A Short Guide for

Choosing the right postdoctoral position

By postdocs for graduate students

September 2010

This short guide is the product of a discussion amongst the Einstein postdocs Rudy Chaparro, Scott Lefurgy, Laura Norwood-Toro, Emma Robertson, Philip Schwartz, and Joerg Schlatterer. We hope this helps you make the right decisions.
Step 1: Know yourself!

What are your professional goals?
What are your private goals?

Keep in mind that those goals can change over time! Be aware and realistic.

Have you ever thought about connecting who you are with what you'll love to do? If you are interested in a personality style self assessment session, request more information from Joerg (jschlatt@aecom.yu.edu).

Step 2: How can you accomplish your goals?

Do you need postdoc experience?

If no, don’t waste your time by doing a postdoc!
If you need time to find an appropriate position, a postdoc position can be a temporary solution. Here, it might be advantageous if you can use your technical skills acquired during your PhD. Spend a significant amount of time looking for a job (one day per week) and participate in networking and career events.

If yes, many different aspects have to be taken into account to make this experience successful. Every postdoctoral position is unique and can catalyze or inhibit your career. Therefore, evaluate your all opportunities carefully.

The next steps should help you to find the best fit postdoctoral position for you.

Step 3: How do you find a postdoc position?

The answer depends strongly on your career goals. The following questions might help to assess your needs:

- Do you want to use your skill set (techniques, teaching experience, etc.) which you used during your PhD?
- Do you want to learn new skills?
- Do you want to switch your research area/field?
- Where do you want to do a postdoc: abroad or in the US?

There are many well paid postdoc positions worldwide.

Focus exclusively on research groups providing those opportunities.
How do you identify available positions?

- **Attend conferences and speak to people!**
- Read job ads in Science, Nature …
- Talk to your mentor

**Step 4:** How do I contact a potential boss?

- Talk to her/him during a conference
- Call him/her
- Send him/her an email
- Contact through job ad service (Science, Nature, etc.)

**Step 5:** The interview process:

Make sure that you actually have an on site interview at the institution of interest. Otherwise, there could be surprises.

This is your opportunity. Ask all questions that are on your mind. Write down important questions so you don’t forget. Ask the potential boss, the lab members, members of adjacent labs, and, in general, anyone who could give you information.

**Very important** questions – general fit:

- What happened to former postdocs? Did they succeed in your area of interest?
- Will you have your own project? Or does someone in the lab compete with you?
- Can you take your project with you after you are done?
- Which expectations do they have? E.g. are you expected to teach or to mentor students? Are you expected to work 12h days and weekends?
- Is funding available? Will you be expected to write fellowship proposals? What’s the pay? (You can negotiate!!!)
- Will you get benefits (health insurance, daycare …)?
**Important questions – how the lab is run:**

- Is there a lab meeting? How is it structured?
- Are there journal clubs and frequent seminars?
- What is the lab structure?
- How often will you have the chance to talk to your boss?
- How are conflicts managed in the lab?
- Who will be your mentor?
- Which other time commitments does the potential boss have? (e.g. Chair, committee member, editor …)
- Which expectations do they have? E.g. are you expected to mentor graduate students, undergraduate students?
- Will you be independent in the lab?
- The question “How do you behave on your worst day?” can give you a lot of information about the personality of your potential boss and/or lab members.

**Step 6: Transition to your postdoc position.**

- You are an accomplished PhD and **NOT** a student. Present yourself accordingly.
- Give yourself a short time in the lab (~3-9 months) and see if it works for you. Otherwise, leave!
- Expand your personal and professional network.
- Volunteer, e.g. in a postdoctoral association. Any non-science activity will help to polish your soft skills.

**GOOD LUCK!**

*Your feedback is appreciated. Please, send any comments and additions to joerg.schlatterer@einstein.yu.edu*