed to find a second one.

3. Timing against a mandate, not a posting

Published roles have budgeted bases. Mandates — searches that exist because a company has decided it must open a lane — have flexible ones. The same person is worth materially more to the second company than the first.

> *Nobody has ever been paid $175,000 for being available. They were paid for being difficult to replace.*

The three mistakes

- **Naming a number first.** The first number spoken becomes the ceiling. The correct answer is what the role needs to produce, and what the company pays people who produce it.
- **Trading base for commission percentage.** Base is guaranteed; commission is a forecast written by the person hiring you. Move the base first, then the plan.
- **Accepting the counter-offer.** More than half of producers who accept a counter-offer leave within eighteen months anyway — at the base they should have negotiated the first time.

What to do next

Write down three numbers: your gross profit for each of the last three years, your top five accounts by margin, and the lanes you personally price. That single page is the difference between a $120,000 conversation and a $175,000 one. Send it to us and we will tell you, confidentially and without obligation, what the market is currently paying for it.