

Reflections on my job search and interviews

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These are some of my personal thoughts after my job search experience. I was on the chemistry/physical sciences academic job market for two rounds of applications in 2016 and 2017. This is just my experience I'm sharing. It's good to keep in mind that there is not a "one size fits all" method for finding an academic job.

SUMMARY OF SEARCHES:

2016-2017 season - Sent out 13 applications w/ 4 phone interviews, 3 on-site invites; I went to 1 on-site, received 1 offer; turned it down. That season I didn't have a postdoc publication yet. I was sending applications to lower-tiered schools and to regional locations I was interested in. After going to the one on-site, I realized that my career interests would be better served by waiting until after I had a publication.

2017-2018 season – Sent out 21 applications w/ 4 phone interviews, 11 on-site invites; went to 10 on-sites, received 2 offers.

I applied mainly to chemistry departments, w/ physics, applied sciences, and chemical engineering sprinkled in. I heard mostly from natural sciences, and only from one engineering application.

APPLICATION PREP:

To manage both application prep and postdoctoral work, I made a rule that I would leave the office every day at 5 pm and any time after or on weekends was spent on job applications. This clear-set line was to make sure I avoided having any guilt for ignoring lab work for job application prep.

Applying the 2016-2017 season definitely helped my 2017-2018 applications. My research proposal was revamped and lengthened since I had an entire year to keep adding to my literature repertoire. I don't think I was hurt by applying two rounds.

Quick summary of my typical application: 2 page cover letter, 6 page CV, 10 page research statement with 1 page of references, 2 page teaching statement.

I never got a clear answer on how long the research statement should be. Really - a department chair said it should be 5 pages, a workshop said 10 pages, someone recently on the market said they got a job with a 30 page proposal. I freaked out about this too much. What I settled on and worked for me was a 10 page proposal with a 1 page cover page and 3, 3-page proposals set in a JACS-like double column format with 1 figure per page. Each proposal also had a "summary" with a TOC like figure.

Best advice I got was to make it very clear on the first page of my research statement how my research was different from the field and how I would advance the field. I also included a sentence about this in my cover letter. Thinking/writing about this and talking it through with someone who played a devil's advocate helped for my interviews too.

I included tailored references to the school/department in each of my proposals. (e.g. specifically naming a nanofab or microscopy facility; listing a collaborator from the department who could help with synthesis needs). A couple of faculty mentioned that they liked this in the interview. I think it's worth taking the extra hour or so to look this up. It'll also help you understand if the school has the facilities you need.

The list of schools I applied to was driven a lot by geography which was personally important for me. A couple of my advisors pushed me to apply to some higher ranked departments, which, while I was skeptical at first and doubted I would hear back from, I am thankful I applied to. I ended up interviewing at and liking some of them. They were good interview and networking experiences. I didn't apply anywhere I absolutely knew I wouldn't be able to live (for me, that's a small college town, away from an airport). I used Chemjobber and Andrew Spaeth's list and then also went to school's websites in the cities/regions I was interested in and searched their job boards for other non-chemistry positions I could apply to.

INTERVIEWS:

The higher-ranked the school, the shorter the interview. All of my one-day interviews were in the top 20 ranked departments and focused on only meeting faculty in my specialty. I had two 2.5-3 day interviews at the lowest ranked schools I interviewed at and met everyone in the department. Typical interviews fell in between at 1.5-2 days.

Individual meetings fall into three types and you never know which it'll be: 1) they interview you with both science/big picture/vision questions of your planned research; 2) they go into a lot of detail talking about their research/open up a ppt and go slide by slide; or 3) they ask you if you have any questions and let you interview them. Just be ready for all of them.

Also, I clearly had meetings setup that were "LOOK! We have another female scientist! Talk about women-things!" as their science was way out of my field. I really can't decide if these are good... Men don't have these meetings and get to focus on the science throughout their interview... And this highlights the extra service you have to do as a "minority" in STEM. I think the best and obvious answer to this is that it'd be great for departments to have enough URM on their faculty so you don't need to go out of your way to have overlap. It's too bad that isn't the case. Alternatively, one school had me meet with a representative from the diversity office. If this is standard for all interviewees, this can avoid modifying the schedule for different applicants based on their gender or race. Also, only one university asked about diversity during the interview. I think science could get better at discussing and emphasizing diversity in the interview process as opposed to just considering it a HR requirement.

