What to Expect When You’re a Postdoc:
Making the Most of Your Postdoctoral Experience

Congratulations! You decided to take the next step on your career path!

First things first, what is a postdoc? The National Institutes of Health (NIH) and the National Science Foundation (NSF), in collaboration with the National Postdoctoral Association, define a postdoctoral appointment as: “a temporary and defined period of mentored advanced training to enhance the professional skills and research independence needed to pursue his or her chosen career path.”

\[1\]

**Hypothesis:** Completing a postdoc will better prepare a PhD or MD/PhD for his/her career and offer better employment possibilities.

**Materials:** A doctorate degree, CV, letters of recommendation, publications, general idea of what field you would like devote a large portion of your time and life to.

**Methods:** Embarking on the postdoctoral experience involves a multi-step process with three phases. Phase One is a preliminary, research step to determine if a postdoc appointment is the right path for your career. After the successful completion of Phase One, Phase Two encompasses determining the right institution and lab in which to continue your career. Phase Three requires making the most of the postdoctoral position to help launch your independent career or to advance to the next step in your professional path.

**Phase One: Information Gathering**
- What are your career goals?
  - What do you see making you happy and fulfilled? Other than the paycheck.
  - Make a list of deal-breakers; discuss this list thoroughly with your significant other if she/he will be moving with you.
- Talk to your advisor and others in the field to obtain their suggestions and recommendations.
- What do you want to work on?
  - Same field/organism/system as your dissertation
  - Completely different field/organism/system
  - Change field, organism, system – or all three

**Phase Two: Finding the Right Fit/Preparing for Interviews**
- Create and practice an Elevator Pitch, a thirty-second summary of why you and your research are awesome and worthy of investment.
- Talk to your advisor, seeking suggestions and letters of recommendation.
- Investigate labs that look like a good fit for your goals. Find out who works there and what they are working on, how would you and your research fit in?
- Make yourself marketable: Update your CV, finish publications, polish and perfect your presentation, get familiarized with the scientific topics of the people you are interviewing with, search databases to determine eligibility for fellowships/scholarships.

\[1\] http://www.higheredjobs.com/HigherEdCareers/Interviews.cfm?ID=184&ReplyID=851
• Speak up and ask questions during the interview. Remember the interview isn’t only for the prospective employer to learn if you are a good fit, but also this time is for you to learn if the employer will be a good fit for you. Be enthusiastic and truly interested about their scientific portfolio.

Phase Three: Make the most of your postdoctoral position.

• Set realistic, achievable goals with your PI
  o Understand his/her expectations of you; in return, spell out what you expect. Remember that a mentorship is also a partnership; communication and clear expectations are important to any good relationship. The AAMC Compact Between Postdoctoral Appointees and Their Mentors is designed to facilitate this conversation.
  o Put the expectations in writing. As with your research, if you don’t write it down, you didn’t do it/say it. An Individual Development Plan is often used for this.
  o Experience and training during your postdoctoral time is important, but publications and projects that you can take with you are more valuable. Set the record straight from the beginning that this is important to you.

• Network, Network, NETWORK
  o Have business cards printed with your contact information, including current position, and give them out!
  o Conferences
    ▪ Attend even if you are not presenting, have your elevator speech ready and make contacts with potential collaborators.
  o Professional societies
    ▪ Get involved; don’t just read the e-newsletter
  o Informational interviews/sessions
  o Social networking sites
    ▪ LinkedIn/Facebook
    ▪ Area specific websites/forums/blogs

• Work/Life Balance
  o Living in your lab is not acceptable. You want your family to remember what you look like and Vitamin D is good for you!
  o Time Management. Prioritize tasks and requirements.

• Be prepared to be surprised.

Discussion: The decision to pursue a postdoc and where to apply is not one to be made lightly. Make your final choice only after deep thought and plenty of research. Not everyone needs a postdoc to be successful. Not everyone wants to do a postdoc, and that’s OK! The goal is to make the decision that is right for you, your family, and your career. Your advisor will be a great resource for you during this process, as will the Office of Postdoctoral Affairs.

Next Steps:
  Make an appointment with your advisor
  Upload your CV to the Committee for Career Development website for review. (http://gsbs.utmb.edu/ccd/workshop.asp)
  Become familiar with available resources on the GSBS Career Development Page.