

the United States as well.

The hardest part was making a shortlist. On top of considering each lab's research focus and location, I also spoke with my PhD adviser and my thesis committee about the reputations of my chosen institutions and labs. I also received some advice at this stage that I really encourage all potential postdocs to consider: go to a lab with the intention of learning their field and the techniques that they specialize in. Don't try to learn a completely different technique that is tangentially related to the main work of the lab – I've seen this derail many postdocs.

I applied to eight labs by cold e-mail: four labs in the United States and four in Europe. The cover letter (e-mail body) is really important – think carefully about what you want to say and make it personal. I had four initial half-hour Skype interviews, and I was then invited for three in-person interviews, which took place in Geneva, Switzerland, London and Edinburgh, UK. I arranged to combine those last two locations in one trip, and the labs covered the costs.

The postdoc interview

I was intimidated by the prospect of travelling on my own to the interviews, particularly as a young woman. I experienced a culture shock on my first trip, I was completely baffled by Geneva's public-transport system, despite having researched it beforehand. Then, my Airbnb host thought I was arriving in the morning instead of the evening (I was using a 12-hour clock instead of a 24-hour clock), so I had to wait outside for a long time. It all worked out in the end. Both my Airbnb host and my lab hosts helped me to navigate the city and enjoy it.

Some of the other experiences I had on my trips were much more positive – I loved all the fresh food and restaurants. Also, conversations about life as a postdoc were different. Someone actually laughed when I asked about health care and insurance because it's a completely different system in European countries compared with the United States. Despite all these differences, the moment I stepped into the Geneva lab for the interview, I felt more comfortable. Science is pretty universal, and I found that I could easily fall into conversations about science with the people there.

In all of my interviews, I gave a seminar about my PhD research. Usually people from my host lab attended this, as well as people from other labs in the department. Then, I met one-to-one with the lab leader and other lab members. Sometimes I met with other faculty members or people running core facilities. Often, I would go for a meal or two with the current students and postdocs and would get a full tour of the facilities and the campus.

I found that giving a really good seminar presentation makes a big difference. Your

interviewers won't expect you to know everything about their research, in my experience, but they do want to make sure that you are well-versed in your own – that you can answer questions about it and that you are engaged with it. Also, make sure you read the most recent papers from their lab and that you're familiar enough with the basic ideas of their research focus, so that you can have a good conversation about it.

Try to remain calm, even if it's just what shows on the outside. I'm always nervous before an interview, but you have to find what works for you to get through those nerves.

One thing that helped me was to find a private space before the start of the interview (usually a bathroom or an empty room) and open my arms wide. It helped me to open my body language and pretend that I wasn't freaking out inside. Then, usually, I would calm down as the interview began and as my mind became engaged with the content of the seminar or conversation.

Making the right choice

In the end, I received two offers and decided on John Diffley's lab at the Francis Crick Institute in London. During my interview, I had great conversations with both John and the other postdocs, which was important to me. I wanted to find people that I could talk about science with, in a productive and comfortable way and to have a supportive environment rather than a competitive one. I'd had some bad experiences before I joined my PhD lab, and I wanted to make sure that didn't happen again.

I could imagine how I would develop as a scientist in John's lab and ultimately gain more independence. When you're on an academic career track, that's a big part of the experience – becoming independent, designing your own projects and looking towards the future in terms of how you're going to establish your own lab some day.

About the institution

In addition to reading papers to identify potential postdoc labs, I relied on institution and lab websites for information. I think many institutions and labs could attract more postdoc applicants by improving their websites – a good online presence makes it easier for people to find out more about a lab and decide whether they could fit in well there.

I also think institutions should offer longer employment contracts. Science is hard, and it takes time to get data published and to prepare for your next career steps. I've heard of some institutions using one-year rolling contracts, which can be stressful and doesn't provide any job security to a postdoc. I am glad that the Francis Crick Institute offers a four-year contract with a possible two-year extension. This has given me the time to publish papers and prepare for my next career move. I'm now in a great position and plan on opening my own lab as a group leader next year.

