

# Making The Leap, Pt. 1: Interview Preparation

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ISEH Headquarters

January 26, 2017

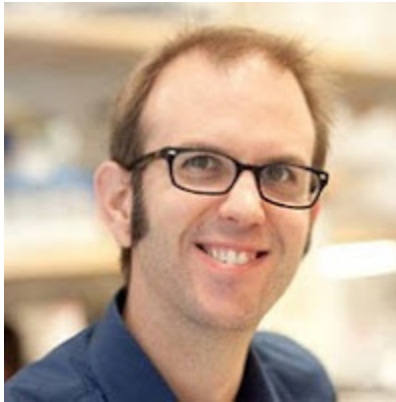
*“Hm. Here’s my suit...now where’s my belt??”*

-Me, at the hotel getting ready for an interview During my job search in 2015, I interviewed at seven academic institutions and one biotech company. In the end I was offered positions at the company as a scientist and at three universities as tenure-track faculty. Each interview was its own unique story. One interview location was a long morning haul to the institution via rental car for a first-thing-in-the morning seminar. A blizzard during a different interview left me stranded in the town the day before I was supposed to fly to Keystone for a conference. The biotech interview was nothing like the academic interviews. Ultimately the process was certainly intense, but also fun and extraordinarily valuable for a young scientist. It’s your first chance to essentially ‘go on tour’ with your own scientific identity. This post is the first in a series relating to making the leap between postdoc to faculty. The goal is to relate some of my insights into the process based on my experience, both then and now, from the other end of the desk. Importantly, if you’ve not read Dan Lucas’ and Isabel Beerman’s posts on academic interviewing ([Part 1](#) and [Part 2](#)) they are a fantastic resource and go into great detail on how these interviews are structured. In this first segment, I’ll discuss some logistical strategies and basic principles to keep in mind as you prepare for the interview. **What to bring:** Packing for an interview has a few subtleties. Forgetting something, whether it’s an item of clothing or your laptop, is a confidence-killer. You should assume that you won’t have time to replace items you don’t bring. You should also remember that if you are flying and have everything in a checked bag, there is a small (but not insignificant) chance your bag will not be on a carousel. I kept my laptop and power supply, remote/laser pointer, notepad, dry-erase markers, and video adapter in my carry-on shoulder bag, along with a pair of trousers, tie and button-down shirt just in case. The unappetizing thought of showing up to the next morning’s interview in jeans and a t-shirt and having to explain why all day made this a sensible move. Also, regarding clothing, go business formal. It’s a matter of respect and professionalism. I wore a suit the first day, for the second day I dressed down slightly to what I had in my shoulder bag. For second interviews, I ditched the suit but still kept it professional. I also learned how to properly fold those items into a bag to minimize wrinkling. At one interview, I arrived at the hotel at midnight local time and needed to be up at 6 am the next morning and drive to the interview, hopefully beating a blizzard in the process. Half an hour of ironing would not constitute a good use of my time. Lastly, cases where you need to do your own driving (as was the case for two of my interviews), have a smart phone with GPS (or a stand-alone GPS device) and a charger handy and be sure you know where you’re going. **Basic survival:** Interviews are fun, but also intense. Most of mine lasted one full and one half day, with the flight in the afternoon before, and flight out the afternoon of the second day. All first visits had a seminar the first day. All but two academic

interviews had the chalk talk on the second day of the first visit; one had the chalk talk directly after the seminar, and one had the chalk talk during the second interview. You will likely have no time to yourself from about 7am to 9pm on the first day of the interview. You will also likely not have time or ability to finish meals; they are often with students (typically at lunch) or a faculty member or two, and are conversation-heavy. On interview days, I kept energy bars and a bottle of water in my shoulder bag to keep hydrated and fed. Also: at the height of the process I was traveling roughly 3 of 4 days per week for over a month. Depending on your schedule you may need to temper your expectations of what you can accomplish back in the lab. Also consider your need to stay physically and mentally healthy. Illness, fatigue and interviews do not mix well. **Optics matter:** Hires are made not just based on your scientific acumen. You were invited because the faculty hiring committee found your CV to be interesting. Now they have the opportunity to see whether they want to work with the person behind the CV. How you come across during the interview process, ranging from how you handle the initial contacts to the travel logistics to your interaction with every student, postdoc, technician and faculty member can impact the outcome of the interview. Respond promptly and precisely to emails from individuals at the institution regardless of their position. Be respectful of everyone you meet. During your talk and chalk talk, respond respectfully to questions, even if they are either off the mark or aggressive. At meals, mind your manners, and do not over-imbibe. The bottom line is to be yourself (appearing insincere or inauthentic is an easy disqualifier), but maintain professional standards of conduct at all times so you don't become their 'worst interviewee ever' story instead of their next hire. Avoid discussing potentially polarizing issues outside of science, and remember that issues like spousal hires, real estate, startup package and the like are usually better left for second interviews, when the institution is moving to actively recruit you and is ready to consider such matters. Conversely, questions from faculty or other interviewers related to your family and marital status, religion, race, medical issues and/or gender are often illegal and as such you need not provide an answer. Lastly, and importantly, when the interview is finished it's probably worth it to individually thank via email each person you met with, as well as the admin(s) who took care of the logistics. It is to me a matter of respect for their time and efforts on my behalf, and in nearly every case elicited a response, always positive. I typically drafted these on the plane ride home so they were sent in a timely manner. Such emails also open the door for further correspondence if you didn't get to ask a key question. **Interviews are not a one-way evaluation:** Interviewing for positions in a highly competitive job market should not interfere with the important point that you should be evaluating the institution just as much as they evaluate you. Are their people (particularly recent hires) happy, productive and well funded? Are their research facilities cutting-edge and in good order? Did the interview seem well organized or slapped together at last minute? Did you like the people whom you met? Were your seminars and chalk talks well attended? Did departmental/unit leadership seem interested in you and your work? Did the students and/or staff appear of high caliber? Are the potential collaborations promising? Do they have what you need to set up your research program? Good mentorship, availability of qualified students, technicians, postdocs and clinical fellows to staff your lab, good faculty

collaborators, balanced teaching loads, appropriate resources for your research program and evidence of institutional and departmental support for faculty are critical for the success of new investigators. These are important areas that you should make a point to ask about, and to ask multiple people for their input. During a Skype pre-interview, I declined an in-person interview invitation after finding out about a lack of proper sorting facilities; likewise, I found out that another institution didn't have appropriate mouse facilities and offered no teaching protection for faculty during their first year. These were both dealbreakers for me, and it was better to find out at the first interview than on day one of my faculty job. The bottom line is that as much as you want the institution to love you, you need to love them back in order to have a productive career there.

Coming up in the second part of the series, I'll discuss some insights into how to approach one-on-one meetings, seminars and chalk talks during job interviews.



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