Job Talks and Short Lists

This is a compilation of advice and discussion that took place in DTM's Postdoctoral Development Program on January 31, 2012.

If you are after an academic job, then getting on a short list of interviewees is the first goal. That said, departments differ greatly in how they organize hiring. Some departments, such as those in the UK, have group interviews, some have no official short list but instead use their seminar list as a giant rolling admissions of a sort, and some start with a phone interview (you might also want to practice these, and get a Skype account and learn to use it). These differences underscore the central piece of advice: ***every*** talk is a job talk. There is no such thing as an informal talk, even though some faculty in a department may ask you for one. Furthermore, it's a good idea to treat every moment of a campus visit as part of the job interview, even the social/casual moments.

There are often complex politics, history, and deal-making in a department before a short list is created, and these unpredictable pressures usually increase during the interview and decision process. As a result, the "top" candidate is not always offered the job. Do not be dismayed if you are not offered the job after being short-listed. Getting short-listed is an indication you are hirable, and has the potential to raise your profile even if you don't get the job. Further, the first person offered the position may not accept the job. Many departments then go for the second or third person on the short list. Do not be offended if an offer is made to you even if you are not their first choice. As noted above, there is a broad range of complexity that leads to these decisions, and being offered the position simply means that they want to hire you. Finally, don't be discouraged if some interviews pass without an offer! It's common (again, it's a complex set of decisions made by the department) and every interview is excellent practice for the next interview that you'll get.

Preparing to visit for a job interview visit:

- Read the departmental web site and learn about all the scientists; read their major papers and discover their particular favorite hypotheses if you can. Ask for your schedule a few days before you arrive (though it will almost certainly change right up to the last minute), so you can learn about everyone you will speak with.
- Be prepared to ask them a question about their paper or research (see below). You immediately telegraph that you have done your homework and are interested in them. Most faculty find that impressive.
- Other short-listed candidates are likely to be listed as seminar speakers on the departmental web site, so that's a way to do a little investigation to size up the competition. Avoid comparing yourself directly to others on the short list, since you need to project who you are, not how you are better than others on the short list.
- Sign up to meet with seminar speakers at your own institution to get practice with these sometimes awkward, sometimes inspiring one-on-one conversations. Take note of what works and what does not and how to move the conversation along,

and use these skills in your own interviews. Think of questions to ask the speakers about their research as practice.

- Keep your web site up to date. If you want a metric of how critical this has been, use Google Analytics or a similar product to track hits on your site when you apply for jobs and as you come up to the dates of talks, and after them.
- Get your sleep ahead of time. Everything is part of the interview, including lunch, dinner, rides to/from the airport, etc. Appearance: Women, neat dress trousers and a professional-looking blouse or sweater with or without a jacket is as appropriate as a suit, perhaps more so. Skirts or dresses are excellent choices as long as they are professional-looking, but beware of the problem of very sore feet at the end of a long day from wearing uncomfortable heels (there are comfortable ones to be had). Men, get a haircut. Wear a tie and a pressed shirt (a jacket is also fine). If you have a beard, get it trimmed. If you are clean-shaven, shave the morning of the interview. This is expected of a job candidate. If your pants, shoes and belt are threadbare, go shopping. If you need help, get some! Even if you spend $500 on new duds, it is cheap, cheap, cheap relative to your time and future. Dressing appropriately conveys respect for your audience, one of the most important things you can do. When in doubt, it is better to be slightly overdressed/too formal than the opposite. Also, if you are flying in (and especially if you need to make connections), consider taking everything carry-on to avoid being without your clothes and other necessities during the interview.

Preparing your job talk:

- If there are people in the department you are visiting who have made progress in your field (there probably are), reference them in your talk if you can; In other words be careful and complete in reading the literature, and generous in referencing. Be careful to avoid pandering, however.
- Don't tailor your research talk to what you might imagine the department wants to see. Talk about the clearest and most compelling science you can. But if you have natural fit, do not pass up mentioning that fit – you want the department to visualize how natural it would be to add you as their colleague.
- Practice your job talk with colleagues before you go.
- When answering questions from your talk (and otherwise), avoid phrases like, "That's a really good question." They already know that it's a good question; otherwise, they wouldn't ask it.

