



## **GOING IN WITH YOUR EYES OPEN: WHAT TO ASK BEFORE ACCEPTING A U.S. POSTDOCTORAL POSITION**

*by*

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### **THE PURPOSE OF THIS CHECKLIST**

This article has been written by the International Postdoctoral Committee (IPC) of the NPA to aid prospective postdocs in search of positions that will give them a fulfilling experience. By reading through these questions, by understanding the reasoning behind them, and by finding out the answers that are important for you, you will develop a much clearer idea of what a particular postdoctoral position has to offer. We hope that this checklist will empower those considering a postdoc, especially international candidates who are not acquainted with the US system, to find appointments that suit his/her needs.

In the right setting, a postdoctoral fellowship in the USA is a fulfilling, stimulating and unforgettable experience. However, any one of a number of factors can leave you disappointed and frustrated at the end of the postdoc. You may feel your time in the postdoctoral position was too short, that you were underpaid and exploited, or that you were not sufficiently able to develop professionally to take the next step in your career. To help avoid this, it is essential that you determine in your own mind exactly what you want from a postdoc, and that you identify suitable groups that could support you in your intellectual and professional growth.

**A postdoc in the USA is intended as a temporary training opportunity that allows someone to gain the experience necessary to pursue the career of his/her choice.** For instance, if your long-term ambition is to work in a particular research field, you should consider not only the research interests of a group, but also how joining it would establish you within the field; e.g. thoroughly discuss the potential project(s) you would work on and how research is managed (see below). You may also believe that some teaching experience would help your future career, in which case you would investigate whether the future position offers that possibility. Or if your long-term ambition is to work within policy, journalism or administration, you should make sure you will have opportunities to attend conferences or courses in these areas.

In addition to these issues, other factors will contribute to your postdoctoral experience. Institutions may offer a postdoctoral office, a postdoctoral association or career development services, which provide valuable guidance. Other issues to consider are common to any job such as wages, vacation time and the length of your appointment, as well the availability of benefits (e.g. health and childcare, retirement).

The questions below are meant as a useful framework for discussions, allowing you to establish lines of communication with your mentor. This is extremely important, since **there is no universal definition of what a postdoctoral position should entail**. Establishing ground rules before accepting a postdoctoral position can avoid future frustrations.

### **THE NEEDS OF INTERNATIONAL POSTDOCS**

While the above issues are important for all those considering a postdoc in the USA, there are additional factors to consider if you are coming to the USA from another country.

- If you are unsatisfied with your situation and wish to transfer, you may find that the stipulations of your visa may hinder transfer from one position to another.
- A postdoctoral position in the USA may be different from apparently similar research positions offered abroad. To reiterate, the USA postdoctoral is a temporary apprenticeship intended to be a stepping stone in a career path: it is not a permanent position.
- Postdoctoral compensation can vary widely. The wages paid by the National Institutes of Health to his/her fellows in the NRSA program are often used as a reference, but many postdocs (including international postdocs) are actually paid less than this.
- It is particularly important to analyze the benefits package that comes with any postdoctoral position you are offered, because the level of coverage for yourself and your family may vary. The USA does not have a national health system: therefore your access to health care will be through the particular insurance offered by your employer (if it is offered).
- For international postdocs, the support services offered by an institution are of fundamental importance. For instance, an International Office dealing with visas (requests, renewals etc.) is a very common and valuable resource. Other services (e.g. English language classes) may only be offered by some institutions.

### **HOW TO USE THE CHECKLIST**

In the checklist, the questions are grouped to follow the timeline of a standard application process. There is information to be gathered before the interview to assess if the group and the environment are going to foster your career advancement. During the interview, the reciprocal interchange allows you to clarify issues further and to make sure there is compatibility and a commonality of interests. Once you are offered a position, it is appropriate to negotiate additional benefits and establish a formal system of progress assessment or individual development plan between the postdoc and the PI (see below).

