



How to Find the Perfect “Post doc”

Obtaining a degree as a Doctor of Philosophy (Ph.D.) marks the end of an individual’s tenure as a student. Possession of this degree, especially in the life and natural sciences, will open many doors to opportunities reserved for those who are specialists in their field. In many cases, however, recent graduates will find that some of the best job opportunities require more experience in their chosen specialty. This experience is obtained through a period of one to three years in a postdoctoral job. Such jobs are the middle ground between a graduate student and a professor. While the possession of increased skill is recognized within a postdoctoral job, the “post doc” still works for a more seasoned researcher, whether it is at a university, academic institution or private company.



Unlike a student or professor, a post doc in the sciences can focus entirely on research. Opportunities are diverse, and new graduates may find themselves overwhelmed. In addition, the past few years

have seen over 20,000 postdoctoral researchers in active employment, so the competition is fierce. For guidance through the process, a graduate should consider the basic questions: why, what, where, who, how and when?

So how does one go about finding a postdoctoral job that best suits your professional aspirations? The start of this process, like many others, begins with “why?” Why do you need a post doc job? Does a desired employer require such work experience? Becoming a post doc without the requirement to do so equates to nothing more than stalling before entering the workforce. Further, you do not exist in a vacuum but rather will have colleagues who have gone through this process, and through talking with and learning from them, the benefit of their experience can be applied to the decision at hand.

Once the decision is clear that you will become a postdoctoral researcher, the questions that become important are “what?” and “where?” What will you investigate in the postdoctoral job? And where will you apply? When choosing a field for a post doc position, consider the impact—staying in the same field as your dissertation may allow you to become a grand expert at the cost of limiting your scope. With newer discoveries every day in the sciences, this can be a risky proposition. Conversely, entering a different field will give you the capability to follow trends in the community, but will not garner as much expertise in one particular field. Such a move also risks spreading yourself too thin.

Once the field of study is chosen, then the question of “where?” surfaces. Different institutes, companies and research labs specialize in different areas. A standard literature search in your chosen field will provide authors and their locations, giving a base upon which to start searching out postdoctoral positions.

This leads to the very critical question of “who?” This is in fact two questions: who are the leaders in the field and who do you know that may help you get your foot in the door? All postdoctoral jobs are positions that are linked to an established scientist, someone who has contributed significantly to the respective field in the natural sciences. Identifying these individuals will provide a list of desirable locations and positions. In addition, searching news items and publications can also identify those researchers who may not be ideal, for ethical reasons or reasons concerning the progress or lack thereof in their field.

When considering persons you know, include your graduate advisor and fellow graduate students that may have already entered the postdoctoral world. They typically will provide a good start to networking your way into a favorable interview. If the list of contacts is thin, then ask questions to experts in the field, and by doing so put your name out as someone who is entering the field. Such networking may also create the potential for collaborative efforts that will provide richer information than a curriculum vitae could ever give.

At this point, you, the intrepid graduate, have not only decided to become a post doc, but have landed an interview with the institution that performs leading research in your chosen field. Now you face the big question of “how?” Most interviews involve a presentation of past research and current ideas; the purpose of the meeting is to sell yourself as a valuable resource for furthering the research of the



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institution. This meeting is key, and the presentation has to be perfect. The presentation should be practiced many times until it is fluid in delivery; every word and every image should have purpose and meaning. Take care not to explain too much, as the interviewers are experts and know the basics of science. However, they may not be experts in your previous field, so use research performed as a guide for what should be assumed knowledge and what should be explained. After the presentation, maintain poise; informal conversation and the ability to convey one's ideas in the elevator or over coffee will hold significant weight to the interview.

Finally you must address the question of "when," or more specifically "for how long?" Typical postdoctoral jobs will last the lifetime of a research project, but one can also find that funding may determine the length of a project. There are plenty number of fellowships and grants for which you may apply, given your promise for meaningful research in a particular field.

Despite the anxiety that comes from pursuing a postdoctoral position, it will provide further experience and make a graduate a better scientist and a potential leader in the chosen field.

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