Demystifying the Postdoctoral Experience: A Guide for Applicants

Nicholas R. Forand¹ and Allison J. Applebaum²

Author Note:

¹Nicholas R. Forand is a Postdoctoral Researcher in the Department of Psychology at the University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, PA.

²Allison J. Applebaum is a Postdoctoral Fellow in the Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences at Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center, New York, NY.

We would like to thank all those who shared their experiences regarding the postdoctoral process. Without your contributions, this article would not have been possible.
Abstract

Obtaining a postdoctoral position is a common and sometimes necessary step for psychologists’ career development. However, in contrast to the internship application process, there is little formal guidance for postdoctoral applicants. By using professional resources and the experiences of individuals familiar with the postdoctoral process, we provide a detailed look at the process of obtaining a postdoctoral position. We cover the search, application, interview, and acceptance process, and provide some advice for dealing with common problems.
Demystifying the Postdoctoral Experience: A guide for applicants

Applying for internship is a structured, organized process, with many resources available for applicants. In contrast, applying for a postdoctoral position is chaotic. Individual training goals, sites, applications, and responsibilities are heterogeneous and applicants are generally offered little formal guidance. As we navigated the process a year ago, we encountered many unexpected challenges, and often wished for better resources and advice. These experiences inspired us to write this article. Below, we draw on the knowledge of those familiar with the process, along with professional resources, to provide a detailed look into the process of obtaining a postdoctoral position. We hope the results will give future applicants a guide for navigating the rocky postdoctoral landscape.

A postdoc is a temporary position in which an individual with a doctoral degree obtains mentored training intended to enhance professional skills. It is often an ideal way to obtain the experience necessary to achieve one’s career goals, and it has become a popular route for recently graduated psychologists. Despite the attractiveness or even necessity of obtaining one of these training opportunities, the dizzying array of postdoctoral positions and lack of a centralized listing and application process can leave one at a loss. Added to this are the constantly shifting features of the postdoctoral landscape. For example, over the past decade, the American Psychological Association (APA) has begun accrediting postdoctoral programs in general clinical and specialty clinical areas (e.g., child psychology, health psychology, etc.). As of December 2010 there were a total of 59 accredited programs, with more expected to receive accreditation in 2011. The APA requires postdoctoral programs to meet a strict set of quality and
training requirements (available on APA’s website)\textsuperscript{1}. Thus, an applicant seeking high quality training is advised to look into APA accredited programs. However, by no means must one obtain an APA accredited position to have an excellent training experience. Currently, the relatively small number of these programs means that applicants must view APA accreditation as another variable added to an already complex model.

Another example of this complexity is the recent push for a uniform notification date (UND), spearheaded by Dr. Russell Lemle of the San Francisco VA. Dr. Lemle found that many postdoctoral applicants felt forced to take expiring offers from their lower choice programs because they had not yet heard from their preferred choices. Since 2004, he has been coordinating an effort among postdoctoral sites to offer a UND, intended to help applicants make more informed choices. Currently, over 100 sites have agreed to notify their postdoctoral applicants on the same day (in 2011 it was March 9\textsuperscript{th}). The UND is another admirable effort to organize the postdoctoral system, however, as Dr. Lemle noted in his Association of Psychology Postdoctoral and Internship Centers (APPIC) e-newsletter article (Lemle, 2008), non-participating programs can outcompete UND programs by extending offers before the uniform date. Other programs have been reluctant to join the UND because they are wary of losing their top applicants to programs that extend offers early. Thus, although a uniform notification date will benefit applicants if universally adopted, the current system forces applicants to contend with both participating and non-participating programs. Because both APA accreditation and the UND are works in progress, clinical applicants are confronted with an only partially organized system.

\textsuperscript{1} APA accreditation should not be confused with membership in the APPIC listing service. APPIC has been listing postdoctoral programs since 1991, and has its own set of standards for membership. These are available on the APPIC website (see e-resource appendix).
These are just two of the issues postdoctoral applicants encounter. This piece offers information and guidance for each step of the postdoctoral process. Our focus is on general research and clinical positions, broadly defined. Specific specialties, such as clinical neuropsychology, have their own standards for postdoctoral training, but this is out of the scope of the current article. To acquire information from a range of sources, we conducted an informal survey. We asked colleagues if they were interested in sharing their experiences, and we posted similar requests for feedback on several professional and scholarly listservs. When individuals responded, we sent them a series of informal questions. For current or former postdocs, these questions asked about their experiences searching for and obtaining postdoctoral positions. For postdoc mentors, we asked about the details of the positions they offer and what they look for in postdoctoral candidates. Over 60 individuals shared their experiences with us, representing a wide range of specialties and career paths. Their responses form the backbone of this piece.

