

Thinking About a Postdoc?

Ten Questions To Ask Before Accepting a Postdoc Position

By Chris Goetz, Second Year Postdoc and Postdoc Advisory Board member; edited, 2010

(from: <https://research.unc.edu/postdoctoral-affairs/prospective-postdocs/ten-questions/>)

Do not limit your interview to your potential advisor. Ask to speak to members of the program or lab, especially the other postdocs, as they will usually be honest and tell you what it is really like to work for their advisor.

How much time does your potential advisor have to meet with students and postdocs?

What are the expectations regarding funding? Some advisors will want you to get your own within a year or you may be asked to leave.

How involved will your potential advisor be with you and your project?

Pay attention to the lab dynamics. Do people seem to get along with each other? Is there competition between lab members on projects?

How big is the program or lab? What is the ratio of postdocs to graduate students? Consider if this is important.

Are there opportunities for collaboration with other labs or researchers?

What are the core facilities like? It is important to consider this if you may be doing more complex analyses such as histology or imaging.

Will there be ample opportunities and support to attend conferences and present your research?

Consider the geographic area where you will reside. What is the cost of living relative to your salary? Should you consider purchasing a home?

The Chronicle of Higher Education

July 15, 2010

Making the Most of Your Postdoc

By Zoe Smith and Ariana Sutton-Grier

Postdoctoral positions are a common, and often necessary, interlude between graduate study and tenure-track life. The experiences and training gained from a postdoc can shape the rest of your career. Yet it can be challenging to find out even the most basic information about such opportunities.

As postdoctoral fellows in a federal research center, we would like to share some of the resources we have found useful as well as offer advice that may help you make the most of your postdoctoral experience.

Not just a research job. No two postdocs are alike since they vary by time frame, scientific field, location, goals, and expectations, among other factors. However, one aspect common to all fields is that a postdoc is not just a research position; it's an opportunity to develop and enhance your technical skills and your career prospects. Knowing what you want to achieve during your postdoc—and clarifying your advisor's expectations as well as your own—is a key first step.

Make a plan. Early in your postdoc, discuss, prioritize, and write down the goals that both you and your advisor hope you will accomplish. That includes research goals, such as the number of publications you hope to write or co-write, and other professional goals, such as teaching experience, organizing a symposium or workshop, writing a review paper, or improving your grant-writing skills. Make sure your plan takes into account your personal and family responsibilities.

Get a head start. The key to a productive postdoc is often a quick start. Using available data sets and collaborating on existing research can be a good way to boost your publication record while waiting for your own new data. That can also be a good time to write meta-analyses and literature reviews. Your advisor is likely to have valuable advice on those processes. You might also consider developing side projects that are extensions of your research and capitalize on resources available at your institution.

Preliminary data are essential to attract money for your research proposals, and we recommend writing your own grant proposals. Tailor them to the specific goals of the grant agency. If you can obtain a grant that would travel with you to your next job, then you are well on your way to landing that job.

Take advantage of professional-development opportunities. University and government institutions often provide subsidized workshops and seminars for improving technical and communication skills. But other programs are available, too. Make yourself known to your grants offices and library. Networks like the National Postdoctoral Association [hold annual](#)

meetings that offer both information and contacts. Travel grants are available to help you attend the NPA conference (see www.nationalpostdoc.org).

You can improve your teaching skills through programs such as the [Faculty Institutes for Reforming Science Teaching](#), which focuses on improving undergraduate biology education. Direct teaching experience in a local college, university, or community college is also valuable. Many adjunct positions are available that allow you to organize and teach a complete course, not just a lab section or a guest lecture. Often these positions are advertised in e-mail discussion groups; for example, a major group for people in environmental science and ecology is [Ecolog-L](#). Ask colleagues in your department or laboratory which online groups you should participate in to hear about potential training opportunities.

