HOW TO CHOOSE THE BEST POSTDOC POSITION?

Choosing the best postdoc position for your future career in science is essential. However, most young scientists have no plan how to find the position(s) that fit best and how to choose with care. A number of key questions will help you to find the postdoc position which fits your needs, talents and skills.

DEFINE CAREFULLY WHICH GOALS YOU WANT TO REACH DURING YOUR POSTDOC PERIOD!

An important rule for a happy life is to define the goals you want to reach and how you want to feel while you are pursuing these goals. Many things are unpredictable but you probably know pretty well which private and family conditions you want during your postdoc period and in which field you want to work. You may have to think more carefully about which impact factors and how many papers you want to generate and which technical and transferable skills you want to learn.
The better you know what you want, the easier it is for other people to support you in finding a position which is right for you and for which you are the best candidate. Both aspects are important – you should feel perfectly well in the environment and you should bring the personality, skills and talents which are needed in the new environment.

**WHICH PRIVATE AND FAMILY CONDITIONS DO YOU WANT?**

Your private and family situation should be a major concern to make sure that you are happy during your postdoc period. **Three main questions help you to define your aspirations.** You should think carefully about the question whether you really want to go abroad, whether you want a long-term relationship with your partner (and maybe your children) or move together and whether you want a joint postdoc with your partner.

**DO YOU REALLY WANT TO GO ABROAD?**

Most research institutions highly value international experiences – and **there are good reasons to work abroad**: a scientist who has experienced the culture of other laboratories, different leadership styles and cultural challenges (including feeling lost or experiencing xenophobia) normally develops a much broader view on science and cultural differences and understands better the challenges that young foreigners face who are working in his/her lab. Working abroad increases your stress resistance, improves your ability to solve problems and to improvise and may broaden your international network.

There are many prestigious universities which explicitly demand international mobility from their young professors and do *not* select candidates without international research experiences.

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However, **working abroad comes with a price**: there are several unpleasant side-effects of international mobility which nobody ever talks about such as feeling lost & lonely, losing touch with your old friends & circles and paying too much money – read more here: [9 reasons not to go abroad – and how to handle them!](#) Thus, make sure that you are aware of the advantages and disadvantages of going abroad and how to handle them.

**LONG-DISTANCE RELATIONSHIP OR MOVING TOGETHER?**

If you go abroad your relationship will suffer
Inevitably. In most cases long-distance relationships are not experienced as easy. You can only communicate via email, phone or skype which is of course much less intimate than being together in the same room. In addition, you may feel lonely and get in contact with other attractive persons which may appear as an interesting alternatives for your existing relationship. If children are involved they miss you terribly, you may miss them terribly and you do not participate in their life anymore for quite some time.

On the other hand, moving to a foreign country as a couple (or a family) is stressful for a relationship. If only one partner has a job, the other partner may feel lonely and useless and may get frustrated or depressed.

If both have a position, the two partners may experience substantial differences in the quality of their work, their supervision, the colleagues and the working environment as well as the ease to integrate. In addition, it may be rather difficult to meet new people as a couple because it is psychologically more difficult to start a conversation with a couple. It is also obvious that you are not available as a potential erotic partner.

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JOINT POSTDOC WITH YOUR PARTNER?

Going abroad for a postdoc together has many advantages. You avoid the inevitable problems of a long-term relationship, you can cope better with loneliness, being homesick and possible discrimination as a foreigner. You share many experiences and challenges which may strengthen your relationship. The organisational and administrative effort is shared which may make it easier. Both partners experience similar working conditions and understand perfectly well the situation of the other.

Working together in the same lab allows effective collaboration, participation in joint projects leading to more or better publications. However, it may also lead to unpleasant competitive situations depending on the type of relationship you have. Working in different labs may be better to develop an independent career but comes with the risk that one partner experiences better working conditions, better salary or better output.

WHICH IMPACT FACTORS AND HOW MANY PAPERS DO YOU WANT?

When going abroad you should aim at an excellent publication output. A postdoc period is often short (2-4 years) and does not always get extended. The first postdoc may be followed by a second one but you may also start applying for academic or industry positions. For professorship positions your publication list must be excellent, for industry positions your technical and transferable skills may be more important. To learn more on how to develop a clever publication strategy read more here: What is the best publication strategy in science?

There are good arguments to **focus on one or only a few papers with high impact factors** provided the supervisor is excellent, substantial funding is available and the infrastructure is state-of-the-art. As a rule of thumb I would predict that a very high impact factor publication (IF > 10) means that you will work extremely hard, while 1-3 high to excellent impact factor papers (IF 5-9) will allow you more freedom.

You should also consider the working environment – if you go to a top lab which publishes very high, you will probably work in a very competitive environment. Before you apply, you should definitely talk to *several* former and present lab members to get a rough idea about the working conditions. Read more here: The most intelligent strategy to get hired in science.
WHICH TECHNICAL SKILLS DO YOU WANT TO LEARN?

The postdoc time is the perfect moment to learn fancy techniques which distinguish you from others later and qualify you for specific positions only few can fill. We often see PhD students and even postdocs who have mastered and practised only one or two very common techniques such as immunohistochemistry or qPCR. The other extreme are persons who claim to know a multitude of techniques but demonstrate only very superficial knowledge. The golden middle way is of course to select a few techniques which are not completely common and become very experienced with them.

For industry positions high expertise in a few fancy techniques may be an advantage. In contrast, for professorship positions your technical expertise often plays a minor role. Some colleagues even have the opinion that a professor should *not* be the best technician in the lab. In contrast, they outsource specific technical expertise (for example via collaborating with experts in the field) or hire a competent postdoc. Thus, for professorship positions technical skills are often overrated by young scientists, other skills may be considered as more important. Read more here: How to become a professor?

WHICH TRANSFERABLE SKILLS DO YOU WANT TO LEARN?

The postdoc period is a perfect time to learn management, communication and leadership skills. There is a long list of skills which are considered important for leading a research group in academia and industry.

The postdoc period is also the time to develop scientific independence and develop clear ideas about your future lines of research, and on how to raise grant money. Before applying, you should ask former and current lab members whether they have learned these skills and whether they had the possibility to learn grant writing and raise a substantial amount of grant money.
HOW TO CHOOSE THE BEST OUTCOMES?

In summary, you should enjoy your postdoc period and make it a good time. You should go for the big wins such as high impact factors, big grants and fancy techniques. However, you should consider carefully the costs for your relationship, family and finances by addressing the questions raised above.

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