

**ASA Early Career Researcher Mentoring Workshop – Getting a Job
Note by Bryan Gaensler & Sarah Maddison**

Looking for jobs:

- Make contacts at conferences.
- Invite yourself to visit institutions – it's much easier to consider moving somewhere if you've actually been there!
- Check the AAS job register etc.
- For institutes of particular interest, check their WWW site too; some jobs might not be astro-specific.
- If you're looking for a part-time job, you won't find much on offer. Apply for full-time jobs, get the offer, and only then mention part-time and negotiate. If they want you, they'll make it happen (plus they might be able to then make an additional offer to someone else).

How to interpret job ads:

- There are a wide variety of wordings, and sometimes standard formats are imposed by institutes that can make job sound strange.
- Make contact with someone at the institute and ask them for more info.
- Deadlines are almost always rigid. Don't forget to factor in time zone difference if applicable.

Getting your referees:

- LET YOUR REFEREES KNOW AS FAR IN ADVANCE AS POSSIBLE. Remember that this takes a lot of time, and that they're probably doing this for many other people too. Some people might refuse to write ref letters without at least 2 weeks notice (preferably 4 weeks).
- Pick people who know your work, who are likely to be known to the employer, and who are more senior than you – don't pick your main collaborator if they're another postdoc, and don't ask Brian Schmidt just because you had a beer with him once.
- If you're asking someone to referee for you for the first time, or if you're not sure how much of a fan they are of you, phrase your request appropriately (e.g. "I really need an unequivocally positive reference for this job. If you're not comfortable providing such a letter, no problem - just let me know so I can ask someone else").
- Letters are useless unless they're confidential; so don't ask to see the letter, or tell the person what to say, or offer to submit it as part of your application.
- Opinions vary, but (say BG) if I'm asked to write letters for more than one person for the same job, I either tell all parties involved that I'm writing a letter for someone else too (and give them the option to withdraw me as a referee), or (if I know one person far better than the other, e.g. if one of them is my student and the other isn't) I tell the second person that I can't write a letter for them because I'm already committed to another candidate.
- Be very clear to your referees what is needed and when - some possible permutations depending on the job ad

- do nothing, the employer will contact you if they want a letter (reasonably common for Australian jobs)
- send letter separately, by the same deadline as the application is due
- upload letter to an online system at the referee's convenience (give them the details of how to do this)
- upload letter to online system, but request is triggered by you submitting your application; in this case (increasingly common), need to make sure you upload your application well before the deadline, to give referee time to get notification and then submit their letter
- If you're picking different referees to comment on different aspects of your work (e.g. two different research fields, or research vs teaching), gently indicate to them what you think they could highlight (although ultimately it's up to them).
- Create a WWW site or Google Doc that contains: list of jobs you're applying for (with link to job ad), deadlines, what's required (send to email address, upload via online form, etc), and a copy of your application / research statement / CV / publication list.
- As the deadline for each job approaches, send your referee a gentle reminder of the upcoming deadline(s), with a link back to the above WWW site; hopefully they will tell you they've done it, or for online submissions you'll often be able to see yourself whether they've done it yet.
- If someone misses the deadline for referee letters, get a new referee ASAP. Missing letters can really hurt your chances, especially if it's someone close to you like your current supervisor.
- Tell your referees if you've decided not to apply for a job after all.
- When your job search is concluded (successful or otherwise), tell them the outcome and thank them.

Applying for the job:

- Don't leave until last second; most now have online application process that might be confusing or clunky.
- It's normally OK to spend work time in current job applying for other astro jobs, and OK to use departmental letterhead (although check with your supervisor).
- It's normally *not* OK to spend work time applying for non-astro jobs, and probably advisable not to use departmental letterhead (but again check with supervisor).
- Find out about the employer (dept, school, entire institute). Understand their values, their strengths, their facilities, their challenges/concerns, and the consortia/partnerships they're part of. Find out who is about to depart and who is arriving soon. Understand how they recruit/hire students, and what sort of grants their staff are eligible to apply for. Make sure you understand who's in charge at each level and who you'd report to. If a teaching role, understand the degree structure, types of courses taught, where their students come from (in house, interstate, overseas), and how their students are paid (scholarships, grants, etc). Note what research opportunities undergrads can take (thesis projects, vacation work).
- Cover letter is critical, even if they don't require it. It's your only chance to articulate in your own words why you want the job, and why they should

want you. Also a chance to mention things that don't fit in the CV, or to emphasise things that are buried in your CV. Probably not longer than 2-3 pages. Obviously check spelling, grammar, and that you don't mention the wrong job (amazing how often this happens).