Preparing for the many meetings and interviews that go along with your talk:

- Prepare good questions for *them* during your interviews. Ask about their science and about the department (see list of questions below).

- While they are talking with you, they will be thinking, Can I work with this person? You should be asking the same question. You and they are mutually choosing your future academic siblings.
- Your talk and the one-on-one discussions are the two areas you persuade or make good impressions as a colleague. Different department have different voting systems for choosing a new candidate, but you should assume that everyone's opinion counts.
- Take care to interact with a department's graduate students. Ask for their names, with whom they work, what their research is, what is good about the department, where it has weaknesses that can be improved. Graduate students often take candidates to lunch, and frequently have either real votes toward a potential hire, or influence the voters with their opinions.
- Interviewers look for vision, look for someone who could leave an intellectual mark or could lead. They look for paradigm changers, but they want someone who can make important progress in a timely manner in order to get tenure, not someone with a plan that takes many years for results.
- The department will want to know if you have made a new contribution, i.e., a code, technique, or some kind of substantial advance?
- Do not be just a clone of your advisor or use others' techniques. Don't just ask research questions someone else gave you. How are YOU adding to the body of work so-and-so is doing?
- If your visit extends past your talk, it's a good sign if your schedule suddenly becomes more crowded after people see your talk!
- Keep yourself on schedule during the visit. Politely say, "I should make sure I see Professor X…"
- Schedules are sometimes almost comically crowded. Do not hesitate to ask for a break (bathroom, water, coffee, etc.) or any reasonable/critical accommodations.

Questions you should be prepared to answer:

- What courses would you plan to teach? (Good answers include a new course or two, an existing course if it's not already covered by someone else, or an offer to help with it, and a survey/intro course for non-majors)
- What size research group do you plan to have? Undergrads? Grads? Postdocs? (there is no right answer here, but a wrong answer is "tiny" or "zero").
- Do you have ideas for 2-3 proposals that you'll submit in the next couple of years? What size budgets might these proposals have?
- From where will you get funding?
- What are the funding rates of the programs you will approach?
- What kind of lab do you want to build? What instruments, how many people?
- How much will that lab cost?
- Are you going to continue the work you are currently doing, or do you plan to forge new directions?
- Where do you anticipate being with your research in five years? Ten years?

- What do you think the big research questions are in your field?
- Do you have any questions (yes, you should –see suggestions below)

A large number of questions are illegal to ask. They include "How old are you?" and "Are you married?" This second question is often practical and critical in academia, where a partner often needs to find an academic job and a motivated institution might want to help. Faculty often don't know the law in this area, and even eager institutions may be unable to offer a second position, so a question about a spouse or your family often reflects a natural desire to see if you have a complication in that area that they may need to prepare to help you overcome.

If asked these questions, you are free to answer them. If you would prefer not to answer, try to deflect politely and as unobtrusively as possible. A combative response challenging the legality of the question would be very awkward if the interviewer is well-meaning. An excellent suggestion is to reply that you are free to move to a new job if the opportunity is right, and that you are here for the interview because you are genuinely interested in the position. For more information on illegal interview questions, please see a document hosted on the DTM postdoc web site.

Questions you might want to ask:

- Are junior faculty well supported? (service load, teaching load, etc.)
- What is the tenure process? Are there formal metrics for tenure (published papers per year, students graduated, etc.)?
- Do faculty have formal mentorships? If so, are these done at the department level, or higher (such as with another department).
- Is there seed money, or other internal funding within the university, particularly for new initiatives?
- Are there adequate personnel resources for administration in the department, including research, computer/IT support, lab technicians, etc.? How are these positions supported (research funds, department funds, university funds, etc.)?
- Does the department have a strategic plan? What is the growth trajectory of the department?
- Are there other new hires on the horizon? Will there be new positions created in the next few years, or will new hiring come from retirements?
- Where does your department stand in the eyes of the university administration? Is it considered a top program?
- Is the university healthy? Are there growth areas or new directions the university is taking? Is it drawing funds away from the department, or is the department playing a key role?