Find a mentor. It should be someone you respect, regardless of their field or position, and someone with whom you meet on a semiregular basis for advice and support. It doesn't have to be a formal arrangement, although you may receive more attention if you request your mentor's active involvement. Voicing your ideas, achievements, and worries with someone else can provide valuable insight about your career progress and can help you alleviate self-doubt, which is not uncommon among postdocs. If you don't have a mentor in mind, try using a national program called MentorNet (www.mentornet.net), which helps link graduate students, postdocs, and professionals. You might also consider becoming a mentor for a rising graduate student.

Two brains are better than one. Postdocs are a great time to begin collaborations that could last a lifetime. Talk to people around you, including peers and other principal investigators, and not just those in your lab. Find areas of common interest that could develop into proposals and projects.

Attend conferences as much as possible. Besides giving you a chance to show off your research, the social opportunities are key to building your network. Those connections could lead to research collaborations, job openings, or valuable friendships that you will treasure throughout your career. After all, nobody knows what you're going through better than other postdocs.

Go international. Overseas experience is a fantastic way to discover how science works in other countries and cultures, and to appreciate how the focus of science may vary depending on the issues that different countries face. Since moving overseas can be challenging, it is worth investigating whether fellowships offer assistance with relocation expenses and visa troubles. People at your host institution may be willing to help you settle in.

Network online as much as possible. Hiring committees usually search the Web for information about potential candidates. It's imperative that you take time to create a professional-looking Web site with information about your research, teaching, and publications. While most universities will offer you space for a Web site, you may acquire one on your own.

Check first with your institution's IT office. Most will have software and other resources to assist in the creation of a Web site. In addition, there are many free templates released under the Creative Commons license (see, for example, freeCSStemplates.org) to help you design an appropriate Web site.

You might also consider opportunities for making your research available to the public, such as setting up your own blog and taking advantage of online networks such as LinkedIn that may help you locate a job or collaborator.

Think carefully, however, about how you use social-networking media (Facebook and the like), where the information you post may be more public than you realize.

Learn how the hiring game works. If your goal is to obtain a tenure-track position, you need to know the basics: how to find those positions, how to be a competitive candidate, how to prepare a CV, and how to conduct yourself in an interview. Asking other postdocs and your advisor for advice is a useful first step.

Spend time personalizing your application for each institution you apply to. That takes time but is necessary for a successful search. Subscribing to job networks and forums is a good way to keep an eye on the market throughout your postdoc.

Alternately, you may decide that academe is not for you, in which case you will need to broaden your job search. During your postdoc, be on the lookout for other nonacademic opportunities that interest you in government or the private sector. Consider applying for fellowships that allow you to explore nonacademic career options.

Timing is also important, since there may be seasonal employment periods, and some positions (such as government graduate and fellowship positions) can take months to secure.

Balancing work and life. Postdoctoral positions are often undertaken by people in the process of starting families and planning their futures after years of study. Before you accept a postdoc, we recommend you ask questions about benefits included in the position and about any policies related to parental leave. The National Postdoctoral Association Web site provides suggested policies as a useful starting point. Postdocs typically involve long hours. Set boundaries between your professional and personal life (as hard as that can be to do), and develop habits to improve your efficiency, enabling you to spend quality time with family and friends.

Have a life! It's important to have at least one hobby or outside pursuit that you do just for yourself, to keep you motivated and refreshed. Particularly as the length of time spent in postdoctoral positions increases, it is important to keep a healthy work-life balance.

Good luck and enjoy the journey.

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The Chronicle of Higher Education 1255 Twenty-Third St, N.W. Washington, D.C. 20037

Link to article: <http://chronicle.com/article/Making-the-Most-of-Your/66265/>

Individual Development Plan for Postdoctoral Scholars

Adapted and used with permission from the Federation of American Societies for Experimental Biology (FASEB)'s Science Policy Committee

Individual Development Plans (IDPs) for postdoctoral scholars provide a planning process that identifies both professional development needs and career objectives for the individual postdoc. Furthermore, IDPs serve as a communication tool between postdoctoral scholars and their mentors. An IDP can be considered one component of a broader mentoring program that needs to be instituted by all types of research institutions.

