

QUESTIONS TO ASK WHEN CHOOSING A POSTDOC ADVISOR

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The best time for a postdoc to evaluate a potential postdoctoral position is before signing on.

Experienced postdocs and advisers suggest asking the following questions of (and about) a prospective adviser:

1. What are the adviser's expectations of the postdoc?
2. Will the adviser or the postdoc determine the research program?
3. How many postdocs has this adviser had? Where did they go afterward?
4. What do current and past lab members think about their experience?
5. Will the adviser have time for mentoring? Should I seek out other mentors?
6. How many others (grad students, staff, postdocs) now work for this adviser?
7. How many papers are being published? Where?
8. What is the adviser's policy on travel to meetings? Authorship? Ownership of ideas?
9. Will I have practice in grant writing? Teaching/mentoring? Oral presentations? Review of manuscripts?
10. Can I expect to take part of the project away after the postdoc?
11. How long is financial support guaranteed? On what does renewal depend?
12. Can I count on help in finding a position?
13. Will the adviser have adequate research funds to support the proposed research?

A postdoc should have a “roadmap” of expectations and goals appropriate to field, sector, and overall career objective. The fundamental requirement is to select an adviser who is an expert and productive in the field of the postdoc’s interest. Before signing on, the postdoc should gather information that is helpful in evaluating the opportunity: What does the postdoc expect from the experience? What does the adviser expect?

The postdoc and adviser should meet early and write down at least a rough research roadmap, including the extent to which the two will collaborate: What are the postdoc’s obligations to the lab? How much support and oversight can the postdoc expect? How long should this project take? What are realistic goals: publication? Other benchmarks? How long is funding guaranteed, and how likely is renewal? This exercise is easy to neglect or avoid in the rush of new beginnings. But clear terms of appointment are essential to prevent later misunderstandings, and they should be established as early as possible.

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