



# Setting Yourself up for Success in the Postdoc

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## Q&A from the Webinar “Setting Yourself up for Success in the PostDoc” January 14, 2015

Due to many questions and limited time, we were unable to answer all of the participants’ questions. Therefore, the panelists took additional time after the webinar to provide you with answers! Thanks to each of them.

### **What kinds of mentoring opportunities are available in a post-doc?**

*First I’d turn this question on its head a little. When you are hired hopefully the PI who hired you will be both your boss and a mentor. Remember you have your PhD he/she is now your colleague and ideally this person will be a lifelong friend, contact and mentor helping you in your career. Depending on your work load and the contract you sign you may or may not be able to continue developing your own pedagogy and mentoring up and coming students. If it’s very important that you continue to teach and mentor students during your Post Doc be sure to discuss this before accepting the job. Just like determining authorship for papers, be sure to talk about expectations to prevent conflicting goals (what you expect during your post doc and what your boss/mentor is expecting). If you are in a academia for your post doc my experience was current Post Docs served as a mentor to the other students in the group.*

### **When looking to secure outside funding for your postdoc, what are some good avenues to pursue?**

*I did not have to do this but I remember a seminar at SSSA where a University Professor said don’t waste time applying for grants for early career or young PI’s from places the NIH or NSF. The advice was it takes the same amount of work for a very small amount of money. This made sense to me but if you have no funds that “small” grant might be enough to make it through 6 months. To find sources you should be asking everyone you meet where they apply for funds. Regardless where or how much.. be sure to be working on collaboration whenever possible. New collaborations may be more important in the long run than writing your own small grant.*

### **As you searched for a post doc, did you contact people you were interested to work with even if they were not advertising a position at that time? If so, did you have any luck with that strategy?**

*Answer 1: This worked for me when I already had a connection to the person through a colleague or advisor, so they already knew of me when I made the contact. Try to network through your advisor, committee members, or other official or unofficial mentors to help make these connections.*

*Answer 2: I applied for my current job and Post Doc not thinking I would get hired, but did. Remember if you don't try you'll never know! Your current skill set may be complimentary to the current group and therefore they may find you to be more attractive than someone else with years of experience.*

**When you apply for a post doc, does the research statement need to focus on the current project that you are applying for the position? Or focusing on my own goals?**

*Answer 1: Many postdoc applications do not ask for a research statement and your research interests can be integrated into your cover letter. If a research statement is requested, I suggest doing a bit of both— demonstrate how you would approach the current project and how it would contribute to your broader research goals and vision.*

*Answer 2: You're being hired for a job for which they likely have some specific products which must be produced. After the sky is the limit. Bring your own interest to the table and talk about side products. I've never met someone who did not like new ideas that bring new products (whether that's peer-reviewed papers or other outcomes).*

**How can I choose options between a very fantastic post-doc position and an assistant professor position which might be not so attracting to become a suitable permanent position?**

*Answer 1: Which will position you best for the more permanent position that you would like? For example, if the faculty position has a heavy teaching or extension emphasis and you want to do research down the road, I would choose the postdoc position. I have seen colleagues take non-ideal faculty positions thinking they would be a good stepping stone. It has worked beautifully for some. For others, they have either had a difficult time maintaining productivity to position themselves to leave because they are not in a supportive environment or they feel that they have invested too much to leave after several years of building up their research program despite not being that happy.*

*Answer 2: Not an easy decision. You have to weigh your long-term goals against the short term benefits. Regardless when you make your decision, No Regrets! Attack the new job with vigor so that new opportunities present themselves.*

**How long does the post doc application process generally take? I hoping to be finished my PhD in the next 12 months so I am wondering how best to plan in terms of timing. I am also interested in going international which would add additional time.**

*If you are trying to go international you should be applying now! I started applying for Post Docs about 12 months out (and a new job 2 years before the end of my funding). A Post Doc or new job motivates you and your committee to stop the dilly dally and finish your education to move on to new opportunities.*

**I have two questions: 1) I'd be grateful if you advise me what the most important criteria for getting a tenure-track position are. 2) How do you deal with a situation when your PI is not that willing to write a new grant involving you due to a lot of work load?**

Answer 1:

1. *The criteria will vary with the position and will depend on the type of school, the relative emphasis between teaching, research, and extension, and the institutional outlook. For that reason, it can be difficult to generalize. At my institution, key criteria include evidence of research productivity (publications and grants) and creativity (is the applicant on the cutting edge of their field or developing innovative collaborations or working in multiple areas?). Evidence of teaching effectiveness or at least awareness of effective teaching approaches can be important if teaching is a large proportion of the position. In addition, communication skills and ability collaborate (play well with others) can not be underestimated.*
2. *You may want to look for another position if you do not have a supportive PI. Other options include trying to find a postdoctoral fellowship program that would allow you to apply for your own funding. If your PI is not willing to work on a grant even if you offer to contribute substantially to the proposal development, I would try to find another faculty member who might be willing to lead the proposal with you and your PI as collaborators.*

Answer 2:

*My advice is don't burn bridges with your PI and be uber productive during your post doc. Burning bridges could be more destructive than their lack of willingness to write new grants.*