An excellent companion to this piece is Seime and Zeiss (2005), in the April 2005 issue of *the Behavior Therapist*. These authors summarize the presentations from ABCT’s (then AABT’s) postdoctoral panel from the 2004 convention. We expand on their advice by offering a greater range of perspectives on the postdoctoral process, and organizing them into a “how-to” style guide. Prospective applicants are encouraged to read both pieces.

**Why Get a Postdoc?**

Our first question for current and former postdocs asked why they pursued a postdoctoral position. Perhaps the most common response, across both research and clinically oriented postdocs, was to acquire supervised hours and experience for licensure.\(^2\) Other responses

---

\(^2\) Most states require postdoctoral supervised hours, but some do not (e.g., Alabama, Washington). We recommend familiarizing yourself with the requirements of your state before starting your postdoc search. See the Association for State and Provincial Licensing Boards website for state-by-state licensure requirements.
affirmed that individuals seek postdocs to develop their skills or improve their credentials. Research-oriented postdocs generally wanted to add publications to their CV or gain expertise in grant writing, whereas clinical postdocs sought specialized training or experience with certain populations. Others were less sure of their plans, and wanted a postdoc to help sort out career options. One respondent, a university faculty member and accomplished researcher, said that she was unsure what kind of career she wanted, and thought that a postdoc would help her decide. Her experiences as a postdoc confirmed that an academic career was the right fit.

**Types of Postdoctoral Positions**

**Clinical Postdocs.** The APA Committee on Accreditation sorts clinical postdocs into two major categories: traditional programs in clinical psychology which include clinical, counseling, and school psychology, and specialty practice programs, which include cognitive, clinical child, clinical health, clinical neuropsychology, family, forensic, and rehabilitation psychology. Most clinical postdocs are offered periodically at sites similar to those that offer internships (e.g., state and private hospitals, clinics, VA’s, etc.). There are exceptions, however. One postdoc reported that he provides clinical services for a university faculty member’s R01 grant. Thus, he has a “clinical” position funded entirely by a research grant. Thus, individuals searching for clinical postdocs might benefit from attending to advertisements from traditionally research-oriented sites.

Some of the clinical postdocs obtained by respondents offered a substantial amount of research experience, whereas other positions offered little to none. Expectations of clinical mentors were similarly varied. Most clinical mentors said they would support research if a postdoc was interested, but they also suggested that the time available for research was dependent on the time allotted to clinical responsibilities.
Research Postdocs

Research postdocs are likely to be found in academic hospitals, universities, or Veteran Affairs medical centers (VA’s). All of the research-oriented respondents had positions supported by grants or other federal monies. The majority had T32 National Research Service Award (NSRA) institutional training grants. These National Institutes of Health (NIH) grants are awarded to institutions to develop mentored research training programs, and their postdoctoral positions are typically two years in duration. VA research positions were through the Advanced Fellowship Program for Mental Health Research and Treatment, which offers two-year positions that are 75% research and 25% clinical. Others drew support from faculty NIH R-series grants.

Prospective postdocs might also consider NIH’s F32 NSRA training fellowships. F32’s are 2-3 year fellowships that provide support for individuals wishing to obtain mentored training in a specific research area. Applicants select an institution and faculty mentor, and submit an NIH grant application. Similar funding opportunities are available from other federal and private sources. Obtaining independent funding has some major advantages; it demonstrates your ability to attract outside funding early in your career, and you are able to tailor your experience exactly to your training goals. As one respondent noted, the F32 allows you to “write your own ideal job description.” Prospective applicants should see Seime and Zeiss (2005) and the NIH website. Of note: according to the NIH, only 28% of F32 applications were funded in 2010, so it is a good idea to have a backup plan.

Perhaps surprisingly, over half of our research-oriented postdocs indicated that their position included supervised clinical hours. Indeed, respondents highlighted clinical experience as a major factor in selecting these postdocs. Again, mentors varied in their support of clinical
work. Some said they explicitly include supervised hours in their positions, whereas others support clinical work only insofar as it does not interfere with research activities.

