

Applying for a PhD/post-doc position: wearing the PI's shoes

An informal guide

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Motivation

- I've seen both sides of the coin
- Recently: applicants – what I'd like to say (but can't say)
- How does recruiting look from the point of view of the recruiter?

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Disclaimer

This really only is my personal view: unofficial (and not universal) advice

Outline

Finding a project

Preparing the application

- Application form

- Cover letter

- CV

- Referees

The interview

Contacting people

Final notes

Finding a project

General



Specific

- “I’ll have a look around to see what is out there”
- ...
- “I (sort of) know what I’d like to do but I do not know where/how”
- ...
- “I really would like to work on this project in the lab of Prof. Q”

- What would you like to work on? Where? Have a good idea (but be flexible)
- Consider getting in touch before applying

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General

- Wide search, e.g.
 - FindAPostDoc (<https://www.findapostdoc.com/>)
 - *Jobs* section in journals (e.g. Nature, Science)
- *Careers* section in societies websites, e.g.
 - FENS (the Federation of European Neuroscience Societies) Job Market (<https://www.fens.org/careers/job-market>)
 - The Physiological Society (<https://www.physoc.org/careers/jobs/>)
 - The Nutrition Society (<https://jobs.nutritionociety.org/>)
- Word-of-mouth, social media
- During meetings, chat to people

Specific

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The application process

Typical components:

- Written application
 - Cover letter
 - Application form
 - CV
 - List of referees (you have to allow contact)
- Interview
- References

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The application form

- Institution-specific
- Read the instructions *carefully*
- Know who to contact: Application form issues? HR/admin. The project? Potential supervisor

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The cover letter

- Not terribly long: ideally one page
- Focused. Related to the position you are applying for
- Do your research, find the name of the person. Avoid “To whom it may concern”
- Be specific when writing personal statements or cover letters. Show that you are interested in this particular project, cf. “I am interested in Medical Science” vs “I am interested in studying the possibility of modulating these receptors that regulate cell development...”

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The CV

- Organise your CV properly: clear sections, clear chronological order (I prefer reverse chronological).
- Make it easy for the reader, e.g. check font size, highlight your name in the list of publications
- Make it relevant
- Sensible length
- Avoid gaps

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What *not* to put on your CV

- Do not add date of birth, religion, marital status, nationality, personal phone/address, visa status... I do not think this is useful.
- A picture of yourself?
- Computing skills: “Skills in Microsoft Office, EndNote, iPhone...”. That should be a given. No-one stands out these days for knowing that. (“Internet” under “Computer skills”??) Do you have any more interesting computing skills?
- “Personal skills” section? I’m sceptical. Especially for things like “problem solver”, “quick learner”, “creative”, languages spoken...
- Hobbies? Hmm. Is this really necessary? Do you have space for this?

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What *not* to put on your CV

- No need to tell us about your primary/secondary school, or add academic records (HR will ask for whatever records are needed)
- Avoid irrelevant things. Write your CV for the job you are applying for; e.g. if it is a research job, maybe no need for an extensive “Teaching profile”?
- Full driving licence. Why would you say that? (unless the job explicitly requires you to drive)

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The referees

- You will need 2–3 referees
- Think this carefully: do not underestimate

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Before the interview

Invited for an interview? Great! Now prepare carefully...

- Read the instructions. Do you need to present anything?
- Find out more about the project, the place, the people (you want to make sure that you like the post/project)
- Try to anticipate some of the questions you'll be asked
- Think: are there gaps in your CV?
- Think about non-academic questions: e.g. at UoA “equality and diversity”
- Prepare questions
- Referees: Important to allow contact with them. This may come up during interview.

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During the interview

Usual format: short talk followed by Q&As

- Stick to the time allocated
- Talk about *your* work
- I want to know what can you do:
 - Are your skills useful? What expertise will you be bringing?
 - Knowledge?
 - Can you communicate well?
 - Can you organise ideas?
 - Can you work independently/as part of a team?
 - Can you contribute new ideas?
 - I (and you) want to know if we can get on

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During the interview

- Ask questions yourself. What would you want to know? You also are interviewing the people offering you the job
- Think: what they'd like to know but are afraid to ask

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Contacting people: When to get in touch

- Before applying (just scouting or looking to work with someone in particular?)
- During the application: find more about the project/people
- After the application (?)

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Contacting people: How to get in touch

- Email
- Conferences
- Online/in person chat. Visit the lab

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Contacting people: Dos and don'ts

- Do get in touch with potential supervisors. Ask questions, show interest. Stand out.
- Do not be overwhelming
- Do think in advance: what are your objectives?
- Do ask something interesting
- Do not turn up without having anything to say
- Do not be generic (it shows) (“Dear Professor”. “I’m interested in your project”)

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- What do you want to do?
- Read the ad carefully. Is this what you want? Do you have the skills?
- Get in touch
- Stand out. You want to be top of the pile. How do you get there?
- Think: What makes a good CV? What makes a good first impression?
- Wear the supervisor's shoes

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