

How to succeed at your academic job interview, Part II

 /2016/02/how-to-succeed-at-your-academic-job.html

ISEH Headquarters

February 4, 2016

I am a new Assistant Professor at the University of Michigan Medical School. At the last ISEH meeting in Kyoto (2015), I was invited to give a “recent applicant view” on how to be successful when applying for Faculty positions. In the paragraphs below I summarize my presentation and provide tips and advice for prospective applicants that are planning to enter the job market.

Preparing the application package

The application package is your letter of introduction and the one item that will determine whether you are invited for a job interview. To be successful your application package needs to be outstanding. It will require a significant amount of time and effort on your part. In the US, and in many other places around the world, most academic positions are advertised between August and November. There is usually a fixed deadline to submit the application package. This means that your application package may need to be ready before the position opens! For most positions you are going to need a cover letter, a 2 to 4 page research statement describing your past accomplishments and future research plans, detailed Curriculum Vitae (CV; academic resume), and at least three letters of recommendation. If the position involves teaching it is common to request a teaching statement. Below are brief descriptions of each element of the package and tips to help you prepare a competitive one. The most important part of your application package is the CV. The current job market is very competitive and it is not uncommon to receive over a hundred applications for a single Assistant Professor/Junior Faculty position. The members of the search committee are going to select a handful of applicants for interviews and the easiest way to filter applicants is to look for solid publication records. How many publications do you need? That is going to depend on your specific field: go online and search for newly appointed Faculty in your field of research. Is your publication record similar? If not, then it might be better to continue your postdoc and build up your publication record. A good CV is also visually appealing and clearly organized so that information (especially your publication record) is easy to find. The second most important items in your application are the cover letter and the letters of recommendation. In the cover letter you have half a page to briefly introduce yourself and your accomplishments and explain why you are a good fit for the Department, including how you will help them to accomplish their mission. You can find more information on how to write a good cover letter [here](#) and [here](#). A very frequent mistake is that the cover letter is not personalized and it starts with a general “Dear Sir or Madam”. This conveys the impression that you are spamming all available positions and you have not taken the time and effort to put together a serious application. A proper cover letter should be addressed to the person who is the head of the search committee or the Chair of the

Department. The cover letter should finish with a small paragraph detailing the documents that are enclosed with your application and the names of your references and your relationship with them (i.e. postdoctoral mentor). Most job openings request three to five letters of recommendation. It is critical that both your PhD and postdoctoral advisors write enthusiastic letters of recommendation. Missing either raises serious concerns as it suggests that you have a conflict with one of your advisors. If this is in fact the case then you should ask another of your references (ideally another Faculty in the same department as your advisor) to explain in her/his letter that despite this conflict you are collegial and a great candidate. Another piece of advice: it may help a lot if, in addition to writing a letter of recommendation, one of your references calls a member of the search committee to enthusiastically recommend you. The final piece in your application package is the research statement. This is a 2 to 4 page document that summarizes your career goals, past accomplishments and future research plans. The search committee wants to evaluate whether your research is likely to get funded. You can find more information on how to write a good research statement [here](#). Talk with your mentor to ensure she/he is not planning to pursue projects similar to the ones that you are proposing; the committee will ask her/him, and often you, about this. It is absolutely critical that you differentiate yourself from your current mentor and create a unique research program. Most departments will not recruit anyone who is in direct competition with more senior and established investigators. You should also use the research statement to explain any gaps in training/funding/publications and highlight contributions to projects where you were not the first author. Remember that writing a good research statement takes time. You should start working on it the moment you decide to enter the job market. I recommend that you prepare both a 2-page and a 4-page version of the statement, as this will save you a lot of time later. The application package is the first, and only, opportunity that you have to be invited for a job interview. Work hard to make it as exciting and visually appealing as you can.

Applying to Faculty positions

A lot of people decide to not apply to Faculty positions that might be a good fit for them based on geographic restrictions or because they want to join a prestigious institution. My advice is this: apply to every position that matches your profile, even if it's not perfect. There are several reasons for this: 1) in the current job market it is very difficult to get an interview; you should maximize your chances by applying to as many positions as you can (without spamming). 2) You can schedule interviews at the institutions that you are less interested first and use this to get feedback on your seminar presentation and your chalk talk. 3) During each interview you are going to meet many different investigators and this is going to help in expanding your network. 4) You might also find that the institution is actually the perfect fit for you. You might love the place, they might be recruiting a lot of new people that synergize with you or they can give you exactly what you need for your research (e.g. collaborators or expensive instruments). It is important to remember that while you are submitting job

applications and interviewing, you still need to continue to work hard and do good science, which further builds up your CV.

