

Postdoc-ing 101 Workshop

This summary gives an overview of the topics covered for those of you who couldn't attend the workshop or would like a hard copy / refresher of key points made by the volunteer panel of current graduate students, postdocs, and industry representatives.

General

- As evidenced by the variety of experiences of the panel, each postdoc position search will be different depending on many factors: your area of chemistry, networking skills, current advisor, research skills, and timing.
- Currently government lab and academic positions all but require postdoc experience.

The Search

- Try to find positions that compliment your skills, knowledge, and critical thinking, but are different than your PhD project.
- Seek advice from potential resources, i.e. professors in your department other than your advisor, postdocs possibly from the schools you'd like to work, etc.
- Contact the labs you want to work for whether their website says they are hiring or not. The website might not be updated and professors will make positions for good researchers.
- Create a list of the labs you would like to work in. Asking your advisor's opinion of your choices is suggested, since he/she should know you and your work habits. Networking at conferences, meetings, etc. can make the search process easier.
- Google can be useful, especially for non-traditional positions.

Application

- Sending information by mail was more successful than via e-mail since e-mail can be easily lost or passed over.
- Have your advisor or another pertinent reference send a follow-up recommendation a few days later to put your application above the rest.
- Check the websites of the groups you are applying to, as they may have specific application directions. If not, a typical application includes: a personalized cover letter, résumé, and 1-page research summary. Including a 1-page summary of your research gives your potential boss an idea of what you do and opens the opportunity for questions during a conversation.

Interviewing

- Treat as a job interview w/o the behavioral interviews common to industry.
- Don't take the interview (including the research presentation) lightly. Positions have been lost from bad presentations. Think about who your audience will be and prepare your talk accordingly. Advisors expect postdocs to be influential within a lab and it should be evident in the presentation and interview.
- Having good questions to ask can be as important as the answers you give to their questions, since it also showcases your knowledge and reduces any lulls in the

interview. Have some idea of the projects you'll be working on and prepare questions.

- Don't be afraid to ask questions pertinent to you:
 - How many papers do you expect me to publish?
 - How many conferences will you send me to?
 - How much is my salary? (Possibly ask for a raise if it appears unfair)
 - Inquire about contact information for former postdocs so that you can ask them about their experience in that lab.
 - Questions for current students/postdocs: What are the best and worst parts of working for your particular advisor?

Two-body problem

- If applying to the same lab, act professionally and present yourselves as two scientific researchers, not a couple. However, don't go out of your way to hide the fact you are a couple. Lying about it won't help.
- The National Research Council is a good source of postdoc positions for couples (more positions / flexibility?)

Academic Postdoc – Why and What next?

- With a good postdoc position the door is open for industry and academia.
- Can round out skills in a complementary field (i.e. synthetic organic vs. physical organic)
- If you realize what skills you are lacking, a postdoc position gives you the time and place to strengthen areas from grant writing to undergraduate supervision to instrument operation.
- Can yield the time to apply for academic positions which take ~1 year with proposals, applications, and interviews.

Funding

- When applying, state you are willing to write a grant if necessary. In actuality you don't want the paid part of your position to be based on whether your grant gets approved for funding or not. If a professor says "you can work for me only if you get your own funding," consider it a rejection.
- If time is available, apply for grants such as the NIH post-doctoral position (common in biological related fields) ~6 months before the start date of your postdoc position. Preparing these grants is time-intensive (up to 2 months or more), so plan accordingly.

Cautions

- Don't let yourself become a lab tech! Beware of positions that exploit your skills as a lab trainer. Accept a position where you can use your knowledge and skills on a new project and not only on training.

- Just as in grad school, keep in mind the group dynamic that you are joining, i.e. well established versus new and unknown, since this will greatly affect your experience.
- Accepting a postdoc position is like accepting a job. Don't feel like you can easily back out of a position for a more lucrative choice since your actions will significantly affect your current advisor and your current and future group members.

Miscellaneous

- In a specific case mentioned (synthetic bioinorganic chemistry to biological chemistry), crossing over fields was generally well accepted by potential advisors. This may not always be the case however (e.g. switching into synthetic organic from another field was mentioned as being more difficult).
- An offer from an unwanted position can be used to push other potential advisors to give an offer.