Where to Find Advice

In an unstructured process, finding good sources of advice is crucial. Respondents obtained advice from their graduate advisors, internship faculty, and current and former postdocs. Other sources included the APPIC postdoc listserv and the ABCT postdoctoral panel. One respondent cited The Compleat Academic: A Career Guide (2nd Ed.) as a useful resource for those interested in academic careers. To this list we would add Novotney (2010), and the discussion forums at forums.studentdoctor.net. Of course, the idiosyncratic nature of the postdoctoral process can limit the usefulness of any advice. Debra Burock, Ph.D., a licensed psychologist in Lafayette Hill, PA, sums this up nicely:

“I sought out books, articles, and my current and past supervisors for advice; however, I found that each person’s experience in securing a postdoc was incredibly unique. There didn’t seem to be a standardized process and mostly appeared to be luck of the draw and persistence in locating a placement that was best suited to the individual’s needs and preferences. There was little published information on the process so most was word of mouth from those practicing professionally.”

With this in mind, we encourage prospective postdocs cast a wide net when looking for advice.

Searching for Postdoctoral Positions

The process of searching for postdocs is another challenge. The APPIC and APA websites are useful but far from comprehensive. At the time of this article, a search for programs in the New York metro area in the APPIC directory produced only 3 listings, and one of these
was in New Haven, CT. To supplement these resources, respondents signed up for listservs and contacted their professional networks.

Using their responses, we compiled the following list of advice for the postdoc search:

1. Start early. Many applications are due between December and March, although other positions come open throughout the year. Most applicants start the process around October, but some started while still in graduate school. A few internship sites offer an option to continue as a postdoc, and even if the site does not guarantee interns postdoctoral positions, experience as an intern can be helpful in securing a postdoc at the same site. Thus, if possible, we recommend considering the potential for a post-doc when applying to and ranking internship sites.

2. Use official resources, such as APPIC, APA, and APPCN (for neuropsychology sites). Even if you don’t find something that interests you, the listings can give you a good idea of what types of programs are available.

3. Join listservs such as APPIC, ABCT, SSCPnet, and APA divisional listservs. Also look into joining state and local psychological associations and sign up for their email lists. Postdoctoral positions are often posted to these sources in the fall.

4. Look for position listings in professional publications such as the APS Observer, the APA Monitor and the Behavior Therapist.


6. Email everyone you know. You should be in touch with all of your professional contacts to let them know you’re in the market for a postdoc. In addition to graduate and internship faculty, you might also contact research collaborators, peers, and previous and current postdocs.
7. Email everyone you don’t know, but might be interested in working with. Several respondents, including both of the authors, found open positions by emailing people whose research interested them. Send a brief email stating your interest and a C.V.

8. Identify common postdoctoral sites in your preferred geographical area (hospitals, clinics, VA’s, etc.), and contact their faculty members to see if positions might be available.

9. Look into positions at VA medical centers. According to the VA psychology training website, there are 260 clinical postdoctoral positions available across the country. The VA also offers research opportunities at 23 specialized sites (these go by various abbreviations: MIRECC, NCPTSD, etc.). See the e-resource appendix for the relevant VA websites.

10. Look into independent funding opportunities, like F32’s and other federal and private sources such as National Alliance for Research on Schizophrenia and Depression.

11. Get creative. Two respondents checked the NIH RePORT website (see e-resource appendix) to see who had recently received funding in the areas they were interested in, then emailed those individuals. This might also be a way for clinical applicants to find projects that need a study therapist or clinical coordinator. Also be on the lookout for opportunities to develop your own postdoctoral position. See Novotney (2010) for some advice.

One additional note about searching: a handful of respondents from rural areas noted that they had difficulty finding clinical positions with supervised hours. Individuals in these areas should be prepared to encounter fewer opportunities, and may need to intensify their search.

**Applications and Interviews**
Applications. In addition to the standard cover letter, C.V., and three letters of recommendation, many sites have additional application requirements. Some are minor, such as standardized application forms and transcripts. Other common requirements are statements of career goals or research interests and work samples, such as case reports or publications.

Some sites, however, required our respondents to put an extensive amount of work into their applications. One postdoc reported that two sites asked her to answer four 500-word essay questions. Research-oriented positions, such as T32’s, often asked applicants to submit a research plan or to propose a project. Some programs also asked applicants to propose how they will accomplish their training goals at the site. One former postdoc, who developed her own postdoctoral position, had to describe her desired responsibilities and training requirements, propose a salary, and provide productivity estimates. Given the time needed to complete some of these requirements, we advise that postdocs start their applications early and budget their time accordingly.

