

Postdoc Academic Chat #3

General Principles For Responding To Academic Job Offers

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LKSC 101

<http://med.stanford.edu/irt/about/maps-directions/lksc-directions.html>

Questions/Discussion items to consider:

- 1. What are the specific “must have” items that you are most anxious about asking for during your negotiations?**
- 2. How, when and in what way do you bring the “two body problem” into the conversation?**
- 3. How best can you research what is already available at an institution by way of resources, particularly facilities and equipment, that you can share and use?**

Readings

- (1) The Right Start-Up Package for Beginning Science Professors**
- (2) The Right Start-Up Package - It's Not Just About Money**
- (3) General Principles For Responding to Academic Job Offers**

- (1) The Right Start-Up Package for Beginning Science Professors**

Richard Reis Stanford University

"Remember, what you are negotiating is the start-up package, not just the start-up salary. How you start out can make all the difference in how well you do, how successful you will be, so be sure you get the resources you need at the beginning.-- Assistant professor of chemistry, University of Michigan."

Congratulations, you have just been offered a tenure-track assistant professorship at your first-choice institution. Now, however, your real work begins. You are entering the critical negotiation stage that may, or may not, bring you the resources you need for a successful academic career.

To thrive as a beginning science or engineering professor you are going to need more than a good starting salary. Of course, such a salary is important. Not only does it help provide you with a needed standard of living, it establishes the base line for future raises and reduces the need for you to look for other, career-diverting ways to earn additional income.

Yet many beginning faculty members think it's their job to hit the dean up for an extra \$3,000 to \$4,000 before accepting an academic offer. Such an approach not only creates resentment, it can make it more difficult for you to get the other things you must have to begin your tenure journey. As was noted by Eve Riskin, an associate professor of electrical engineering at the University of Washington:

"Most faculty don't realize they can negotiate their start-up conditions in a way that will help them be more successful, as well as happy. My goal was to make my life easier, not richer. It wasn't the start-up salary, but the start-up resources I really cared about."

Negotiating an academic job offer is about becoming part of an organization and a group of people with which you will have a significant relationship. You want to get the things you need to increase your chances of success, while remembering that you are going to work with these people for years to come.

What else besides salary should you look for in a start-up package?

For science and engineering professors, the main things are graduate-student support, summer salary support, laboratory and computer equipment, manageable teaching responsibilities, particularly in the first three years, and a small amount of unrestricted funds that you can use in any appropriate way without prior approval.

Before discussing these resources in more detail, let's make sure that you begin the negotiating process with the right mindset. To do so, you need to see yourself not as an applicant who is still seeking a job offer, but as a person who has received one. Most people never make this critical shift, and it can cost

them dearly.

You need to be forthright in your approach and not worry that the school is going to withdraw its offer because of it. How you ask for something is often as important as what you ask for. As Martin Ford, associate dean of the graduate school of education at George Mason University, says, "Always try to use work quality or productivity as the rationale in your negotiations. Align your goals with those of your employer."

Let's first look at the issue of graduate-student support. Sometimes you can negotiate trade-offs that get you what you need while at the same time making a very positive impression. The case of an assistant professor in the mechanical-engineering department at the University of Massachusetts is an example.

In his first round of negotiations the department offered to cover his salary for two summers so he could continue to do research. He countered with a request for salary support for the first summer, but in exchange for the second summer's compensation, he asked for summer support for two graduate students. He was confident that he could generate support on his own, and consequently the department was delighted to make the requested trade-off.

What about laboratory equipment and computer support?

The key, as always, is to try to make it a win-win arrangement for both you and the department. Shon Pulley, associate professor of chemistry at the University of Missouri at Columbia, points to this example: "In explaining to the department why I needed a particular piece of equipment, I also pointed out how other faculty members could benefit from its use and how its acquisition would count as a matching contribution toward additional grant support."

Keep in mind that your idea and the department's idea of what you need may differ simply out of misunderstanding or ignorance. You are in the best position to know your needs, but in trying to meet them, be open to approaches that you might not have thought about. The department may not have the computer you need, but may be willing to work with you on obtaining it as a gift from a local technology company.

Now let's take a look at what is often the trickiest element in the negotiation: your beginning teaching assignment. On one hand you want to make clear that you take your teaching responsibility very seriously, yet in order to do so you

need to reduce or simplify such responsibility in your first few years on the job.

