

The inside track from academia and industry

Great expectations

You may have got the job, but making sure it's the right fit is important for both employer and employee.



Joann Boughman

Landing a good job is a challenge, and the process can be daunting. Choosing a position and negotiating the details may not be easy, especially in an academic setting, but the first steps will set the tone for your future work relationships.

If you have made it through the initial selection and interview stages, then you have already made yourself known, and your skills, training and experience have been recognized by those involved in the selection process. It is incumbent on you to find the best possible arrangement.

You should research the institution and specific unit in which you will be working. Know exactly what they are looking for, going beyond the advertisement. Determine how your skills and experience fit their needs, but do not err by overselling your abilities. It is always best to be honest, but if there are new skills that you must master, show an eagerness to learn.

Understanding the relationships and the 'cast of characters' at the job site is very important. Learn enough about the administrative structure to know which people have the authority to make decisions, including financial decisions. Although the principal investigator or laboratory director may be hiring, be aware that the division chief, programme director or department chair may have the ultimate authority for salary, space, or equipment and supply needs.

Do enough background research to understand how the unit you may be joining fits into the larger context of the department, school, university or company. For example, is the unit a part of an entity that depends on extramural grant funds, or is there clear institutional support as well? If the position of interest would be funded only through grants,

you should be aware of the potential consequences and timeframe in the event that funding is not renewed.

Expectations

Theirs It is important that you know what is expected of you in the new position. Will you be performing only research? Is teaching involved? If so, what is the time commitment and what types of student will you be responsible for? Are you expected to supply any of your salary in the form of grants and, if yes, how soon? Are there duties outside the lab setting or designated teaching load? What are the routine and style of the unit (work hours and environment, sharing of equipment or space, teamwork on any or all projects)?

These questions are important not only for the day-to-day work routine, but also with respect to the amount of support and interaction that you can count

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on in times of stress or need. The style of the research workplace has an impact, and not only on how the lab or team operates. It also provides insight into communication processes, distribution of responsibilities, credit for grants, presentations, manuscripts and other professional opportunities.

Yours You should know the components of the salary and benefits package that is being offered. Questions are essential, and if the prospective employer is not responsive, you should ask yourself why. Determine whether their expectations mesh with yours. What degree

of independence is available, and how much independence is expected? Will you have sufficient mentoring as well as supervision? What is the evaluation process, and what type of feedback on performance will you receive? What personnel will you have access to (laboratory, central or core facilities, and administrative support)? Will there be opportunities to pursue activities of importance in your long-term goals (teaching, mentoring or participation in university activities)?

The process

Just as in any professional setting, competing for a position in science can be an arduous and sometimes uncomfortable process. You must present yourself professionally and competently. Be assertive although not aggressive, with a pleasant but persistent tone.

Prioritize your own needs and expectations. Know your limits and what you are willing to compromise on. During the process, figure out what fits and what does not meet your needs. Remember that each position is a step in a life-long career process. Although you may not know your future goals in detail, you should constantly be re-evaluating both your short- and long-term goals.

During any interview and negotiation process, you must be willing to ask for what you want. At the same time, you must be ready to settle for what you need...but no less. There are multiple paths to any career goal. Use your creativity and observational skills to their best advantage, not only in your scientific research, but also in the processes that allow you the opportunity to perform your life's work. ■

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