I had a set suitcase I kept packed w/ the same outfits/jewelry/makeup to wear. It made it easy not to have to think about what I was wearing. Also, know you should have layers/versatility in switching outfits based on the weather. My first interview in late October in Southern CA was in the upper 90's F, while in January I was in a slushy blizzard in Pittsburgh. So before the season starts, have winter clothes ready if you might be interviewing somewhere cold. When you're in the midst of interview season you won't have much time to go shopping. Make sure your winter jacket fits over your suit jacket.

Included in my suitcase – teabags/throat lozenges (my throat got tired from all the talking), Bluetooth speaker, sleep aids since I never knew how bright/loud my hotel room would be.

Rent a car if you're driving. I drove my personal car for one interview and got a blown tire that added a couple of hours, \$\$\$ in repairs, and stress I didn't need.

The order I attended interviews mattered, but in a different way than I was advised. My first interviews definitely needed some polishing. My two offers in 2018 were actually from my last two interviews of the season. This is the opposite of some advice I received that "your last interviews won't be good because you'll be burned out." I was actually more burned out earlier in the season when I was working on scheduling/prepping for interviews and still submitting some applications. By Christmas my brain was fried and my interviews before then were my worst. Before the interviews I received offers from, I went to two interviews that I viewed as "scary." I went there with the attitude of holding nothing back and I was happy with my performance at these "intimidating" places. I think after that I finally presented with the confidence to land an offer.

I also totally bombed at a couple of interviews where I was very interested in the position. Since I really wanted to do well, it actually led to a lot of nerves and backfired. I don't know the answer to fixing this, except I just tried to move on as quickly as I could.

The behavior of a department to my chalk talks was an unknown until it happened. Overall, I got interrupted less than I expected. I had ~20 slides for 1 hour sessions since there will be some questions/longer discussions. Most of my chalk talks were easier than some of my seminars/qual exams during my PhD. After going to a couple of interviews, you can start to anticipate some of the questions. I had ~30 back up slides based on anticipated questions. Some departments had no one interrupt at all during the chalk talk. The hardest chalk talk I gave was one that let faculty come and go during the entire talk. It was hard to gauge who was following vs. who had just arrived. All the departments had me give my research talk before the chalk talk except for one.

Interviewing is fun in getting to meet so many great people, hearing about awesome science, getting to share your ideas, and getting to travel and eat in different cities. But the other side is living a couple months of feeling constantly judged and living under the interview microscope. I was living alone/without pets at the time, so having my partner, family, and friends to call after

the interviews was important. But there were definitely days I wish there was a pet at home I could come to after an interview that would be there with some unconditional love, haha.

Travel refunds and arranging travel took up a lot of time, but helpful administrators make the process easier. Some schools paid for things up front, others paid back reimbursements that sometimes took a month or two to get. State schools usually took the longest.

OFFERS & NEGOTIATIONS:

At the end of it, some schools let me know I didn't get the job. Some schools didn't. Only one took the time to make a phone call with a rejection & I truly appreciated that. I wish more courtesy was given to the job seekers to let them know the status. Even if it's a negative result, the applicants are human and I think should be treated as such. I know everyone in academia is "busy," but those who took 5 minutes for a phone call vs. the places I didn't get a notice after spending three days on their campus is something I will remember. And it's something I will keep in mind once I'm on the other side of the interview process.

The negotiations took so much longer than expected. I received my first "soft offer" February 24th. I officially signed around 2 months later. There was a lot of back and forth – probably ~5 phone calls, multiple emails. Lab space was my priority in negotiating, as I wasn't going to be pushy on everything.

Having two offers was very nice, but also deciding and rejecting one offer was not fun at all after spending time with the people in the department. I know it's part of the process, but I didn't feel great after.

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Finally with the experience my friends and colleagues had at the same time... I don't think you can always predict the success of a person's job search just based on quantifiable numbers (ranking of schools they attended, number of publications, impact factors, who they worked for etc.). Being in the right place at the right time, luck, and connections all come into play. It's a crap shoot, and the only way to have a chance is to play the game. Some people can send out one application and get one offer. Others send out 10's or >100 and get nothing. In the end, you can only take one job and you hope there is one job offer you can take.