

How (not) to get a job...

Each fall, at the beginning of the job season, clusters of postdocs nucleate in the lab, worrying about the job market, which is probably worse than ever before, and about how to maximize their chances of success. Each new rumor induces more anxiety. There are 400 applicants for this job. No, 500. Only plant histopathologists have a chance this year. Only those who can teach gross anatomy need apply. After a few hours of this, everyone is upset and the most sensitive feel ill.

The irony of these discussions, of course, is that the postdocs talk to other postdocs, who don't know how to get a job either. Surprisingly little information flows from the faculty to those who need it. So here is one view from the other side of the process. Searches are probably different at other institutions, but any facts are better than none. Besides, this information might save valuable postdoc time for experiments.

The application process in science is particularly idiosyncratic. Not for us the efficiency of medical residency matching, where all the choices are fed into a computer March 1, and everything important is settled ten seconds later. Not for us the intensity of the Modern Language Association meetings, where aspiring humanists are interviewed by prospective colleagues in one action-packed week. Instead, an advertisement goes out, somewhere, the applications flow in, and an achingly slow drama plays out over the succeeding months.

Most places want to hire the best person they possibly can. Three things are important: productivity (measured in number and quality of publications), talent (the letters of

recommendation) and potential (the research statement). Many applicants undermine themselves by ignoring one of these areas. Some apply before their papers are written. Some letters say "I don't know what he's up to these days", a vaguery that could be avoided by giving the recommender a current CV. Some research plans are too dense. The applicant thinks "I need to impress the world's expert in my field". But if the expert is doing graduate admissions this year, she isn't reading any job applications.

The search committee consists of eight overcommitted faculty members from random fields. Each application is read by two of them, so if there are 400 applications, everyone reads 100. Of these, 30–50 applications will be read more seriously, and only six to ten applicants will be interviewed, so the biggest cut is based on what that first file looks like. Each application deserves hours of thought, but it's lucky to get thirty minutes. Nothing lowers the reader's spirits like a ten page research statement. Two pages is ideal. Everything needs to be at the reader's fingertips. If your papers are in the package, they'll be looked at; if not, the reader's unlikely to search for them. The strongest applicants are those who are easy to appreciate.

One surprise to me was that the best research statements were pitched at a different level from most scientific writing. Unlike grants, which should be conservative, statements allow the applicant to show her creativity and long-term goals. Again unlike grants, the applicant need not continue an ongoing project. The most popular statements are the ones that convey excitement about a new research direction. People who say they'll be competing with their current lab or other well-established labs do poorly — the search committee thinks they'll be toasted. A less visible, but more serious, problem is overlap or perceived overlap with a faculty

member. A few places build supergroups with similar interests, but most prefer one of everything. Time spent positioning yourself as a Bright New Thing is well spent.

No one — not the applicants, not the search committee — realizes in advance how slow the hiring process is. Academic campuses move at a glacial pace. In the first month, the applications get organized on the floor of a secretary's office. In the second, they go out for first reviews (by this time, the applicants are panicking because they haven't heard anything). The third month is Christmas vacation. The fourth is spent trying to schedule eight faculty for the first meeting, where they discuss only a fraction of the applications. The interviewees may not all be invited until May.

Is this the best process possible? We all know political operators with few ideas and many papers, or brilliant students who mixed with their advisors like oil and water. Ideally, the letters, publications and statements should correct for each other. My *bête noire* is the search committee lemming phenomenon: we must look at X because Stanford wants her. I also have qualms about the weight the letters get. One applicant has letters from Mendel, Darwin and Ramon y Cajal, another from Newton, Copernicus and Fermat. Well, I know the first guys better... and when I'm done, they're the only part of the file I remember. It's human nature, but it encourages intellectual incest. Letting the applicant speak for him or herself, at least in the first reading, might soften the grip of old boy- and girlism on the field.

And all this trouble only gets the applicant to the interview... — but we can deal with that another time.

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My Word is a new column in which Andrew Murray and Cori Bargmann (and guests) will write on contemporary issues in science. Responses will be welcomed by the Editor.