

Thoughts on the Academic Job Search

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Start early:

- Do great science as a postdoc.
 - Publish your work in visible journals.
 - Get your paper(s) published before you go on the job market.
- Become known in your department/institution as a postdoc.
 - Seek out collaborations.
 - Take every opportunity you can to speak about your work at your own institution.
 - Seek out opportunities to interact with grad students/postdocs/faculty in the department (for example, start a journal club on your research area of interest).
- Become known in your field as a postdoc.
 - Attend meetings—be brave and talk to people there. Try to attend some small conferences (such as Gordon Conferences) where it's easier to meet and interact with people.
 - Take every opportunity you can to speak about your work or present your work as a poster at regional, national, and international meetings.
 - Ask friends at other institutions (where you might be interested in getting a job) if you could come give and talk. This could be an informal job talk...
 - Try to meet with/have a meal with scientists who are visiting your department to give a talk, particularly those in your field.
- Try to get some teaching and mentoring experience as a postdoc. You can do this by asking your advisor or other people in the department if you could give a guest lecture on your field of expertise or cover class for them while they're away at a conference. You can also mentor graduate students and undergrads in your lab. Ask your advisor if you could work with an undergrad where you design the project and the undergrad reports directly to you. Ask them to highlight this in your recommendation letter.
- Try to create a track record of independent funding by applying for postdoctoral fellowships early and/or later in your postdoc. Specifically, apply for a K99/R00 Pathway to Independence Grant from the NIH. If you get it, it will really be helpful on the job market. If not, having prepared a K99 application will be incredibly helpful as you get your job search materials in order.
- Prepare your teaching statement and CV so that they're ready to go. Have people look at these and give you feedback. Many places (even Medical School Departments) did ask for a teaching statement, so take this seriously. You may want to seek out a course put on by your campus teaching center about how to write a teaching statement.
- Sit in on job talks (and chalk talks if at all possible) so that you know what to expect.
- Tell your advisor and other PIs you know when you're planning to go on the job market so that they can spread that information by word of mouth and tell you about appropriate positions that they may hear about.

Application Process:

- Timeline: Advertisements start coming out in August. The first deadlines for my search were in October. The last deadline I submitted for was Dec. 15, but additional ads kept coming out after that.
- Places I looked for advertisements of positions: *Science*, *Nature*, *Cell*, *Inside Higher Education*, *Chronicle of Higher Education*. Sign up for automatic job announcements via e-mail for jobs that meet your search criteria.

- Tell your reference letter writers that you will be applying for jobs. Ask individual references to highlight certain aspects about you. Try to bundle your requests for letters in an organized fashion that makes it easy for them, and be sure to give them enough time. I gave them a spreadsheet that lists institution, dept, search committee chair, method of letter submission, and deadline for each application.
- Gather examples of successful job search materials at the types of institutions you're planning to apply to from friends in your field.
- Talk to your advisor about what you're writing in your research statement to make sure you're on the same page about what you're taking with you and what you want to work on in your independent lab.
- Write your research statement so that it is accessible to a broad range of people. Try to include a mix of safe projects that build directly on your postdoctoral work and some longer-term high-risk/high-reward ideas.
- Tailor your cover letter to the institution to which you're applying. Try to get the Search Committee Chair's name or the Dept. Chair's name so that the greeting is more personal; make sure you get their name and the name of the department right! Highlight how your work fits well with the needs listed in the search ad. If you have a connection to the research interests, particular people in the department, or the location or type of school (for instance, if you are coming from a big school for your postdoc, but grew up in a small town, went to a liberal arts college for undergrad, and want to be back in that type of environment) highlight that. Be careful not to mention connections or potential collaborations with specific people there unless you really know what you're talking about.
- Find out who else is on the job market. Form a group and work together. I was in a group with 3 other postdocs (all of us at different institutions). We kept a spreadsheet of relevant job ads, a discussion board, and listing of where we'd applied and what we knew about where various job searches were at in the search process on googledocs. This was incredibly useful!
- I listed my cell phone number as my primary contact number (vs. my lab number) on my applications. That way I could see who was calling, get my information and thoughts together and call them back in private (instead of in front of all my labmates with the music blaring, etc).

Interview Process:

- *Timeline:* I went out on interviews from late November through mid-March.
- I was surprised about how early my first interview was (late November) and how little notice I had to prepare, so as soon as the applications are out, start getting ready for potential interviews.
- When you do get an interview, contact people you know at that institution or others who may know about that department to get as much inside info. as possible.
- This is obvious, but prepare well for interviews—it makes you appear more relaxed, effortless, and confident when you're there. Your job talk must wow them—make sure you've practiced for a diverse audience to make the material clear for a broad group of people and to help anticipate questions. You have less control over how the chalk talk will go, but make sure you have the message you want to get across down and keep coming back to that even if you are asked questions that take you off on a tangent. Read up on the Department, the University, etc. I didn't read papers by each person I met with. I did check out all of their websites and read papers/reviews for those with whom I shared common interests.
- Regarding Chalk Talks: I was asked to give a chalk talk at 9/10 interviews. Consider doing your chalk talk as an actual "chalk talk"—I think it stands out and allows you to be more interactive. Very briefly recap your job talk and give an overview, but then get on with future plans. The goal should be to describe the specific aims for your first grant. Be prepared for questions on feasibility, how your work fits into the larger field, who your main competitors are, fundability (grants you'll apply for), potential projects for postdocs and grad. students and undergrads, and classes you'd want to teach (know what's already taught in the Dept.). Consider handing out a chalk talk outline—it keeps everyone on track.