Most departments will agree in principle with this goal. But what if the department says it is sympathetic to your request for a reduced teaching commitment in your first year, but is unable to honor it? They say you will be replacing someone who taught a regular number of classes each semester, so that is what you are going to have to do.

Don't give up too easily. You might respond by asking if you can borrow ahead with another faculty member, who would take one of your classes the first semester in exchange for your teaching one of his or her classes later on.

Other ways of simplifying your initial teaching assignment might include: Teaching a course previously taught by someone who is willing to loan you copies of their lecture notes, exams, and homework assignments. Teaching two classes back to back or schedule days without classes so you can block off time to do other work.

Teaching a class with fewer students. There is a big difference between a class with 30 students and the same class with 60 students. There is one more resource you should try to obtain before starting your employment. Ask your department to set up an unrestricted account in your name and to deposit a starting sum, say \$5,000 to \$10,000, in it.

Such an account allows you to cover relatively small expenses such as travel to conferences, computer and software purchases, book purchases, publication fees, and business lunches. This approach gives you freedom to deal with unanticipated expenses in a timely manner without having to constantly ask your chair for small amounts of money.

The above examples are the key things to keep in mind when negotiating a start-up package. There may be others, depending on a person's particular situation. I'd very much like to hear about interesting, difficult, or unusual situations you have encountered in your own negotiations. Please send your comments to catalyst@chronicle.com

(2) The Right Start-Up Package - It's Not Just About Money

The following note from Hy D. Tran, assistant professor of Mechanical Engineering and of Electrical and Computer Engineering at the University of New Mexico gives some important insights on negotiating for a successful

start-up package for beginning professors.

It is generally accepted that one has the best negotiation position before accepting an offer, and vice-versa. It is also accepted that offers are virtual (vaporware, if you will), unless they are in writing. However, a lot of verbal exploration is a part of any negotiation process. Regardless of how careful you are, there will always be surprises--promises made in writing may be subject to "interpretation" (e.g. you thought you had a 2000 sq. ft lab promised to you, but it's really a broom closet...) The most important thing is the people--do you feel that you will be comfortable in the environment that you've been interviewing. You must realize that your future department is always putting its best foot forward (these are all truisms, even in non-academic environments).

The most important part about negotiating a startup package is to realize that it's not about money! It's about getting your career launched as quickly and effectively as possible. Insofar as money is useful (e.g. you can now afford to buy lunch, dinner, and use a laundry service) money is important. But in addition to salary, you have to ask for laboratory/office space, professional development support, equipment money, student support funds, and reduced teaching commitments. If you are expected to do research, the reduced teaching load is probably the most important part of your startup! Try to get (in writing in your offer) a reduced teaching load for as long as you can. In addition, a departmental or school commitment to reduce your teaching load can be used to demonstrate to funding agencies the "institutional commitment" This is time that you can also use this time during your first year to prepare a "career roadmap." If you can sketch out a career roadmap prior to getting a written offer, all the better.

So, while you're out interviewing (or before), think about what is it that you want, and what you **really** need. (I want a salary in 6 digits, but can make do with 5; but I **really** need parking, etc.) For me, a very important consideration was child care. Classify those desires--compensation; work environment; expectations; support--and think about what contribution **you** are making to your department. Why are they interviewing you? What is it that they're looking for? Will you be happy fulfilling their expectations? Then, negotiate for the things that you will need in order to succeed.

That said, you should not offer to take less \$\$ than they're willing to give.

(3) General Principles for Responding to Academic Job Offers

Martin Ford, associate dean of the Graduate School of Education, at George Mason University, in Fairfax, Virginia, has formulated eleven general principles for responding to academic job offers. Ford's advice, which applies to a wide range of disciplines, not just education, are posted here with his permission.

(1) MAKE SURE YOU HAVE AN OFFER

If it's not from someone authorized to make an offer (e.g., a dean or department head), it's not an offer. If it's not in writing, it is not an offer. Therefore, the appropriate response to an oral "offer" of a job, salary or fringe benefit (e.g., moving expenses, research space, etc.) is to "put it in writing."

(2) KNOW WHAT YOU WANT - AND WHAT YOU DON'T WANT

Find out as much as you can about what academic jobs are like - salary, working conditions, work activities, work expectations, and lifestyle considerations. Also find out as much as you can about alternative jobs you may consider. Use this information to determine the boundary conditions of what is possible on these dimensions.

