

Postdoctoral Training Interview Summary

Prepared by Physiology Mentoring Task Force: Drs. Harrison-Bernard, Edwards,
Fucich, Siggins, and Ms. Ninh
Updated 08/24/18

Best, Good, Neutral

	Postdoctoral Mentor #1	Postdoctoral Mentor #2	Postdoctoral Mentor #3
Does the position match your desired postdoctoral track? (academic, industry, government, military, teaching, international?) ¹			
Is my mentor supportive of my ultimate career / next step goal?			
Is my mentor supportive of my ultimate career / next step goal?			
Will this training provide me with all of the tools that I need to achieve my career goals? Consult your individual development plan.			
How well does the lab meet my scientific interests? ²			
What is the training track record of my mentor? (number and success of previous trainees—current position, publications, etc.)			
How well does the department / institution serve my scientific interests?			
Will the animal/disease model & techniques utilized provide me with sufficient data & publications to advance my career? ³ (e.g., cell culture, animal models, patient samples, computational)			
Will I learn new laboratory techniques? Will these make me marketable or better suited for independence/funding?			
Will I have the opportunity to present at scientific meetings? Organize symposia? How many national or international meetings? Travel funding?			
What is the prestige and reputation of the mentor and the department? What is the mentor's relationship with the department chair?			
Will institutional resources be viewed as sufficient when applying for external funding or are they sufficient for my needs?			
What is the likelihood that the lab will have continuous grant funding during my training period?			

Will I have the opportunity to interact with my mentor on a regular basis? Do I want to be micromanaged or left alone?			
Is the personality of the mentor suitable for my personality? ⁴ Do I get along with the other lab members?			
Will I have the opportunity to publish first-authored manuscripts in high-impact journals? Does the mentor emphasize quality or quantity of publications? ⁵ How many publications? How long did it take previous postdocs to publish the first manuscript?			
What is the minimum/maximum period of appointment? ⁶			
Will I have the opportunity to submit fellowship (F) grants and career transition (K) grants? Contribute to R01 writing? ⁷			
What are the possibilities of transitioning from a postdoc to a faculty position in the department?			
Is the total number of lab members too large or too small? (e.g., will i receive enough attention from my mentor(s)? will i have enough technical assistance to conduct experiments?)			
Will I have enough dedicated time to research? What are my other responsibilities? (mentoring, teaching, seminars/courses, administrative)			
Am I comfortable with the work ethic of the laboratory? ⁸			
Is there a dedicated and administratively funded postdoc organization or society on campus? Are postdocs a priority for the institution? ⁹			
Can I live comfortably in the city? (affordability, weather, distance from family) ¹⁰			
What is the beginning salary? Will my salary increase annually? ¹¹ Benefits? (e.g., health insurance, is it covered?)			
Does the postdoctoral position meet the career/personal needs of my spouse/significant other/partner? ¹²			
What support systems are available for family planning? ¹³			
Will I be happy here?			

Footnotes

1. Know your options and try to take the shortest path to your ideal career. Teaching postdocs are available. Those desiring to work in industry should consider doing their postdoc in industry as spending too much time in academia could be a handicap in some industries.
2. This is likely your last chance to make a significant pivot in your research area, but be sure that you are building upon a linear and progressive career narrative.
3. Try to balance learning new techniques with generating publishable data. You don't want to sacrifice your postdoc (or career) to establish a technique for your replacement postdoc for which to reap the gains.
4. This includes things like sense of humor, communication styles, and interpersonal boundaries. Good mentors may exhibit a range of personality quirks, but are always respectful and extremely supportive of their trainees and work hard to build collaborative relationships among their team and extended network.
5. Consider that some high-impact projects may take longer than your appointment to publish. Try to publish at least 2 manuscripts per year, and 10 manuscripts for your overall postdoctoral tenure. Keep in mind that your main project may not be spinning off enough publications to make you competitive for a K99/R00 and an independent faculty position. You will likely need to be proactive in securing additional projects and collaborations to increase your productivity. This will typically require longer work hours.
6. Aim for a guaranteed period of appointment of at least three years. Most labs will want you to transition to some kind of independent position (even if at the same institution) after five-six years. Do not plan on doing multiple postdocs as this could hurt your career momentum.
7. Write every conceivable fellowship/training grant you can and make yourself indispensable in helping your mentor secure extramural funding (consider their R01s, center grants, training grants, new research collaborations). If you want to stay in the department long-term, ask your mentor to support you for a faculty position where you can write a K01 grant. If you desire to leave your postdoc institution, write a K99/R00 grant (although leaving is not mandatory under this mechanism). If a VA facility is located nearby, consider writing a Career Development Award (CDA) to become a PI within the VA system. Keep an open line of communication with your mentor in terms of what happens should you fail to secure an independent fellowship or transition grant – will you be asked to move on after a certain period of time or are there other options available? Again, keep in mind that indispensable people are indispensable.
8. The most successful labs work very hard and very smart. Lab members are usually very committed to research and their careers (#1 priority), and are keen on establishing collaborations to boost everyone's productivity. With effective time management and communication, successful postdocs are able to minimize distractions and competing

time interests without sacrificing quality of life (as they define it). Rank your current life priorities and be honest. Is research/career your #1 priority or are you looking for a more balanced life?

9. Ideally, there should be a very high administrative dedication to postdoctoral fellows (i.e., not organized by postdocs themselves, but with a dedicated administrative office and line of funding - see Vanderbilt and The Scripps Research Institute for examples). These organizations will greatly boost your career development in a time-efficient manner, and provide options for networking, exploring alternative careers, and offering free management & leadership training courses, among other benefits.

10. Keep in mind that stipends are typically not adjusted for cost of living. Also, will family be a bigger distraction if you live close or far away from them (e.g., free child care vs. frequent trips home)? Will working at an institution that overlooks the ocean help or hinder your research progress? Evaluate your priorities, and think clearly about your options and where you might be constraining yourself. For example, factors like family and geography can produce either a severe constraint or represent a facilitating boost to your career. What factors in your life produce unnecessary constraints on your career? Consider removing them or minimizing their influence. What factors or conditions allow you to thrive? Maximize their influence.

11. The NIH minimum postdoc salary in 2018 is \$48,432. Do not accept less than this. You should also be provided affordable health insurance plans and low-cost retirement savings options. You should begin retirement investing now if you haven't already – take advantage of the salary bump to start putting money away (10% of your salary is a good place to start). If you have a spouse, consider that their benefits package may be more attractive and a better place for your health insurance and investment dollars.

12. If you have a spouse, now is the time to ascertain their support of your career and to discuss the “two-body problem”. Identify who is the “leading” vs. “lagging” spouse (i.e., whose career will take priority? under which circumstances?). Will your spouse allow you to dedicate the time you need in the laboratory and at home to be successful as a postdoc? Evaluate your priorities here.

13. Family planning should be a conversation you should be comfortable having with your postdoc mentor, even at the interview stage. Communication of intentions and priorities is key so that adequate planning can be made on both sides. Things to consider: maintenance of a safe & comfortable (including harassment-free) work environment during pregnancy, maternal/paternal leave policies, expectation of work output during leave, affordable childcare options, policy regarding bringing infants/young children to the workplace, provision of lactating rooms at work.