

Work



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Success in a job application depends on intangible factors as well as publication metrics.

LOOK BEYOND METRICS

Survey explores how and why certain people get job offers. **By Nina Notman and Chris Woolston**

It takes at least 15 job applications to land a single offer, finds a survey of 317 early-career researchers who applied for faculty positions in a range of nations (J. D. Fernandes *et al.* *eLife* 9, e54097; 2020). The results have shed light on a hiring process that is often opaque, frustrating and hard to predict. Contrary to common belief, the authors found that a publication in a high-profile journal isn't an absolute prerequisite for a successful application.

The survey was conducted by members of the FuturePI Slack community, a postdoctoral support group. They collected responses from researchers who had applied for faculty positions between May 2018 and May 2019. Respondents hailed from 13 countries, although 72% were from the United States; 85% were in the life sciences. Overall, 58% received job offers, significantly above the average from other studies, suggesting that successful applicants were especially willing to take the

survey. Only 26% had an authorship credit in *Cell*, *Nature* or *Science*.

The survey tracked conventional metrics of success such as fellowships, citations and publications, and found that these measures were only modestly effective at predicting which applicants would get job offers. The authors tried to construct a flow chart to predict the applicants' fate, but it was less than 60% accurate.

More is more

One clear lesson was that jobseekers shouldn't skimp on applications. Those who submitted more than 15 applications landed substantially more on-site interviews than those who didn't. They also received more job offers, but the correlation wasn't so strong, suggesting that the shotgun approach to applications can go only so far. Jobseekers do better when they send applications that are precisely tailored to the position sought, says survey co-author Chris

Smith, manager of the postdoc programme at North Carolina State University in Raleigh.

Publication in a high-profile journal helped applicants, but it was no guarantee of success, the study found. Jobseekers who were first authors of a paper in *Cell*, *Nature* or *Science* received offers on 11% of their applications. For people who had no papers in those journals, the success rate per application was 2%.

The authors also polled 15 faculty members who had served on hiring committees to find out what makes an application successful. The results suggest that committees seek candidates who will be good colleagues and scientists, says the study's lead author, Amanda Haage, a biomedical scientist at the University of North Dakota in Grand Forks. The committees looked at affordability as well as at track records, she says.

Intangible assets

Recruitment of academics is more holistic than many think, explains Robert Bowles, a careers adviser at the Royal Society of Chemistry in Cambridge, UK. Applicants "tend to forget about the intangibles", he says. "Publications and grants buy you a ticket into the lottery, but they are not going to win it for you."

When asked for their general thoughts on the application process, jobseekers had a nearly universal negative outlook. Most were frustrated that they did not receive feedback on their applications.

But faculty members on hiring committees find it impossible to provide detailed feedback on all applications. All 15 surveyed said that they typically receive more than 100 applications per job offer; 10 said they usually get more than 200.

It's just one more sign of a stark imbalance in academia. Jobseekers outnumber positions, and that disparity is expected to get worse in the wake of the current coronavirus pandemic.

In this environment, postdocs should keep in mind that unsuccessful applications do not mean failure, says biochemist Rosemary Bass, a careers adviser at the University of East Anglia in Norwich, UK. "We see people who think that making five applications and not getting an interview means that they are a reject," Bass says. "The current situation is bringing home the difficulties of the academic job market to PhD students and postdocs in a way that we as careers advisers have not managed to previously."

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