In the interest of helping aspiring postdocs fine-tune their applications, we asked postdoc mentors what they looked for in a good applicant. All mentors said they require a certain degree of experience (e.g., training, hours, relevant experience) or professional accomplishment (e.g., publications, grant applications). Many also want applicants with clear career goals, and a plan for how they will use their postdoctoral experiences to achieve them. Along the same lines, mentors looked at work samples for quality and clarity of thought. Interestingly, mentors were somewhat skeptical of letters of recommendation. Letters with specific examples from the recommender’s experience with the applicant were valued, whereas letters with lists of positive adjectives were not. Whenever possible, applicants should make sure their recommenders are
producing letters of high quality that include specific examples. This is also advice to keep in mind if you are asked to write your own letter on behalf of the recommender.

**Interviews.** Interviews ranged from an informal chat to multi-day affairs including one or more job talks. Indeed, a handful of respondents reported that sites required them to complete both a multi-day interview and a job talk, in addition to providing extensive application materials. Group interviews and panel interviews were also common. Sites that were outside applicants’ geographical areas sometimes offered interviews via phone or Skype video chat, but if an in-person interview was required, most sites did not pay for travel expenses.

Questions for clinical postdocs appeared similar to those asked on internship interviews. Applicants were asked to describe their theoretical orientation, clinical experience, and preferred style of supervision. They were also sometimes asked to present a case, or conduct a role-play. One respondent said that a site asked him to write a testing report on the spot. Questions for research postdocs included fit with the site and/or mentor, prior experience with grant writing and securing funding, and discussions of research interests and career goals.

Mentors appeared to weight the interview heavily in the selection process. Many stated that a combination of personality and fit is more important than an applicant’s achievements. Mentors look for candidates who are personable, dependable, confident, and capable of excelling within the demands of the position (e.g., self-motivated, able to work with a team, etc.). Clinical mentors valued strong interpersonal skills, whereas research mentors valued intellectual curiosity and potential for independent research.

These responses suggest that credentials will get you through the door, but that the interview is the key for securing an offer. Applicants will likely need to dust off the skills learned
for internships interviews. Be prepared to “sell” yourself during the interview, both in terms of your accomplishments and fit for the position.

**Offers and Acceptances**

**Offers.** The responses of postdocs regarding the process of receiving and accepting positions paint a stressful picture. There was little uniformity regarding how soon offers were given. Some offers were given on the spot, while other individuals had to wait weeks – and in one case three months – before an official offer was made. Of those who applied to programs in the UND, several described problematic situations resulting from conflicting notification dates between participating and non-participating programs (and for one respondent, from conflicting notification times on the same day between UND programs in different time zones). There was also variability in the amount of time applicants were given to accept or reject offers. Times ranged from a month or more to a few hours after receiving the offer. These pressured situations created problems for applicants, some of whom rejected early offers because they were waiting to hear from more preferred sites. This decision resulted in one respondent receiving no other offers.

Applicants should be aware of these complexities, and prepare accordingly. Except in some cases (e.g., the UND), there are no rules and few protections. This makes the process more “interpersonal and political” than the internship process, in the words of one current postdoc. Although these features can make the process stressful, they also suggest there is more opportunity for applicants to influence sites. For example, some sites will ask if their program is your top choice (there are no rules against this). If it is, saying so might improve your chances of getting an offer. One postdoc was able to obtain an offer from a site by calling a contact there and reiterating his strong interest. Initially (according to the contact), the site was not going to
extend an offer because of a perceived lack of fit, but did eventually extend one as a result of the phone call.

Because there are no standardized interview dates, receiving an offer from one site before even interviewing at another is common. In these instances, time frames for accepting offers might be negotiable. Sites also want to secure their top candidates, so an applicant with an offer from a less preferred choice might be in a position to negotiate with a preferred choice, provided the interest is mutual. One postdoc stated that he obtained an early offer from one site by informing them about a deadline on another less-preferred offer.

Negotiating can be difficult, but basic assertiveness skills can help. When negotiating a deadline extension, state your interest in the position, describe your problem (e.g., I have another interview), and politely but assertively ask for your desired outcome (e.g., will you extend your deadline?). Certainly there will be variability with respect to outcome; some sites will act in good faith and allow applicants to weigh their options, and others will force applicants to accept or reject on their terms. Negotiating strategies might also have a higher probability of success with informal postdocs, but this is not always the case.

Acceptances. Respondents reported a number of concerns when it came to accepting offers, reflecting both their training goals and their personal priorities. The most common reasons for accepting an offer were the availability of supervised hours and the geographical location of the position. Other reasons included the salary, the “fit” between applicants and the site or to-be-mentors’ personal style, and the possibility of being hired at the site after the postdoc. As expected, nearly all applicants highlighted the importance of specific training or research opportunities.
We also advise applicants to keep their post-postdoc plans in mind when considering offers. For individuals who want to improve their research vitas, one-year postdocs are not ideal because they provide very little time to publish before the job search starts again. For clinically oriented individuals, it is important to know the licensing requirements for the preferred state of residence, and whether you can meet them. Also, it is important to pay attention to the experiences of current or former postdocs at the site. These individuals have first-hand experience, and can help you determine whether your training needs can be effectively met if you take the offer.

