

How to find the right postdoc lab



Finding a post doc lab is really tough.

It's not just because you are not sure about what you want to study, the fact that you don't know enough people in fields that differ from the one you are currently working on, and that you have to decide soon. It is just one of those next to impossible decisions that we go through because there are so many options and we know that the choice can really affect our career path. Hopefully knowing that **it is tough for everyone** else (at least everyone I talked to) and the suggestions below will make it a bit easier.

Search basics

1. Start with a broad field and **search for the right person**. The person who runs the lab will have immense impact on what you learn, how productive you are, how you enjoy the experience and your chances of finding a position afterwards. If you start with a very specific subfield in mind you limit your ability to choose a PI that is a good fit to you.
2. How do you find the right person? go to as many people as you can and **ask who would they recommend** as an advisor who is thoughtful, successful and well respected and nice to work with. Every person will usually come up with a few names. Check out their websites and publications. Notice names that are recommended by different people.
3. Asking people **throughout your university faculty and other universities** to share their perspective and people they know is good both for the information you get and for the contact you are making with that person. You will know him/her in the future and in a few years they will remember that you are such a nice person and that they actually helped you decide on a post doc and feel some responsibility for your future success.
4. **Try to go to a conference** in the broad field that interests you. A conference is a good time to see if the field really does interest you and to meet all the important people in one place. Also this might give you a chance to already introduce yourself and talk with some potential PIs or their students to see if you like interacting with them.

How do you make first contact with the lab heads?

5. **Try to have someone introduce you.** Usually someone that knows the PI and can tell them that you are a wonderful candidate even before you send your CV. This is because in many big labs the PIs don't even open your CV if they don't get a telephone recommendation on who you are.
6. Just **mentioning the name of the person who referred you** in the email title increases the chances that it will be read. Try alternative routes of approach – talk with them in a conference or just phone their office.
7. Write a polite and detailed email telling about **why you are interested in the lab** and requesting to come and interview. Make sure your CV is updated and serves you well (i.e, make sure its formatted nicely, in PDF format so it looks good, has no typos, has all your merits written easily to see)

When you visit

8. **Visit places early.** You can go more than once. 2-4 labs in a 10 day visit is common.
9. **How does a “normal” visit look like?** Usually a visit is a few hours to a day. You will often give a group meeting or informal seminar on your PhD work. Remember that they are not experts in your field, so keep it such that they can follow you – this is not a defense. If there are other people you consider working with on campus and you want to invite them as well that might actually be a good idea. Ask permission from your host and it will save you repeating yourself. Except for meeting with the PI in the beginning/end, you will meet with members of the lab. They can help give you a feel as to how it is to do science there, what are the leading projects and much more. They might offer to take you for dinner – could be an excellent opportunity to get a feeling for the vibes of the lab and the other sides of many coins...
10. **It is important not to cram too many interviews in too few days.** The visits are very tiring and demand preparation – you should come after having read and understood the last papers from the lab so that during personal meetings with the PI or students you can ask good questions, show that you are knowledgeable and interested in their work. One interview every two days is a good rate.
11. **Make sure to ask questions that are important to you about lab life:** “will the PI be supportive? What are his weaknesses? Strengths? How often does he hear about the work? Does he put people on similar projects? Does he have expectations in regards to work hours? Etc...” As long as you do it nicely and politely it is completely OK to ask such questions from the students.
12. **You will try to impress people in your visit but you should just as much notice if they impress you.** Make sure you get a feel to who the people are, the atmosphere, the range of projects etc.
13. **“Chemistry” with the advisor is key.** Try to assess if you connect and ask yourself “do I enjoy interacting with him?”
14. **Try to meet with one of the lab members outside the lab surrounding.** Many people open up to discuss weaker points about their lab when you are spending time at dinner or strolling around campus.
15. **Make contact with previous students.** You can email or call alumni of the lab which have now carried on. They often are more exempt of the cognitive dissonance that makes people stand behind their decision to go to the lab they are now at and can give you a more mature view of the pros and cons of your possible advisor.
16. For people with kids, **finding day care** for children could be a major challenge affecting your first year in the new place. You should sign up as early as possible. If important, consider getting into waiting lists even before you have a final decision. You can always cancel and make someone happy.
17. Finding a **suitable job for your spouse** can really affect how you experience your postdocs period. Ask around early about possibilities within the university, connections that people have etc.
18. **How to inform the labs you choose not to go to?** When you come back from the visits write thank you emails to all labs. Sometimes also to students who were

especially nice. You should not be under pressure to tell them yet what will be your decision. Everyone knows it is a complicated and long process. When you finally decide where you will go, usually weeks-months afterwards, it is good to inform the other labs and thank them again.

When to go

19. **Tax treaty.** Israel as well as many other countries have tax treaties with the US that make you exempt from paying tax for the first two years. This can have a significant impact on how much you make. One important point is that it is 2 calendar years, meaning that if you arrive in November you get only a year and two months whereas if you arrive in April you get a year and 9 months. Difference is probably worth around 5-10 thousand dollars.
20. **For those going to cold places** (Boston, NY, Canada, UK etc). Even though Sep-Nov is a common time of year to arrive, this is also when general winter is approaching. Half a year in the cold as a starter can affect your mood and definitely your spouse's. Arriving in Dec-Feb can be a cold shock treatment. It is worth considering arriving around April-May. Doing an extra short postdocs back home can give you time to prepare and make more connections before you leave home country.

Fellowships and finance

21. **Applying for fellowships** before you depart for post doc is of course preferable but not a must. Most strong labs will be able to support your first year even if you don't have any fellowship but will expect you to apply during that time.
22. Some fellowships can be **useful beyond their fellowship period**. Human frontiers (HFSP) for example offers grants to start a lab that are very attractive but available only to previous post doc awardees. They also have very attractive maternity leave rules which allow both the mother and the father to take a 3 months fully paid leave (in the US that is twice the regular paid leave time).
23. During your visits to labs you **can definitely discuss financial issues with your potential advisor**. It is not the first subject to start with but can be raised towards the end of the discussion. You can ask about possible fellowships he/she recommends, possible support from the university, housing and daycare support etc.
24. **Health care is a big issue in the US.** Much more expensive than in other countries. Luckily, you would most surely be covered by your university and also your family can join the program at a much reduced fee (still a couple of hundred dollars per month). If in doubt, ask to make sure you are covered. This is also something that can be discussed with the PIs. Many PIs if requested will pay for the health insurance for your entire family.
25. **Find a knowledgeable ex patriot** in the university you are about to move to or an Israeli that is already there, to give you the outline of the costs of living so you know what to expect. More tips see below in useful resources (Gill Bejerano's site)

Choosing a project

26. In most labs you don't have to decide on a project before you arrive. Even if you do, it is common to change it during the first year. It is often a good idea to spend the first few months thinking up projects, testing ideas etc before plunging completely into a research effort. **Finding the right direction for you is much more important than getting some work underway.**
27. It is useful to remember the TOP model that suggests finding the intersection of your **Talents**, what your **Organization** needs and your **Passions**.

Useful resources:

How to choose a lab by Maya Schuldiner:

http://www.weizmann.ac.il/mediawiki/images/youngpi/Choosing_a_Thesis_Lab.pdf

How to choose a good scientific problem by Uri Alon:

<http://www.weizmann.ac.il/mcb/UriAlon/nurturing/HowToChooseGoodProblem.pdf>

US Relocation Tips by Gill Bejerano: <http://users.soe.ucsc.edu/~jill/postdoc.html>

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