- If there are selection criteria (common in Australia; not so much elsewhere), then make sure you answer every criterion separately and explicitly, e.g. in bullet form. Give 1-2 paragraph response to each question (not one sentence). If there's something you don't really meet, don't just say "nothing" or "N/A" or "I have no experience in this area", but offer a positive view (e.g. "While I do not yet have experience in radio astronomy, I have worked in related areas and am keen to learn more. I also expect that the substantial experience in X-ray astronomy that I can bring to your department will create new scientific opportunities, and allow us all to learn from each other"). Often selection criteria have to be entered into a WWW form, but it's a good idea to repeat them (or expand on them) in the PDF version that you upload (along with CV, cover letter, publication list, etc).
- Especially in Australia, selection criteria will include things like understanding of EEO or OHS. A standard response to these is fine at a minimum, but examples or ideas are always good. Only wrong thing to do here is to ignore it.
- Spell check, spell check, spell check!
- Suggest you don't mention anything personal - don't say you want the job because your partner lives there (about 1 application in 10!), don't mention health or disability issues, don't flag that you have a vacation already booked 2 weeks after the starting date. Up to you whether you put things like date of birth or marital status in your CV - common in Australia, taboo in USA.
- Publication list is crucial, but it's obvious if you pad it.
 - OK to include submitted papers (only if they really have been submitted at the time of writing)
 - A very maximum only include 1-2 papers in prep, and only if they're really important papers that you're leading. People list in prep papers so often that it's become code for "I haven't written enough papers yet and I know it".
 - Separate refereed papers, conference papers, abstracts/talks. Mixing them in altogether will annoy the selection committee and will also make it clear you're trying to pad.
 - Best listed in reverse chronological order (more recent first) and have your name in **bold** (easy to see where you are in the author order).
 - OK to star papers that you aren't first author on but for which you supervised a student/postdoc.
 - Give title of paper, full journal name (don't abbreviate), and start/end pages (so they can see big papers vs small ones)
- Research and/or teaching statements are crucial, and needs to be tailored to audience and institute. Note that this is very time consuming and draining.
 - For research, should be a mix of highlights so far plus plans for the future. Try to come up with major new things that you'd like to do if you had time and resources (rather than more of the same), as a basis for the grants you'll apply for and the student projects you'll offer - doesn't have to be as robust as an observing proposal, but should

sound like you've spent at least a little time thinking about it. Don't get bogged down in details of what you've done, but highlight why this is important and provide evidence (prizes, citations, paper referee's comments) that validate this. Start and finish with an overview. Ok to use figures if you like.

- For teaching, put a lot of thought and research into this. How serious is teaching excellence at the institute? Don't just describe your existing experience but talk about your teaching philosophy, as well as the sorts of courses you'd like to teach, and the sorts of innovations or new approaches you'd like to explore/implement/find more about. Point to any resources/special programs/unique aspects of their program as something you are keen to make use of (which shows you've done your homework).
 - You don't have to write a whole new statement from scratch for each application, but make sure it's obvious that you've tailored your ideas and statement for the particular job at hand. Mention the institute (the right institute!) by name, note by name other staff whose interests might overlap on relevant projects, refer to their facilities that you want to use or their programs you want to get involved in. It is amazing how many people submit a generic statement - it's incredibly obvious and their applications go straight to the bottom of the pile. You don't just have to argue why they should want you, but also articulate why this job appeals to you.
- Spell check.
 - SPELL CHECK!

What happens next:

- Be sensible in who you inquire to and how often or how quickly you do it; probably OK to query HR department to confirm that they got your application or to ask the status after a few weeks. But be sparing in writing directly to academics involved in selection - suggest only do this for crucial things like late/missing reference letter, exciting development (e.g. submitted Nature paper now accepted, received notable award etc.).
- Very common for unsuccessful candidates to never hear anything further (which is abominable and you would hope to at least receive an email saying you weren't successful because there were others who better met the selection criteria).
- Widely varying practices, but typically a longlist is made (plus references brought in at this point?), then a shortlist of candidates to be interviewed, and then a ranked list for offer.
- If you're called for interview, they will usually pay your travel. Sometimes interviews done by phone/view.
- Usually almost no flexibility on interview dates/times, so be prepared to cancel other things. In worst case, offer to do in-person interview by phone or video (not ideal but better than nothing)

Preparing of the interview:

- Ask who the interview panel are, and how long interview is likely to go for.