The interview

OK, you have received an email from the head of the search committee or the Department Chair inviting you for an interview. What are the next steps? The first one is responding promptly and enthusiastically to the invitation. It is very important that in all your communications with them you respond as fast as you can. This shows your enthusiasm and that you are considering them seriously. In most places the interview is going to follow a schedule like this: the day before your seminar they are going to fly you in and take you for dinner with several faculty members. The next day you are going to give your seminar and meet with more faculty from the Department(s) that will be your academic home. You might also have lunch with graduate students and postdocs and visit core facilities. The same day or the one after you will fly back home. Alternatively, at some US institutions, they might invite you to give a chalk talk on the second day of your visit. However, most places schedule a second visit for the chalk talk. The single most important part of your interview is your seminar. It is often going to take place during a regular seminar series, making it easy for most Faculty and students to attend. This is the opportunity to showcase your science. The seminar should last 45-50 minutes, as you want plenty of time for discussion. Tailor your introduction to your audience: it is not the same to present to a Hematology department as a Cell Biology or Human Genetics department. Present your data as a narrative and highlight the manuscripts that you generated. Use the last 5 minutes to give a quick overview of the research that you want to do next. This is important because not everybody is going to be able to attend your chalk talk (or there is no chalk talk, as happens at many European institutions) and you want them to have a broad idea of what you are planning to do. Although giving a good seminar does not guarantee that you will get the position, a bad seminar will sink your prospects. Also, be humble when answering questions, you do not want to come across as arrogant. Practice your seminars many, many, times until it's perfect. The same day that you give the seminar you are going to be meeting (usually one on one, but sometimes as a group) with several junior and senior Faculty. They are going to use this interaction to see if you will be a good colleague and that you are not going to cause conflicts. How do you do this? Show them that you care about their research. Before your visit you are going to receive a schedule detailing all the people that you are meeting. Go to their webpages and read about their research, find the last manuscript that they published and read it. Prepare 2-3 questions about their research. The idea is to have them talk about it and show them that you have taken the effort to learn and think about it. Again, be humble, gracious and engaging through each meeting and never make a negative comment about anyone. Smile a lot and show enthusiasm for the institution. That same day, once you are back at home or at your hotel, send an email to each person that you met thanking them for meeting with you. If they requested a protocol or a manuscript send it to them now. When you have lunch with students and postdocs ask them about the institution, the graduate

program, how easy is to collaborate between laboratories, etc. If you do a good job they might point new students to your lab. Take into account that every single second of your visit people are going to be evaluating you. Be humble and courteous and do your best to be collegial. Also remember that, at the same time, you are also interviewing them. Request that they add to your itinerary a visit to the core facilities that you will need to perform your research and find out how much they cost. Again, this shows you are serious and that you know what you need to perform your research. It will be also very helpful when negotiating for resources and space. If you move forward in the interview process, you will often need to perform a “chalk talk”. For this type of presentation you are asked to give a 1 to 2 hour presentation of your future plans. You should plan to present the rationale and specific aims of your first big grant proposal (e.g. your first R01 in the US), a quick overview of your second big grant proposal, and some ideas for future projects 4-5 years down the road. The objective here is to show that you can generate and develop ideas that are likely to be funded. You want to have a clear hypothesis that emerged from your postdoctoral research and experience and propose mechanistic experiments and specific aims that are going to move the field forward. Do not propose descriptive research and make sure that you have the expertise to perform the experiments that you are proposing. If you are asked to give a chalk talk, find out ahead of time if you are going to be allowed to use slides. If the answer is yes, keep them to a minimum. You should use the first 5 to 10 minutes of your talk to summarize your postdoctoral work, highlighting the main accomplishments. This is because there is going to be people attending your chalk talk that did not attend your first seminar, or they might simply have forgotten your specific research as they listened to several candidates. During the talk you are going to be interrupted many times, and it is very likely that you are not going to be able to present everything. Because of this is a good idea to include a slide giving an overview of your planned proposals for the next 4-5 years. Prepare a second slide with a detailed overview of your first grant proposal (hypothesis and specific aims). Also bring with you enough copies of a 1-page summary of your first two proposals to hand out to attendees. If you are not allowed to use slides, then you are supposed to give your presentation using a white (formerly chalk) board. You are not going to be able to write everything that you are planning to do on the board while simultaneously presenting it. Request that they add extra time to your schedule so that, ahead of time, you can write on the board a small summary of your postdoctoral work, the hypothesis and specific aims for your first grant and the title of your second grant. This will give you a solid visual base to discuss your research plans. Be aware that in the chalk talk questions are usually more aggressive and, in some cases, designed to annoy you. You need to show that you have mastered the prior studies and open questions in your field, and have rational reasons for your proposed research, including methods, as well as appear gracious, humble and courteous regardless of how aggressive they are. They want to know that somebody that they might see every day for the next 30 years is going to be a good colleague and a problem solver. Right now the job market is very competitive, but if you take the time to prepare for the job search and follow the advice given in these blog posts, you will maximize

your chances of getting a Faculty position. I hope that this blog post helps you in preparing for your academic job search.

Daniel Lucas

ISEH New Investigator Committee Member

Assistant Professor

Department of Cell and Developmental Biology

University of Michigan Medical School