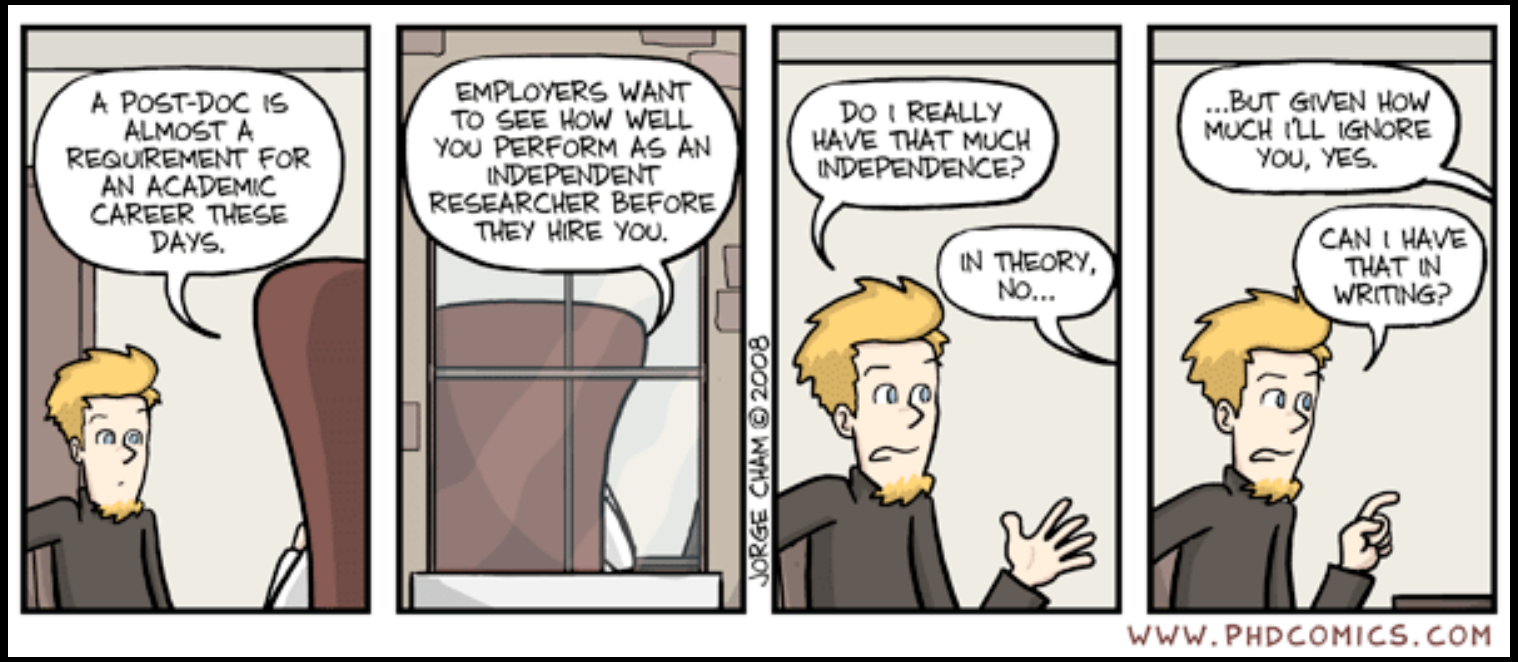
Postdoc job applications : “don’t panic” guide !



Aim of this session

- An academic career has many pros and cons, but about 50% of CAS PhD students go on to postdoc positions
- Knowing how the system works will help you plan your applications (and career) effectively. This presentation will inform you about the typical application process
- Writing effective job applications is a new skill you need to learn. This presentation will provide key tips on how to improve your applications
- Note : some of these views are subject to my own bias, other faculty / postdocs will give valuable info too !

What are the types of postdoc positions?

- Typically a fixed-term 2-3 year research position
- Some are independent research positions ("fellowships") offered by a university or institute
- Most are research associates tied to specific projects or investigators (although there is often freedom)
- Some are observatory or software positions (often with some fractional allocation for research)
- Can also apply for research council funding (e.g. ARC prize fellowships) but is very competitive
- Note : a "fellowship" is not necessarily better ...

What you should know (the basics)

- Applications are very time-consuming! (1 month's work in total? Start preparing early!)
- Each position is very competitive, rejection is normal
- More opportunities to find a position if you are able to move (including internationally), is that what you want?
- Many jobs (75%) are advertized October-January
- Communication from employers to applicants during the process is usually very poor
- Easy to increase your chances by knowledge/preparation

How can I find available positions?

- Most jobs are advertized on the AAS job register (http://jobregister.aas.org)
- Circular e-mail lists (e.g., ASA, CAS)
- Your research networks and collaborators (ask them!)
- Personal contact, if you have a specific idea of where you would like to move
- Rumour mill! (www.astrobetter.com/wiki/tiki-index.php?page=Rumor+mill)

Which jobs should I apply for?

- Because of competition, apply for multiple positions (typically 10-20, sometimes as many as 50?)
- Don't rule out things too quickly, since flexibility is often required and you cannot count on your "dream job"
- However, (obviously) don't apply for jobs that you do not actually want
- Focus on positions for which you are a "good fit"
- Your life and personal goals are obviously very important. What are you prepared to compromise?

When should I apply?

- Many variations are possible, but typically in a job season you would:
- Apply for postdocs Oct-Jan (75% of jobs)
- Receive interviews/offers Jan-Mar
- Start new positions Sep-Nov
- Consider : where are you in your PhD, and when will you realistically finish?
- Consider : are you competitive for an application now?