- Know that preparing for interviews, responding after interviews, and other job search related correspondence will take over your life. I originally thought I might “test the waters” one year, but not I’m not sure how I could have done that effectively. To do a job search right, it takes a lot of time and preparation.
- Keep a notebook—on evenings during the interview and on the plane trip home, write down everything you can remember about the interview—things will start to blur together once you’ve been on a few interviews. I wrote a Pro/Con list for each place on the plane ride home, and found these very useful in terms of decision-making and identifying things to focus on at second interviews.
- On the night of your first interview day, write down questions you want to ask the Chair during your exit interview.
- Start working on your equipment list—have a general overview one and a detailed one. See if you can get a list from someone who’s started up a lab recently who would have similar needs to yours. Chairs may ask for an equipment list after your first interview.
- Take lunches with grad students and postdocs seriously—many Depts. have student/postdoc representatives on the hiring committee. Hiring committees may also consult office staff, drivers, etc. about what they thought of you. I know for a fact that they consulted with a non-university associated driver who drove me to/from the airport for one interview.
- Send thank you e-mails to the Chair, your faculty host, and anyone who you spent significant time with (i.e. meals). Try to make these as personal as possible and even “value added” if you can—pick up on something you talked about with them.
- If you have kids, line up some backup childcare to help out at home when you’re traveling. This is a hard process for you, but it’s also hard on your family.

Negotiation:

- Timeline: I received my first offer in December and went on second visits in January through March. I negotiated in March and April. I accepted my position on May 5, 2010.
- Be vague at the first interview regarding anything about money. The first interview should be about the science, the people, and the environment. Are you a good fit for them? Are they a good fit for you? The negotiations begin on the second interview.
- Institutions may invite you for a second interview either after they’ve already extended an offer to you or if you are a finalist and they want to learn a little more about you and vice versa. Alternatively, some institutions may not have second interviews and handle all negotiations by phone. So, your strategy for the second interview may differ depending on the situation. For the second interviews I went on, I had already received and offer, so that put me in a powerful position. On your second interview you should:
 - Meet with the Chair and possibly a Dean to discuss lab start-up needs.
 - Learn more about how the tenure process works.
 - Request meetings with additional faculty in the department or in other departments that you might want to collaborate with or you think could offer a useful perspective.
 - Talk more about what your teaching load would be, which courses you’d teach, and what your projected schedule for teaching would be through tenure.
 - Request to see any shared equipment and talk with the Directors of any core facilities that your lab would need to use (important to see the equipment and location in person to see if it will work for your needs).
 - Talk about job options for your spouse. Some universities have a Dual Careers Office that will help your spouse identify job opportunities and help them make connections with potential employers. If your spouse is also looking for an academic position, you will definitely want to discuss this at the second interview (perhaps earlier).
 - Learn about and visit child care centers if this is something you will need. If you have children and have the option of not bringing them on the second interview or bringing someone along to help you care for them, I would recommend that. My husband and I brought our 1.5 year old daughter on second interviews with no help, and it was

- challenging for us to both have professional meetings and arrange our schedules so that one of us could take care of her.
- Attend one or more social outings/meals with other faculty members.
 - Request to talk about any other concerns or questions that came up on your first interview.
- Use the scheduling of your second interview to buy time, if needed, to increase the chances of having all offers on the table to compare.
 - Salary is generally pretty fixed +/- \$3,000-5,000. If it's a public institution, you can find the information online. If not, see if you can get any inside info.
 - Start-up packages can vary greatly based on your needs. This is where you need to negotiate.
 - Keep the focus for negotiations on what you need to run a successful lab not a specific dollar amount.
 - Other important things to negotiate about besides start-up/equipment dollars and salary are listed below. These things may help make financing your lab and your life easier as a Jr. faculty member and thus help you succeed:
 - Support for students / technicians.
 - Space: how big?, does it suit your needs?, who are your neighbors?, is it ready now?, when will renovation be complete?
 - Teaching load, when you will start teaching
 - Access to shared equipment
 - Benefits plans
 - Job for partner
 - Daycare
 - Housing
 - Be as honest, transparent, and professional as possible. These people are your future colleagues!
 - Get everything in writing!

Work to define in your mind what you're really looking for based on your skills, interests, and other priorities in life. Write it down. Then, do your research, ask questions, and make decisions accordingly. Keep coming back to this list throughout the job search process, and let it guide your decisions.

For example, this is what I was looking for:

- R1 University with good research environment.
- Strong grad program—good number of grad students.
- Teaching taken seriously, but not too heavy of a teaching load.
- Good potential for recruiting postdocs.
- Diverse faculty interests in the Dept. with several people who have interests that overlap with mine.
- My own confocal microscope in offer and good core facilities available.
- Midwest location, smaller town.
- Good job opportunities for my husband.
- Good public school system for my daughter.

Resources

- **The Academic Job Search Handbook**, 4th Edition
Julia Miller Vick and Jennifer S. Furlong, 2008, 296 pages
University of Pennsylvania Press
- **Making the Right Moves**
HHMI Booklet
<http://www.hhmi.org/resources/labmanagement/moves.html>
- **At the Helm: Leading your laboratory**, 2nd Edition
Kathy Barker, 2010, 372 pages
Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory Press
- **Running Your Lab**
Science Careers Booklet
http://sciencecareers.sciencemag.org/tools_tips/outreach/running_your_lab
- **Chronicle of Higher Education's searchable online listing of average salaries by institution**
<http://chronicle.com/article/Interactive-Database-2011/126972/>

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