- Google the panelists and find out their backgrounds/interests. Often one or more will not be an astronomer (or even a scientist).
- If you know any of the panelists, don't put them in an awkward position by contacting them about any aspect of the job or interview.
- Practise, practise and practise for the interview! Brainstorm as many questions (obvious and not so much) as you can. Get a friend or family member to ask you the questions you've identified plus some surprise ones; repeat your answers over and over until they are clear and succinct. It's amazing how many people come to an interview and have clearly not thought about any of the questions they might be asked.
- You may have to also give a colloquium and/or teach a lecture. Get info on the timing (running overtime is very bad), audience, format, lecture-room facilities, etc. Obviously put a lot of effort into preparing these talks; make your slides look polished and up to date (e.g. don't have the name of a conference from 2 months ago at the bottom; best to use your official university template rather than your own format); practice for content, delivery and timing.
- Before the interview it's a good idea to re-read your application again (and the selection criteria is applicable).

The interview:

- If phone, give a main number and a back-up number in case there's a problem.
- If video, arrange a time to test beforehand (and use proper video conferencing rather than Skype if possible).
- If phone/video and in a different time zone, check and double check that you and they have got the time right – you don't want to be woken at 5am when you were expecting the call in another 9 hours!
- Appearance does matter. If in person, dress well; suit & tie or ballgown is overkill, but (ripped) jeans or t-shirt is unacceptable. Shave (if appropriate), comb your hair, etc.
- Before the interview commences, you can ask for a glass of water (better than dying for a drink mid-answer) and you might like to have some tissues in your pocket (boogers in an interview are not a good look!)
- OK to bring in notes or blank paper.
- If you need them (and especially if it's a phone interview), it's OK to have notes in front of you to remind you of the key points to make in each question. Be sure to have these out at the start of the interview – you don't want to go rummaging for them.
- Make eye contact, speak calmly and clearly, and don't talk too loudly or too softly.
- If you don't understand or didn't hear the question, ask them to repeat it.
- Listen to the questions – prepared answers can sometimes lead you astray.
- It's OK to say "I'm going to think for a moment before answering this" while you gather your thoughts, rather than just saying the first thing that comes into your head and then realising half-way through that you should have said something else. Jotting down a few bullet points before answering is also fine.
- Overall, you have to make it clear that:
 - you want the job and have thought about why you want it;

- you know something about the institute and their research landscape [very useful to talk to an existing employee or other insider beforehand];
- you meet the selection criteria if applicable. (Note that if you have asserted in your written application that, e.g., you have good communication skills but your interview suggests otherwise, this will be bad!)

Typical questions:

- What interests you about this position and this institute? (i.e., why do you want this job?)
- What makes you stand out from the other applicants? (i.e. why should they hire you?)
- Can you summarise your research highlights to date? (Structure your answer by listing 3 bullet points and then going back through them in more detail. Don't get bogged down but try and get across the new/innovative things you did; don't be afraid to say "this was the first ever study of" or "I was the first to show that" etc.)
- What piece of work are you most proud of and why? (Make sure it's something that you led or owned, not just something you were involved in; BG once had a candidate list as their highlight something that he led and in which they only played a minor role!)
- What are your long-term career goals? (This is less likely for a postdoc interview, but possible).
- What do you know about the institute interviewing you or the projects you'd be working on? (A favourite interview question is "What can you tell me about The University of Sydney?" and about 75% of candidates can offer little more than that's a university, in Sydney! You've got to wonder how badly they want the job if they haven't spent 5 minutes reading up about the university and the department.)
- What's the best thing about working in a team? What's the most challenging aspect?
- Give an example of how you have handled (or would handle if it hasn't happened to you yet) an under-performing staff member or student
- What's your greatest strength?
- What's your greatest weakness? (Be honest but make it something that you can give evidence you're improving on; end your answer on a positive note).
- How do you cope with failure? (There's no right answer to this one!!)
- When do you think you are likely to be able start?
- Maybe they won't ask any of these questions and instead will just ask about science (which you should be prepared for too!), but best to be ready for anything, since you don't want to give rambling answers or have an awkward silence while you figure out what to say.
- Feel free to refer to answers that are already covered in your written application, but don't just say "you can read my application for the answer"; briefly recap or focus on the key points. On the other hand, try to avoid referring back to your application for every answer, but add some depth or value through the interview (otherwise they wouldn't have felt the need to

interview, but would have made offers from the written applications alone). If they ask, you should also update them on things that have happened since you submitted the application - e.g. your submitted paper has now been accepted.