Similar to deadlines, other aspects of offers can be negotiated. Start dates are often changed to accommodate internship end dates (these conflicts can also preclude some sites from giving offers, so make sites aware of your internship end date early). Applicants might also discuss increased compensation or benefits, including cost of living supplements. Clarification and negotiation of responsibilities is also important. In theory, the flexibility of postdocs allows individuals to shape the training experience to fit their needs. However, unclear standards or an inadequate initial agreement can result in a poor training experience. We know of several instances in which postdocs took positions that advertised a certain set of responsibilities, only to find the time or opportunity for a desired feature of the position limited. For example, several respondents found themselves in research positions where clinical involvement was discouraged, despite the promise of supervised hours in the program description. Applicants are advised to clarify the time and scheduling for each of their responsibilities before accepting offers.

Whenever possible, applicants should obtain an offer letter or other written agreement describing the details of the position. The letter should include, at least, the title of the position, the dates of appointment (including the end date and possibility and terms of renewal, if
applicable), the salary or stipend, and some description of your anticipated role and responsibilities. Letters might also include the source of funding, benefit information, and other policies to which you must agree. The letter and all supporting information should be read carefully. If you have questions, or see anything that is discrepant from what you and your prospective mentor had agreed, do not sign it until the issue is resolved to your satisfaction. A detailed initial agreement can help sort out responsibilities, and also offer protection against other problems that can occur once the postdoc starts.

**Some Concluding Thoughts**

As our own experiences and those of the respondents demonstrate, obtaining a postdoctoral position can be time-consuming and stressful. The large number of emails we received in response to our listserv postings suggested others also recognized a lack of guidance, and were eager to help fill the void. We hope that we have provided a resource that will be useful to future applicants.

Overall, a few points stand out. A general impression we formed while reading the responses is that there is no one way to get a postdoc; each applicant’s experience is unique. Some succeeded by starting the process while still in graduate school. For one of the authors, this meant creating a three-year plan, thinking about the ideal geographical location and work setting, and then tailoring the internship application process and even rotations while on internship to this plan. Others worked tirelessly on internship, exploring multiple possibilities until they found the right fit, whereas a fortunate few found ideal positions with little effort. Because the process is so unpredictable, we urge you to be persistent, creative, and proactive at all stages. You never know what opportunity will bear fruit.
Another consistent message was to network, network, network! Whether that means contacting individuals you exchanged business cards with or “cold calling” (or more likely, emailing) individuals with whom you share a particular interest, the point is to let anyone and everyone know that you’re on the lookout for a postdoc. It can also be helpful to find a trusted mentor or friend to help guide and support you through this process. Recent applicants or peers are particularly suited to provide information as well as a supportive shoulder. In fact, the co-authors of this article found themselves doing just that while each of us was going through the process! Despite the trouble, though, many of the past postdoc respondents said the process itself was a period of growth for them, in which they were able to meet a major challenge head on with limited support.

Finally, for all, a postdoc is a stepping stone to a more secure position; it is a period of transition, of becoming a professional in the field. Whether that means securing a license and going on to a clinical practice, or writing one’s first grant and demonstrating one’s ability as an independent researcher, the postdoctoral years represent a transitional state. And like all periods of transition, it can be challenging. However, once the transition is complete, the rewards are often worth the struggle.
E-RESOURCES APPENDIX

Sites that list postdoctoral positions:

Association of Postdoctoral and Psychology Internship Centers (APPIC):
http://www.appic.org/postdocs/index.html

Association of Postdoctoral Programs in Clinical Neuropsychology (APPCN):
http://www.natmatch.com/appcnmat/


Veterans Affairs Mental Illness, Research, Education and Clinical Centers (MIRECC):
http://www.mirecc.va.gov/mirecc-fellowship.asp

Sites that provide useful information:

APPIC Membership:
http://www.appic.org/about/2_3_2_about_policies_and_procedures_postdoc.html


VA Psychology Training: http://www.psychologytraining.va.gov/


Forums and Organizations:

Studentdoctor.net: http://forums.studentdoctor.net/

National Postdoctoral Association: http://www.nationalpostdoc.org/home

PHDs.org: http://www.phds.org/postdoc/
REFERENCES


