

Finding Your Perfect Postdoc

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What is a postdoc?

NIH/NSF definition a Postdoctoral Scholar

An individual who has received a doctoral degree (or equivalent) and is engaged in a temporary and defined period of mentored advanced training to enhance the professional skills and research independence needed to pursue his or her chosen career path.

Finding Your Perfect Postdoc

What we are going to cover – a chronology

- Figuring out what you want
- Figuring out where to go
- Narrowing down your faves
- The application and interview
- Making a decision

Figuring out what you want

Consider your career after your postdoc



3-1 yrs

- **Pursue an academic career**

- ▶ Do you want to do only research or teach as well?

- **Experience research in business environment**

- ▶ An industry postdoc is just as rigorous as academic
- ▶ Employment is not guaranteed after most industry postdocs

- **Don't know what you want to do - holding pattern.**

- ▶ Choose a postdoc in a location that will expose you to a variety of experiences both in terms of research and experiences outside of the lab.

Figuring out what you want

Three philosophies on choosing a field of study

1. Same field as your thesis work

- + lot of papers quickly
- limited add. skill/training

2. Should change fields entirely

- + add breadth to skills/training
- may be slow to publish

3. Changing organisms/system

The compromise position

Figuring out what you want

Other considerations in deciding field of study

Keep an eye on what lies beyond your postdoc

1. Consider what fields are intellectually interesting

2. Consider the future: what are growth fields, competition, etc.

- ▶ Departmental seminars, journal clubs, happy-hours
- ▶ News in Journals: *Science News*, *Nature Reports*, reviews, etc.
- ▶ Attend conferences
- ▶ Databases and Information Portals:
 - ex. Thomson-Reuters: <http://www.sciencewatch.com/>
 - ex. Elsevier: <http://www.sciencedirect.com/>

3. What is being funded?

- ▶ NIH: <http://www.nih.gov/>
- ▶ CRISP: <http://crisp.cit.nih.gov/>
- ▶ NSF: <http://www.nsf.gov>
- ▶ <http://www.grants.gov>

Figuring out what you want

Success is not just about breadth of training and skills

Don't ignore or underestimate personal considerations

1. Consider lifestyle factors, these can have material and emotional consequences.

- ▶ Where you like to live?
- ▶ Spouse/family members to support care for?
- ▶ Economic: <http://www.paycheckcity.com>

2. Evaluate your work style and what work environments are best for you

- ▶ Examples: Independent or need feedback? Prefer competitive or more collaborative environments?

Resources:

- ▶ Family, friends, lab mates, mentor, committee - ask them what your strengths and weaknesses are
- ▶ Assessments and tools: MBTI, *Peoples Styles at Work*, etc.

Figuring out where to go

Finding a lab for your postdoc



1.5-1 yrs

Identify labs that appear to fit your interests and career goals

How to identify Labs?

- ▶ Read primary papers
- ▶ Read other news and reviews in your field(s) of interest
- ▶ Attend conferences, seminars, lectures
- ▶ Utilize online resources:
 - Community of Science: www.cos.com 500,000 researcher profiles, etc
 - online social networks: Nature networks, LinkedIn, etc.

Narrowing down your faves

Finding a lab for your postdoc



1.5-1 yrs

If you have PI, postdocs, or mentors that know the labs well ask them about the environment.

Do your homework:

- ▶ Check out the lab's website (if they have one)
- ▶ Check out the lab's publications
- ▶ Check into the records of past postdocs
- ▶ Check the lab's funding (Examples: CRISP or COS)
- ▶ Use your networks you should be developing to find people you can ask about the lab.

Narrowing down your faves

Finding a lab for your postdoc

Some things to keep in mind regarding mentors

- **Junior PI's:**

- ▶ No track record
- ▶ Tendency to micro manage especially if research is slow or not productive
- ▶ Funding is tight
- ▶ Resources are more limited (people, supplies)
- ▶ Conflict over leaving the lab with project

- **Established PI's:**

- ▶ Conflict over taking projects with you - esp. if the PI is moving into a new area or you have developed advanced techniques that are hard to master
- ▶ Be aware of significant changes in fields-of-interest or the size of the lab
- ▶ Watch out for getting involved in too many "PI responsibilities" if the PI is busy



- **Finish papers and publish if at all possible.**
- **Ask mentor(s), advisors/committee for letters of recommendation**
 - ▶ Letters should come from thesis member and at least 3 others
 - ▶ Ask them if they will write a letter before you need them to write the letters.
- **Prepare your CV**
 - ▶ Visit the campus career center if you can or experienced help
 - ▶ Consider writing a resume as well – especially if doing an industry postdoc
- **Prepare your postdoc ‘job talk’**

The application

Putting your decisions into action



1yr – 6mths

Positions are provided based on your papers and a good recommendation or impression

- **Write cover letters**
- **Send out letters and CV's**
 - ▶ Follow-up with an email after a couple weeks and no longer than a month if you do not hear back
- **Try to meet with potential postdoc mentors prior to applying**
 - ▶ Attend meetings/conferences where you may meet them
 - ▶ If traveling through the area ask if you can stop by and talk

Putting your decisions into action

- **Practice your talk with mentor, lab mates and colleagues outside your lab or field**
- **Read papers from the lab you are visiting**
- **Find out about what resources and policies the institution has regarding postdocs**
 - ▶ If there is a Postdoc Office (PDO)? you may want to include the office in your visit
 - ▶ Find out what benefits are offered
 - ▶ Is housing offered (esp. in major metropolitan areas that are expensive)
 - ▶ What professional resources does the school/PDO provide?

The interview

Interviewing tips

- **Be proactive: make sure you ask some probing questions not just about research.**
 - ▶ People will not volunteer negative information but are generally honest if you ask them directly.
- **Ask questions about the PI's support for your career goals and training.**

Resource:

[Going In With Your Eyes Open: Questions to Ask About Postdoctoral Appointments](http://www.nationalpostdoc.org/)

<http://www.nationalpostdoc.org/> (under Graduate Students menu)

- **Ask when you may hear an answer and send a thank you note**

Making the decision

- **Hopefully you will have to decide among offers**
- **If having difficulty in deciding may help to set up a comparison table based on ‘decision factors’**
- **If truly undecided after carefully considering positions, go with gut feeling and have no regrets.**

Finding Your Perfect Postdoc

The big points

- Consider your career after your postdoc
- Consider personal values and interests in addition to career/professional goals
- Give yourself enough time to make a considered choice
- Develop your potential in terms of productivity and recognition
- Use available resources to help develop career essentials: speaking, letter writing, CV/resume writing, etc.
- The interview is for both you and the potential mentor – become an effective questioner and active listener