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# YOUR INTERVIEW OF YOUR PROSPECTIVE POSTDOC POSITION

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## *Congratulations!*

*You have decided to do a postdoc, you have submitted the applications, and you have landed an interview. Obviously, the interview process is a way for faculty to screen applicants, but it is also an opportunity for you, the candidate, to learn more about the fellowship and determine whether it's the optimal setting for you to officially begin your career.*

*The following list provides an idea of some essential questions you should ask at the interview. While they are interviewing you, you are also interviewing them. Remember, you're a hot commodity!*

### **About the lab environment:**

- Will you have your own independent project? You should be wary of a conditional project—that is, if you take on project X first, you will be promised project Y. If the project is independent, is it portable (i.e., can you take it with you when the fellowship ends)? How many people currently work on the same project? The answers to these questions will let you know how well focused and how well defined the research field is in the lab.
- Does the mentor encourage you to go to seminars and workshops to help you develop your skill set and advance your career? Will you be granted time away from the bench to participate in a postdoc council, take courses, learn new technologies, improve communication skills, etc.? Does the mentor have funds for attending scientific meetings?
- How is authorship handled?

- How often and where does the lab publish?
- Will the mentor/PI encourage and help you with grant writing for small grants or fellowships?
- Is the mentor/PI supportive of you teaching/mentoring undergraduate and graduate students?
- How stable is the current funding?
- Is your potential mentor receptive to collaborations with other laboratories?
- How are research supplies acquired? This question also addresses the funding source for those supplies.
- Will you have a research assistant or a technician?
- Will you be able to meet independently with the lab members to talk freely about the lab and the mentor? If you are not permitted to meet with them separately, it could mean that the lab members aren't happy working there. This is a red flag: You may want to look for another lab. As Dr. Alberto Roca, director of outreach, recruitment, and retention in the graduate division at the University of California, Irvine, and member of the SACNAS Postdoc Committee, commented, "Some PIs say what they want during the courting phase, but then act differently after a commitment. Thus, a postdoc candidate should get answers from those who know the potential mentor (both in and out of their group)."
- Where have the previous lab members gone? Can you contact these "lab alumni"? If you contact them, be sure to remain neutral and frame your questions in impartial terms. Consider asking them to name the five best and five worst things about working with the mentor in question. A live phone call will be more effective than email to elicit a more candid discussion.

■ How long is the postdoc appointment? How many hours per week are you expected to be in the lab or is productivity more important than the number of hours you work? Be careful how you ask this question. You don't want to come across as a slacker, but you want to be clear on how your productivity will be measured.

■ What is the vacation schedule? Is there sick time? What is the policy on maternity/paternity leave?

#### **About the mentor/PI:**

■ Does the mentor conduct regular lab meetings? Are there regularly scheduled individual meetings? The answers to these questions will allow you to understand the schedule for your evaluation. An individual development plan is an excellent way to have these questions answered in a written, contractual format.

■ Is the mentor a micro-manager or very hands-off?

■ Where is the professor along the tenure-track timeline? As Dr. Martin Farias, III, assistant professor of pharmaceutical sciences at Texas A&M Health Science Center and member of the SACNAS Postdoc Committee, commented, "In most cases, a more senior PI with a track record of productivity will be more favorable." On the other hand, a more junior faculty member without tenure may be hungrier to get more publications out.

■ What plans does the mentor have for the lab? Is there an imminent departure to another university, into industry, or into government? Is retirement in the very near future? Are there plans to start his/her own company or move into administration?

■ Is the lab/mentor family-friendly?

#### **About the institution:**

■ Do they have a postdoc policy? If so, read it in detail.

■ Does the institution pay at least the National Research Service Award (NRSA) stipend levels or better? Stipend levels are often negotiable. The Sigma Xi Postdoc survey salary results may also serve as a guideline for non-biomedical disciplines.

■ Does the institution have a postdoc office or postdoc association? If so, how elaborate are their programs and do they review all the offer letters? The answers to these questions will let you know how supportive the institution is of postdocs.

■ What benefits does the institution offer? Do the benefits cover family members? Do they have coverage for domestic partners? Does the department pay for part or all of the insurance premiums?

■ Does the institution have websites or office resources that can help you relocate?

#### **General reflective comments/questions:**

■ You must visit the lab in person. To accept a postdoc position over the phone is setting you and your employer up for potential disaster:

■ At the end of the interview day, how do you feel? Was there "chemistry"? Does the science done in that lab excite you? Does it remind you why you chose this area of research? The big gratifying moments in science are generally few and far between. This should be one of them. If you walk away thinking, "Oh, this would be okay" or "If I can change one or two major things, it would be great," then keep on walking. At this point, you need to take some time to reflect on the interview, write up a pros and cons list, and/or talk to trusted advisors/mentors. Trust your gut. ■

*Kryste Ferguson and Dr. Ivonne Vidal Pizarro were colleagues at the Biomedical Postdoctoral Programs (BPP) Office at the University of Pennsylvania. Kryste, an academic coordinator at BPP, gave her husband this list when he interviewed for his postdoc. She can be reached at [kryste@mail.med.upenn.edu](mailto:kryste@mail.med.upenn.edu). Ivonne is a program administrator in the executive office at the American Association for Cancer Research. She can be reached at [ivonnevipi@alumni.upenn.edu](mailto:ivonnevipi@alumni.upenn.edu).*