Goals of the IDP:

Help the postdoctoral scholar identify:

- Long-term career options he or she wishes to pursue and the necessary tools to meet these; and
- Short-term needs for improving current performance.

Benefits of the IDP:

The IDP provides postdoctoral scholars with a process that assists in developing long-term goals. Identifying short-term goals will give postdocs a clearer sense of expectations and help identify milestones along the way to achieving specific objectives. The IDP also serves as a tool for communication between the postdoctoral scholar and his or her faculty mentor/supervisor/PI.

Outline of IDP Process:

The development, implementation and revision of the IDP require a series of steps to be conducted by the postdoctoral scholar and her or his mentor. These steps are an interactive effort, so both the postdoc and the mentor must participate fully in the process.

BASIC STEPS

	<i>...for Postdoctoral Fellows</i>	<i>...for PIs/Faculty Advisor/Mentors</i>
Step 1:	Conduct a self-assessment; look at your skills, interests and identify areas where you want to improve, gain more knowledge or strengthen skills.	Become familiar with available opportunities, especially those offered through the NC State University Office of Postdoctoral Affairs (OPA) [http://postdocs.ncsu.edu].
Step 2:	Discuss goals and opportunities with mentor.	Discuss opportunities with postdoc.
Step 3:	Write an IDP, share with mentor and revise, if needed.	Review postdoc's IDP and offer input.
Step 4:	Implement the IDP. Revise the IDP as needed.	Establish regular review of progress and help revised the IDP as needed.

Postdoctoral Scholar Individual Development Plan

Name of Postdoctoral Scholar: _____ Implementation Date: _____

Department: _____

GOALS FOR THE POSTDOCTORAL EXPERIENCE

Research Projects postdoc is expected to undertake as well as any independent research projects the postdoc hopes to pursue:

Skills postdoc wishes to gain during postdoctoral experience (research, teaching, etc.):

Number of Articles postdoc plans to publish from postdoctoral experience (also note any goals to be first author, which journals to submit articles, collaborations in writing, etc.):

Grantwriting endeavors postdoc wishes to undertake (i.e., training grants, postdoctoral fellowships, co-author as senior personnel on a research grant, etc.):

National or Other Professional Meetings or Conferences postdoc would like to attend (also note any goals to present a topic, moderate a discussion, etc.):

Mentoring or Supervision of undergraduate or graduate students (or others) postdoc would like have responsibility for:

Teaching Experience postdoc would like to gain (course lectures, assistance with classes):

Service Activities that are of interest to the postdoc (serving on committees, assisting with departmental endeavors, etc.):

Additional Professional Development opportunities the postdoc would like to engage in (such as attending Office of Postdoctoral Affairs seminars/workshops; attending career fairs; strengthening presentation or English-speaking skills, etc.):

CAREER GOALS

What type of career is the postdoc interested in pursuing (faculty position in a research institution, faculty position at a teaching college, research scientist in industry, entrepreneur, etc.):

What does the postdoc need to achieve/accomplish to pursue his/her career goals (keep in mind the postdoctoral position is meant to be one that fosters independence as a researcher and a scientist; what will the postdoc need to be competitive for the career s/he wants to pursue)?

When does the postdoc anticipate starting his/her job search?

Are there issues/concerns that impact the postdoc's job search (such as visa issues, limited ability to move to a different area, etc.)?

ADDITIONAL GOALS/CONCERNS

This Individual Development Plan (IDP) was reviewed and discussed and will be used as a working document to assist both the postdoctoral scholar and the PI/faculty advisor with the overall goals, endeavors and expectations associated with the postdoc's appointment.

Date Reviewed: _____

Name of Postdoctoral Scholar

Name of PI/Faculty Advisor

Signature of Postdoctoral Scholar

Signature of PI/Faculty Advisor