We certainly do not recommend that you ask every question on the list, rather that you decide which ones are relevant to you. Also consider that during a typical interview, there is plenty of time in which discussion can be steered toward the topics of your interest without you asking a “formal” question. Some of the issues below are important to all postdocs; others are specific to international postdocs; and others, although important, may only be relevant for some areas of research. Many of the questions listed are appropriate to ask a prospective mentor, some are more appropriate to address with others such as a Human Resources or an International Office

representative at the institution. To the left of the questions, symbols indicate to whom we advise that you address each question.

- # Principal Investigator (PI)
- ♣ Colleagues
- \* Institution

## **THE CHECKLIST**

### ***Before the Interview:***

#### **1. Check the research group's history.**

Verify the publication record and track previous group members to determine whether the research setting is conducive to career development. Examine how many papers group members generate and the order of authorship. Does everybody generate first-author papers as well as contribute to other papers? Do they publish in high-impact or obscure journals? Do you think that performing similar work would further your career ambitions? You can also roughly estimate how long people stay in that group before progressing in his/her careers.

Consider contacting lab *alumni* for questions. This is preferably done by phone or in person: people, when contacted directly, tend to tell you more candidly about potential problems. If you have access to established people in the field, you can also enquire about the PI's reputation and connections among his/her colleagues. For example, working with an established PI will be very helpful for easing the publication process in the short term and for connecting to the right career opportunities in the medium-long term.

#### **2. Gather information on the institution.**

Find out the institution's location, the safety of the area and of the town, and its support offices (e.g. International Office, Postdoctoral Office).

### ***During the Interview***

#### **3. Funding, salary and benefits**

# What are the current funding sources of the research program? What is its funding history? How long will the current grants last? Where does my salary come from? Will my salary follow the NRSA/NIH pay scale? If not, what will my salary be and how is it determined? Can I apply for my own research grants? Or am I expected to apply for my own funding after a certain period? Will you support and coach me in that effort?

♣ It is also useful to ask the other members of the research group how funding applications are handled (constant work over time vs. last-minute rush) and how successful they are.

# Are you going to support travel and participation to conferences in my field of research, and/or others that advance my career?

# How much vacation time will I receive? Sick time? Expected hours per week?

- ♣ You may wish to ask your prospective colleagues how many hours a week on average they work. Consider that the PI may perceive this question negatively and think that you are going to be unproductive.

#### 4. Research issues

- # What is the size of the research program (personnel, budget, lab space, etc)?
- # ♣ What is the research program's training history? Where are the *alumni* now?
- # What are you expecting my role in the lab to be, and what will my job responsibilities be?
- # ♣ \* Are there mechanisms of periodical (annual?) performance evaluation? What are they?
- # Will a research assistant aid me in my research? Student or technician?
- # ♣ How many people do currently work on the same project?
- # ♣ What are the other research projects in the group? You may also want to consider the interaction and the balance between the different research projects. More people studying a similar phenomenon by using different approaches provide a very stimulating environment for research and, most likely, a little more competitive situation. Many unrelated projects in the same lab will make for a more relaxing atmosphere, but may indicate a more unfocused lab and, potentially, lower chances for funding (a highly competitive process) especially if the research group is not very well established.
- # How do we determine what my project is?
- # How will you help me build a publication record?
- # How often are we going to discuss research issues?
- # Can I take my project (or part of it) with me when I start my own independent research? Consider that PIs have very high pressure to develop high profile research to attract funding: therefore a number of objective factors will influence how much you will be able to take with you to develop further. Depending on how established the research program is and how much your intellectual input was in the project design, you may be able to transfer your complete research or parts of it (*e.g.* a novel aspect to develop further).
- # ♣ How are research supplies acquired?

#### 5. Work-related issues

- # ♣ What is the average length of the training period in this lab?
- # What is the projected length of my appointment?
- # Will I have teaching opportunities?
- # Will I be encouraged to advance the postdoctoral experience through becoming involved in the PDA or NPA?

#### 6. Human resources

- \* What are the benefits provided by the institute (*e. g.* health insurance, dental and vision coverage, retirement)? Do benefit packages change with the type of funding?
- ♣ \* Does the institute have any policies or programs designed to meet the diverse needs of postdocs from different backgrounds?