What is a postdoc job application?

- Many jobs will specify what they want, but in general :
- Covering letter (1 page) introducing yourself and explaining why you are a good fit for the position
- Research statement (2-3 pages) describing your science plans and why you are the best person to do them
- CV (2 pages) listing your education/skills/publications
- List of potential referees
- Sometimes a response to selection criteria (in Australia)
- Note : get someone to proof-read for typos, etc.!
- General tone : sell yourself (confident), but reasonable!

What happens in an application process?

- ~30 applications received for each job (10-100 ?)
- Reviewed by a committee of ~5 including the grant holder as well as non-experts in the field
- Initial review will be swift, producing a ranked shortlist
- This shortlist is interviewed and re-ranked
- An offer is made with an acceptance deadline

What does this process mean for you?

- Competition : you will need to apply for multiple positions, but also improve your chances (see next slide)
- You are addressing 2 audiences : expert and non-expert. Explain the significance of your work very clearly, but also provide some detail an expert will appreciate.
- You need to make the key points very clear to someone skimming your application in a few minutes. Repeat them in a couple of places!
- When on a shortlist, prepare carefully for an interview

How do you improve your chances?

- Be a good fit to the position if possible (this can be in terms of skills as much as precise science topic)
- Write a good application (stating why you are a good fit)
- Tailor your application for each position
- Contact your prospective boss with sensible questions
- Use your network of existing collaborators and contacts, are any of them offering positions?
- Increase your profile by presenting at useful conferences
- Get papers submitted / on astro-ph before applications

Am I competitive for a particular job?

- Don't be put off too easily, but do realistically consider your chances of success ("gumption and self-awareness")
- For example : is this position a prize fellowship with 200 applicants? Is this position well outside my field with many better-matched applicants?
- Papers count - need to demonstrate a publication record for a research position - but are not everything
- Skills and fit to position are also very important
- Competition for U.S. postdoc positions can be tougher for students from 3-year vs. 6-year PhDs

Should I tailor each individual application?

- Yes, in a limited way
- Tailor one paragraph of your covering letter and some of the research statement
- Explain why you are good match to this specific job
- Explain why you are keen to join the organization
- Provide a science plan fitting to the position
- This helps the job committee rank you highly, as well as demonstrating to them that you have actually thought about these issues !

Covering letter

- A formal letter introducing your application
- Get the contact details right :-)
- Paragraph 1 : introduce yourself, your current position, and what position you are applying for
- Paragraph 2 : briefly, what are your top skills / research achievements you would like the panel to know about
- Paragraph 3 : why you want to move to this organization (specific details not just hollow platitudes), how yourself and your research would enhance their staff

CV

- Short is good (2 pages, although can be longer if needed)
- Contact details at the top
- Short bullet point lists of academic record, research experience/skills, publications, awards/prizes, talks, conferences, teaching, outreach, roles/responsibilities
- Omit : personal info, photo, pre-university record
- Publication list : do not pad with “in preparation” papers. Highlight your name in long author lists, give web links
- Note : substantiate your claims with examples

Research statement

- This is a sales pitch not a research paper!
- You are presenting yourself as much as science. Why is the science compelling, and why are you the best person?
- Give clear summary of significance in first half a page
- Not too dense : include spaces, sub-headings, figures, bullet points, timelines
- Demonstrate you can carry out future science plans by describing your successful current research
- Has to impress both experts and non-experts, and need to tailor in some cases

How to choose referees?

- Most jobs typically ask you to nominate 3 references (either submit at time of application, or at shortlisting)
- Balance of prominence and familiarity with your research
- As well as supervisors, good to ask national or international collaborators not from the same institution as you, people with "name recognition"
- If you are in doubt, it is O.K. to have the conversation "are you able to write me a good reference for job X?"
- Give them plenty of time to prepare a reference! Also, fine to request referees to emphasize particular points

Key points about interviews

- Usually you will have a video interview with the panel using a set of fixed questions (talk not usually required)
- Preparation is key!
- Interview questions are 90% predictable (see next slide)
- Plan, and rehearse, answers to the questions in advance
- Use these answers to tell the panel why you are the best candidate for the position
- Give informative but concise answers, try not to waffle
- Ask sensible questions demonstrating your knowledge

List of predictable interview questions

- Why did you apply for this position? Why do you want to move to university X / country Y?
- Tell us about your PhD / biggest research achievement
- [If the position is tied to an existing project:] What skills and experience do you have in area X?
- [If there is some research freedom:] What independent science plans do you have for the position?
- What are your strengths/weaknesses as a researcher?
- Can you describe a situation where you had to deal with a difficult colleague / collaborator / situation?
- What are you career ambitions? (e.g. in next 5 years?)

If you get an offer!

- Typically an informal e-mail offer, contract follows later
- You are in a strong negotiating position
- It is fine to take some time deciding
- Perfectly fine to negotiate start date
- Ask the potential employer to clarify the science opportunities / research fraction in the position
- Clarify the financial side : salary and benefits? travel funding? funds for computers? relocation expenses?
- O.K. to discuss with existing postdocs in that group!

Concluding thoughts

- A postdoc can lead to a rewarding career path in academia or elsewhere, opportunities to travel etc.
- Postdoc job applications are daunting and time-consuming. Uncertainty about life and the future.
- It is not easy to write good applications or compelling research proposals. Do seek advice/feedback.
- Your current supervisors / mentors should be willing to give you frank feedback on your career plans - ask them!
- There are simple steps of preparation you can take to increase your chances of success