Allison McClure is a postdoctoral training fellow studying DNA replication in John Diffley's Chromosome Replication Laboratory at the Francis Crick Institute in London.

A LAB LEADER'S GUIDE TO HIRING A POSTDOC

It's worth waiting for the right postdoctoral researcher to come along, but how do you choose the best candidate? **By Caroline Hill**

Iwant to hire people who are really driven: love doing research, love the science, are innovative, ambitious and motivated. Above all, people who are excited by the work that we do and want to be a part of it.

Vacancies

When I have a specific vacancy, I tend to advertise it on FindAPostDoc, Nature Careers, LinkedIn and Twitter. Social media has become a good place to find candidates. On Twitter, potential postdocs can see what papers are coming out of the laboratories that they

are interested in. It's a good way of knowing what's going on. Another thing I have found that works well is using field-specific websites. For instance, for a current opening in my lab at the Francis Crick Institute in London – where we work on zebrafish (*Danio rerio*), a developmental organism – I have been advertising on the Zebrafish Information Network (ZFIN), an online community resource for researchers with an interest in zebrafish. I also advertise on the Node, a global community site for developmental and stem-cell biologists.

I forward job adverts on to colleagues in my



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particular field of study. I did that recently for one of our positions and it worked brilliantly. Someone wrote back quickly and said they had the perfect candidate.

It used to be common for people seeking a postdoc position to simply write to a group leader and express an interest in joining their lab. Some group leaders still say that this their main route for recruiting postdocs, rather than advertising vacancies.

The problem is that a lot of potential postdocs might not realize that writing in is an option, and might lose out. I don't think it's a fair mechanism because it selects for a certain type of person. Also, this route of applying is rather inefficient because a candidate who is excellent might write to you at a point when you haven't got the funding; or, when you have got the funding and a position, nobody suitable might apply.

The interview process

Postdoc researchers coming in for an interview should prepare by reading published papers from the lab. It's amazing how many don't.

I had one person who came in for an interview who had a folder with all our recent papers. She had read them all and highlighted things, and she had questions – which was impressive. The more that a potential postdoc can convince a group leader that they really want to work in a lab, and have an active reason for wanting to do so, the better.

Part of the interview process is getting

people to come to the lab for an entire day. The candidate gives a talk so we can really see what their research is like, and then I usually have a good hour or so with them to tell them about the lab and our projects, and to see how they respond.

Then they have an opportunity to speak to everyone in the lab and that's when our colleagues can gauge how interested the candidate is in joining. We want to see if they will ask probing questions and determine how well they will interact with the team.

As well as getting candidates to come in for an interview, they also have a 30 minute chat with another group leader who has no vested interest and can be more objective. That can be helpful.

Finding the right person

In my experience, it's worth waiting for the right person. Having somebody that is not that interested in the project, or just not a good fit, does not benefit anyone.

Several times, I have cast my net out and interviewed people, but none of them was the right fit. In these cases it is best to wait. It might be that not enough people applied, or the advert went up at slightly the wrong time of year, or just bad luck.

I have also learnt that you can't teach ambition or motivation, but you can teach skills. I have often been concerned about hiring people with a particular skill set and sometimes that is absolutely necessary. However, you might

have people in the lab who can easily train the person, and getting somebody from a slightly different field can be hugely advantageous.

It's also important that potential postdocs think about the sort of environment that would suit them best. There are differences between universities and institutes. With universities, as a postdoc, there are probably more opportunities to train students and to teach, on top of doing research.

Comparisons

It's important to remember that looking for a postdoc to join your lab goes beyond research. We are training future leaders. At the Francis Crick Institute, for example, we have a postdoc training programme that includes opportunities for postdocs to interview and hire students who then work with them for ten weeks. It provides valuable experience for postdocs to hone their skills in hiring and supervision.

Finally, for a postdoc looking to move position, they should think about what sort of location they want to be in. My lab is in London. For me it is important to make sure that people really want to live in a big city. Some people love this lifestyle, but others want to live somewhere where they can be close to the lab, maybe in a smaller town.

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