- They will almost always ask you at the end if you have any questions for them. Make sure you have a couple of insightful questions ready to ask. You only need to ask one, but it's good to have a spare in case your question is already covered earlier. Suggest not asking about salary (although OK to ask about funding for research/travel support), and don't ask about other candidates (e.g. how many people are being interviewed).
- You can ask about family-related issues (childcare on campus, maternity/paternity leave etc.) but be aware that such questions can have an effect of the panel ('if we hire her will she be taking maternity leave in the first few years?'). There is plenty of time to ask these questions once the job is offered to you.
- You also can/should ask what happens next or how soon you're likely to hear back from them, but try to also ask something more insightful about the job or the project or the institute first.
- There are questions that are inappropriate but that people will sometimes unfortunately ask you (especially in Australia, in my experience) - about age, marital status, children, health, etc. I suggest not providing an answer to these, but not being rude either - just say something like "I'd be happy to discuss this further in the hopeful event that you're able to make me an offer".

Getting an offer

- Reply immediately, without playing your hand – say you're thrilled to receive the offer, you'll give it careful consideration, and that you plan to respond as soon as possible
- Get clarity on the date they need you to respond by; if it is unreasonably short (e.g. 2 weeks), you should ask for an extension. If they're inflexible, then this is a sign they don't really have your interests as a priority.
- Tell them whether you have competing offers, especially if the deadlines for those are before theirs (don't give specifics; just tell them there's other options).
- If you're getting the wrong vibe or have a competing offer for which some aspect is better, don't just decide – call them and talk it through; it's fine to decline offer, but people can get annoyed if you turn them for something else without talking about it first.
- Suggest setting up a time to talk on the phone or visit anyway; a place looks different when there's now the real possibility of working there.
- Once you have the offer, now it's OK to introduce personal issues like schools for children, jobs for your partner, maternity/paternity leave entitlements, part-time work, etc.; everything is on the table for discussion as you will have to live there as well as work there.
- OK to negotiate or ask for almost anything - salary, parking, start-up package, starting date, initial teaching relief, travel funds, computer/laptop. You're in the strongest position if you have that aspect already from a competing offer or that you enjoy in your current job. Bear in mind that some things they

simply aren't able to offer you even if they wanted to, so go in expecting that they will meet you halfway, and identify beforehand to yourself your core demands. Try and come up with a justification for each demand that helps them see your point of view and the reasons for asking for this.

- Talk to the people who started there recently to see if there's anything they were offered that you haven't, and to see if the promises made to them have eventuated.
- The offer should give you full info on salaries, super, leave, relocation allowance, visas (including those for your partner/family), medical insurance, starting date, duties, tenure, etc. If it doesn't, ask!
- Often people will make a formal offer first, and then won't proceed to a contract until you ask them to; this is normal and doesn't indicate there's anything weird going on.
- If it's not in writing, it's worth nothing. Goodwill is great but the person making the promise could leave a month before you arrive. It's awkward to move from a friendly conversation to a demand for a written guarantee, but any reasonable employer will expect this and will accommodate you. If they say it's difficult to put it in writing (e.g. for legal reasons), then assume it's a possibility but don't expect it to happen.
- Immediately withdraw from consideration for any other jobs still pending that you wouldn't take over this job even if offered. It's very annoying to go to the trouble of shortlisting someone to find out they've already accepted something else. Similarly, if a new offer comes in that trumps an existing one, decline the old one immediately – the next person on the list will appreciate it!
- Sometimes OK to defer starting for 12 months, but needs a good reason. More than 12 months would be very unusual and not recommended.
- If you're on the waitlist, there's nothing much you can do except wait. It's reasonable to ask what rank you are (although they might not tell you), or when the top person has been asked to decide by. Do update them if you now have another offer – they may say “go for it” or they may say “hold them off for a couple of weeks and we might be able to update you”. Very common for one person to be offered all the jobs, and then nothing happens until they decide, so don't be dispirited – not uncommon to work down to #4 or even lower.
- It's normal that they will be enthusiastic and butter you up and respond instantly to your emails while an offer is pending, but then the interest level will drop right down as soon as you accept. Don't take this personally, and enjoy the attention while it lasts.