ADVICE FOR POSTDOCS

Going it alone

If your principal investigator is unwilling or unable to help with your job search, try these steps to make progress on your own.

- Craft a plan of your goals and timelines. Even if you don't show it to anyone, it is a good way to analyse your strengths and weaknesses, and to give yourself direction.
- Plan ahead. Try to pick an adviser whose postdocs are typically successful, says Jodi Lubetsky, a manager of science policy at the Association of American Medical Colleges in Washington DC.
- If you've already joined a lab and your adviser is "missing in action", schedule a time to talk, she says. If that isn't working and you still want to get your principal investigator involved, find a neutral person to whom you feel safe talking.
- Publish, but don't obsess. Some employers want several papers per year; some are fine with fewer in top-tier journals. Don't worry too much about quantity, says Ron Vale, a cell biologist at the University of California, San Francisco. One strong paper is often good enough, he says.
- Get outside funding or fellowships to show employers that you can compete successfully for money. Awards can come from sources such as local governments, foundations or professional societies.
- Multiply your mentors. Even if your principal investigator is helpful, it is a good idea to establish relationships with 2–4 experienced scientists, who will then be able to answer personalized questions during a phone call from employers, and contribute more than just generic recommendation letters. **A.M.**

that would best nurture her research in tissue engineering. They reviewed her research statement, and suggested that she emphasize how her research programme would address the field's next frontier. What you have already accomplished gets you an interview, they told her — showing how your work can change the field gets you the job. "When I was a PhD and postdoc, I didn't realize that's how it would work," says Radisic.

Applicants also need outstanding letters of recommendation. Ron Vale, a cell biologist at the University of California, San Francisco, says that when one of his postdocs is applying for a position that he knows is a good match, he makes sure that his letter conforms to the "needs and fit of that individual to that institution". A few choice phone calls don't hurt, either. In one instance, Lucy Shapiro, a developmental biologist at Stanford University in California, rang the head of a department that had hired her postdoc's partner, telling them to employ her postdoc too. It worked; her postdoc was offered a job "on the spot, practically", says Shapiro.

Even after a postdoc is invited to an interview, the principal investigator's work is not done. When preparing postdocs to give talks during interviews, Shapiro gets the whole team involved. "They have a rehearsal, and the entire lab gets together and we tear the talk apart," she says. "And we make sure the presentation always ends with an overhead or PowerPoint of 'future work'."

Castillo-Chavez helped one of his postdocs to practise interviewing. He and a team of volunteers asked the candidate hard questions, so that she would not be caught off guard in the real interview. They also talked about current events for weeks, so that she would feel comfortable in discussions. The approach worked; the postdoc is now a full professor.

Castillo-Chavez tells his protégés to research the people who will be interviewing them, so that they can ask informed questions about the interviewers' work. He suggests that when conversation dries up, applicants bring up ice-breakers such as cultural life in the area, schools and housing. "It is sometimes surprising how unprepared postdocs are for a job interview," he cautions.

SOMETHING FOR EVERYONE

All this can be a lot of work for busy principal investigators. But it is often time well spent — a good outcome will ultimately help the mentor. "It's your credibility that's on the line, too," says Vale, who has helped 17 postdocs to obtain tenure-track faculty positions, government posts or industry jobs within the past ten years. "When it's time for them to get a job, it's your duty as a principal investigator and a mentor to be as helpful as you possibly can," he says.

Principal investigators whose postdocs get great jobs will find that their labs benefit. "You will attract the best people to work for you, because they know there's something that comes out of their effort," says Radisic. "There will be their dream job at the end of this."

Shapiro has actively helped her postdocs to move on, in part out of love for her research on the model organism *Caulobacter crescentus*. "I don't want *Caulobacter* research to disappear when I stop working," she says. "If you want a field to continue, how better than to ensure there's competition?" ■

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GRADUATES

UK jobs not secure

Just half of UK scientists feel that their jobs are secure, according to a survey out on 20 June. The Higher Education Careers Services Unit (HECSU) in Manchester, UK, published the survey, which polled 22,000 people with undergraduate and advanced degrees across all sectors and disciplines. The poll also found that almost 75% of all science respondents, most of whom are 29 or younger, earn £29,999 (US$48,715) or less. Fewer than 20% earn £30,000–34,999, and 8% earn £35,000 or more. Charlie Ball, an HECSU senior researcher, says job insecurity was found across most sectors, not just science, and results from uncertainty about public funding in Britain owing to recent austerity measures. "The state of public finances is forcing changes in the way research funding is allocated," he says.

NANOSCIENCE

Network for women

An online network will give female nanoscientists career-development tools and services to help them gain traction in a male-dominated field. The network is part of gender-equality efforts by Suzanne Brainard, the executive director of the Center for Workforce Development at the University of Washington in Seattle. She hopes eventually to expand the network and hand it over to a university or governing body. In May, Brainard and others held a workshop in Washington DC that highlighted women's poor representation in the field. It found that child-care obligations often bar female nanoscientists from attending and presenting at conferences and travelling for collaborations — a problem in a field that requires much interdisciplinary and collaborative research, says Brainard.

UNIVERSITIES

Value of ratings queried

Early-career researchers should be wary of academic-institution rankings, warns the European University Association (EUA) in Brussels. In *Global University Rankings and Their Impact*, out on 17 June, the EUA highlights problems with ratings, including exclusivity, lack of transparency and the possibility that institutions could falsify statistics to boost their scores. Lesley Wilson, secretary-general of the EUA, says researchers should consult only rankings compiled by public bodies that specify how they reach their conclusions.