- ♣ \* Does the institute have a process for dealing with conflict resolution? This refers to mediating services by trained personnel to moderate and facilitate discussions between third parties that have difficulty communicating, usually as the result of a conflict. They are not attorneys.

## 7. Visa issues

- \* What type of visa will the institution help me petition for: J1 or H1-B? These are the most common visas for International Postdocs. They have different characteristics and advantages that could suit distinct professional and personal goals. We recommend that you review the NPA Visa Guide for a thorough, comparative description.  
[http://www.nationalpostdoc.org/committees/IPC\\_Committee/visa\\_faq/view](http://www.nationalpostdoc.org/committees/IPC_Committee/visa_faq/view)
- ♣ \* If I need to extend my visa or transfer from a J1 to an H1-B visa type, will the institution help with this? Will the institution or the PI sponsor this? Currently J1 visas are issued for a maximum of three years, while the average postdoc in the US lasts five years. International postdocs often change a J1 to an H1-B visa to complete his/her training.

### *After the Interview:*

Once you are offered the position you may want to discuss in more detail the working conditions, additional benefits, and help for the practical issues connected with moving to a new environment.

## 8. Support for practical issues

- ♣ \* Does the institution have housing facilities or a locator service to help me with finding an accommodation?
- ♣ \* Is there childcare available?
- ♣ \* Is there any family support (*e. g.* health benefits)?
- ♣ \* Will the institution help me to petition for my family members' visas (J2/H4)?
- ♣ \* If applicable, will you support my petition for permanent residence in the US? There are multiple ways to petition for permanent residency in the US (green card). Some of these are sponsored by the institution at no or low cost to them and may be convenient for a postdoc.
- \* Is there institutional help provided to IPs for filing taxes? IPs that are not residents must file taxes on distinct forms and may have different exemptions from US residents. This can be rather confusing initially and help dealing with these issues is very useful. IPs should also enquire about obtaining social security number, driving license, credit card, and banking information.

## 9. Career development

- # ♣ Is there a merit-based promotion system? If so, is there a different title (*e. g.* senior postdoc, research associate/scientist) and salary scale reflecting this?
- # Will you support my skill set improvement (*e. g.* taking courses, earning training certificates, learning new technologies, collaborating with other investigators, refining oral/written communication, reviewing papers, applying for independent funding, supervising other people)?

- # How will you help me to set up and finalize my individual development plan (IDP), and help me monitor progress with it? The IDP is a written formalization of a professional's goals and expectations. This is regularly checked with performance evaluations and assessment of the progress. Mentors can help guide you through this useful process and assure that reasonable goals are set and reached. For a description of the IDP see <http://www.faseb.org/opa/ppp/educ/idp.html>.
- # How will you support my chosen career transition (attend scientific meetings, introduce job opportunities, write reference letters, help networking/attend job fair, help with alternative career choices, transfer to another postdoc position)?

Once you have clarified these issues with the prospective supervisor and others at the host institution, ask to talk separately with every member of the research group and collect similar information. Cross-check. Try to also read what they do not tell you: hesitations, embarrassment or defensiveness on certain topics may indicate problem issues.

In any case, consider that there is no such thing as a "Perfect Postdoc", but only a good fit between you and the place where you perform your postdoctoral training. It is up to you to match your needs with an appropriately supportive place where you can learn, work, excel, and, hopefully, also have fun in the process. We hope that our article with our combined experiences will contribute to many successful choices.

### **ADDITIONAL RESOURCES**

On finding a Postdoc:

<http://nextwave.sciencemag.org/cgi/content/full/2003/11/20/2>

[http://www.the-scientist.com/yr2003/feb/prof4\\_030210.html](http://www.the-scientist.com/yr2003/feb/prof4_030210.html)

On interviewing skills:

<http://nextwave.sciencemag.org/cgi/content/full/2002/11/20/3> and its linked articles.

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