

Postdoc Interviews

Interviews

Interviewing for a postdoc is largely about fit. Potential postdoc mentors want to see that you can do the research, but they also want to know that they can work with you and that you'll mesh with their current lab. Your goals for the interviews are to show that a) you know their research, b) you are a critical thinker and experienced researcher, and c) they can get along with you during the conversation.

Choosing a mentor is like choosing a significant other; few other people in your life can make such a large impact on your future. While they're interviewing you, you should interview them and their mentees. Make sure this postdoc experience fits your specific and broad career goals.

Also, consider attending an interviewing workshop provided by the Career Center by registering on CareerConnections, <http://careerconnections.duke.edu>. The Career Center also offers interview coaching and mock interviews as ways to prepare for interviews and practice how to respond to questions.

Phone/virtual interviews

The first step after submitting an application can be a phone or virtual interview. Companies may ask you typical behavioral interview questions, such as, "What are your greatest strengths?" or "Tell me about a time you failed." or "When was a time you worked on a collaborative project?"

Academic and government postdocs, though, will be more similar to graduate school interviews. Research mentors will ask about your projects and publications. They may talk about their own work and ask your thoughts.

Before the interview, read the research group's most recent publications in depth. Create a list of questions you want to ask about the research as well as some future directions you see for these projects.

In-person/on-site interviews

After the phone or virtual interview, the next step is to be invited to visit the institution and interview in person. The potential employer may pay for your trip, though in some instances you may have to pay yourself. Carry the employer's contact information and essentials (such as a computer for presentations) with you in case of travel complications. You may spend part of a day or a couple of days with potential postdoc mentors and colleagues. Be ready to talk about your research background and current research and career interests. Ask everyone questions about their work and experience to show that you are curious.

For some, these long interview days meeting lots of new people and talking can be taxing. If this sounds like you, plan some strategies to help you recharge during and after the interview days. This article's advice on attending conferences is applicable to day-long interviews, <http://www.lifehack.org/articles/communication/how-to-survive-big-conferences-as-an-introvert.html>.

Presentation or demonstration

Part of your on-site interview may be to present your research or give a teaching demonstration. For a research presentation, consider who you will present to, what they would expect, how long the talk should be, and the overall focus (one project, multiple projects, or potential postdoc projects). In an academic or government research postdoc, you can present your research like a typical seminar. Focus on projects that are most relevant to that research group. Presenting for industry research postdocs is similar, and you should also emphasize the technical and collaborative skills you used in your projects.

Bring all of the technology you will need for the presentation, including computers and adapters. Save copies of your presentation on your computer, USB drives, cloud servers, and in an email to yourself. Practice your presentation multiple times with others before your interview.

Presentation or demonstration (cont.)

If your postdoc position involves teaching, you may be asked to demonstrate your teaching style by presenting a lesson to faculty and/or students. Consider the educational philosophy of the institution to help you design a lesson plan. Build rapport with the students as they might have a say in who is hired for the position.

Questions to have answered

Consider these questions during a phone, virtual, or in-person interview. Ask your potential boss as well as others you meet during the interview (postdocs, students, staff, or other researchers). These questions can help you understand the realities of the postdoc and how well they align with your goals.

- What are your expectations for postdocs?
- How many postdocs are currently in the group? Do they serve particular roles (lab manager, research mentor to students, etc.)?
- Will there be opportunities for me to _____? [insert skill/goal of interest]
- My eventual career goal is _____. Do you have much experience with that field? Do you know current professionals working in that field? Would I have time to explore that field, network, and possibly gain some experience in addition to my primary responsibilities?
- What is your mentoring style?
- What is your current funding situation? Will I be supported the entire time or will I have to obtain my own funding?
- What is the compensation? Does this allow for annual increases? What benefits are offered and how are they paid for? Is there a policy on paid time off, sick time, and family leave?
- What are your typical work schedule and travel schedule?
- Do you ask postdocs to go through regular (annual) performance reviews? What is discussed in this process?
- Can you support travel to conferences? How often? What conferences do members of your group attend?
- For the projects we've discussed, what levels of authorship could I expect on the publications?
- What is average length of time postdocs stay in your research group? Where have postdocs gone after they leave? Can I contact them?
- Will you help me find a permanent position after the postdoc?