(3) CLEARLY COMMUNICATE WHAT YOU WANT - BUT ONLY TO THE RIGHT PEOPLE

Discussions with potential colleagues and students should be focused primarily on intellectual concerns. Do not discuss salary, or fringe benefits, unless you are talking to the person who will be making the offer (e.g., the dean or department head). One possible exception - often it is appropriate to communicate some of your non-monetary objectives and concerns to your "host" (typically a member of the Search Committee), especially if they involve getting your work done (e.g., space, equipment, research and teaching assistants - but not salary, moving expenses, or housing assistance).

(4) ALWAYS TRY TO USE WORK QUALITY OR PRODUCTIVITY AS THE RATIONALE IN YOUR NEGOTIATIONS - ALIGN YOUR GOALS WITH THOSE OF YOUR EMPLOYER

Employers will respect you even if your requests seem excessive if the underlying goal is to do a better job (e.g., seed grants, RA, computer, and a more manageable initial teaching commitment could significantly enhance productivity; a higher salary, moving expenses, or housing assistance could enable you to focus on your job rather than seek extraneous summer or consulting income).

(5) MAKE REQUESTS IN AN INFORMATIONAL MANNER RATHER THAN CONTROLLING MANNER

Psychological research clearly indicates that people are much more likely to respond positively to feedback (such as a response to a job offer) if they perceive it to be an honest attempt to inform rather than a manipulative attempt to control behavior or to gain personal resources. This principle is especially applicable to situations involving the negotiation of multiple offers.

(6) NEGOTIATE HARD ON THINGS THAT ARE "OUT OF BOUNDS," NEGOTIATE MORE GENTLY ON THINGS THAT ARE "IN BOUNDS."

Since a job offer is worthless if there are "fatal flaws" in it that put it "out of bounds," you should stand firm on requests designed to fix these flaws. On the other hand, you can probably afford to compromise (or even give in) on things that are "in bounds" (i.e., satisfactory but not ideal). Some satisfactory elements of a job offer may become "fatal flaws," however, if you are negotiating multiple offers.

(7) LEARN ABOUT THE TENURE PROFESS, BUT DON'T GET HUNG UP ON IT

Tenure decisions are too individualized to enable you to use this as a major criterion except in extreme cases. However, make sure you know whether the job being offered is tenure-track, and GET IT IN WRITING. A verbal assurance that a non-tenure-track job will eventually become tenure-track should not be trusted, so get it in writing as well.

(8) START AS HIGH AS YOU CAN IN INSTITUTIONAL PRESTIGE

You can probably move down the institutional ladder, but it's almost impossible to move up any significant distance. However, keep in mind that at some schools the ratings of one department may exceed, by a considerable degree, the ratings for the school as a whole.

In addition to knowing where a school or department is on the prestige scale, you also want to know which way it is heading. Some schools are clearly making the effort to move up and they are often willing to hire the very best young faculty by making available the necessary resources.

(9) GET AS HIGH A STARTING SALARY AS YOU CAN, BUT BE REALISTIC

A higher starting salary means that future percentage increases will be based on a higher number, thus accelerating your salary at a somewhat faster pace (all else being equal). On the other hand, assistant professor salaries fluctuate only

within a very narrow range, so that there's usually not much point in pushing too hard on this component of the job offer.

You don't want to lose a lot of points with the dean by bargaining for an extra \$2,000 to \$3,000 in salary. Remember, what you are really negotiating is the start-up compensation package. Academic year salary is only one part of this. Summer income opportunities, consulting time, support for travel, and housing assistance, all have an impact on your standard of living.

(10) CREATE OPTIONS AND KEEP AS MANY OPEN AS YOU CAN AS LONG AS YOU CAN

Be an active, engaged job seeker - make sure all of the options you would like to have are explored. Be patient and planful - don't make any decisions you don't have to make unless you are certain that other options are closed or less attractive.

(11) IN MAKING A DECISION, COMBINE LOGIC AND EMOTION

A thorough evaluation of a job offer should combine thoughtful analysis of the degree to which it affords the attainment of desired outcomes AND an appreciation of the fact that emotions are also designed to provide this same kind of evaluative information. If these two kinds of evaluations conflict, you should work hard to try to resolve the discrepancy. In the end you have to trust your gut. If you FEEL really negative about a job, don't take it unless you can resolve why you feel this way.