- What projects would I be able to take with me to a tenure-track faculty position? Or will I be able to develop independent projects that I can take with me? [Be sure to clarify these points of intellectual property early.]
- How will we decide what projects I work on? Will you closely track my progress or will it be up to me to keep the projects moving forward?
- Will I interact directly with the postdoc mentor or will they be more hands off?
- What is the overall size of the research group and how collaborative is it?
- Where is the faculty member in their career? Are they pre-tenure or approaching promotion or retirement? What major events do they see occurring in the next few years?
- Ask members of the research group how their projects are going and how their research mentor is involved with them.
- Are the equipment and materials needed for projects currently available?
- What is the scientific community like at this institution?
- What is the city like? Where do postdocs live?
- Also see this list, <http://tinyurl.com/m9b92bv>

Thank you

Within 24 hours of an interview, no matter if it was by phone or in-person, be sure to send a thank you message to the potential postdoc mentor. This can take the form of a brief email outlining specific conversations that you found interesting and reinforcing your excitement for the postdoc position. You can also send a thank you card by mail.

Salary and benefits

Since many postdoc appointments are funded by the U.S. government, the salary will often be standardized to government recommendations, such as those set by the NIH. Some institutions use these guidelines regardless of local standard of living costs. For instance, the NIH projected stipend for fiscal year 2017 for a postdoc with zero years of previous postdoc experience is \$47,484. A postdoc in Durham will be able to live much more comfortably on that salary compared to a postdoc in San Francisco or Washington, D.C. Some institutions set their own guidelines to account for these regional differences. You can use this calculator from CNN Money to compare how far your salary will go in different parts of the U.S., <http://money.cnn.com/calculator/pf/cost-of-living>.

Salary and benefits (cont.)

Benefits will often be a standard package offered by the institution. Check the institution's websites for human resources, the postdoc association, or the office of postdoc services to make sure the offer you receive matches these standards. Talk with your postdoc mentor about policies on sick days and vacation days. Some institutions also offer discounts to local restaurants, shops, and services.

Take advantage of loan repayment programs. You may not be able to save money for retirement on a graduate student stipend or a postdoc salary, but you can start repaying student loans. Opportunities such as the NIH Loan Repayment Program can help you pay off your debt while you contribute to research.

Succeeding as a postdoc

Use Resources of The National Postdoc Association.

The NPA, <http://www.nationalpostdoc.org>, has information and resources useful for postdocs to maximize their postdoc experience and connect with other professionals in their field.

Create an individual development plan (IDP) with your postdoc mentor. Use the skills and credentials you identified earlier as a guide. Write out your plans and check on your progress together at least a couple times per year.

When getting started at a postdoc, focus on fewer projects until you feel settled. Taking on too many projects at the beginning can slow down your initial progress. By making early progress, you can demonstrate your abilities to your postdoc mentor and build momentum in your research.

Since you come in as a postdoc by yourself, it can be hard to feel a sense of community. Meet other postdocs through the institution's postdoc association. Also try Meetup, <https://www.meetup.com> to participate in social events in your area.

If this postdoc position is not what you expected or not helping you progress in your career, there is always the option to do another postdoc. Many people do a second or third postdoc for different reasons, both personal and professional, <http://tinyurl.com/RiseOfThePost-Post-Postdoc>. Some fields even expect you to do multiple postdocs before landing that first tenure-track faculty job. If you start a postdoc and it's not working out, don't feel bad about leaving in the first 6-12 months. Try to leave on good terms, and move on to what's going to work better for you.