

Opportunity Knocks: But Which Door Should You Open?

Game-changing career opportunities for postdocs are everywhere. Whether it is a paper to write, a fellowship to chase, or an informal conversation to have, any opportunity could be “the one”—the one that grants you access to a satisfying job, a prolific alliance, or a novel research insight. After you network, go to the right conferences, have coffee with the right people, and apply for several appointments, how do you pick which avenues to pursue?

By Alaina G. Levine



Matthew Wund

“It’s never too late to think about and explore options that may make you really happy and excited to come into work every day.”

Melanie Sinche



Shortly after receiving his Ph.D., **Lakshmi Reddi** ran into a researcher from South Korea while he was on route to the restroom. The scholar was visiting his department to give a talk in an area with seemingly very little connection to Reddi’s expertise, but he cornered him nonetheless, because “as a doctoral student I had made it an issue to attend talks in areas other than mine and to cultivate learning from people who didn’t speak the same language as I do,” he recalls. That ad hoc assembly in the antechamber led to a discussion about innovative avenues to solving the engineering problems perplexing Reddi at the time. And later, it paved the way for a series of rich collaborations between Reddi and the visiting Korean engineer, resulting in multiple co-authored grants.

Reddi, now the dean of the graduate school at Florida International Universi-

ty, realized early on that “hundreds of opportunities that could connect my research to other areas” would have been lost if he had been only focused on his own day-to-day activities as a researcher and not on also keeping his eyes open to new opportunities. “It takes a new paradigm to cultivate this type of thinking,” he admits. “Now I tell my students: don’t think it’s a time-intensive process—change your thinking about where the research opportunities are.”

Keeping your options open to game-changers, whether they are opportunities to apply for fellowships, serve on committees, referee a journal paper, or just talk to someone in or out of your area of expertise, is a necessity if you want to advance in science. “The number one job of a postdoc is not to be a postdoc anymore,” says **Matthew Wund**, assistant professor of biology at the College of New Jersey. And the output one generates from all the tasks required of a postdoc—research, publishing, and presenting at conferences—is only part of the equation that gets one ahead. It is “really stressful” to say no to any opportunity, whether it is as overtly concrete as a job offer to something more amorphous like engaging a visiting scholar, he concedes. “Who knows whether that conversation in a hallway could lead to a job?”

But how do you find balance? “The scariest thing about the postdoc is that you have to do all the work *and* get a job,” concedes **Prosanta Chakrabarty**, assistant professor of biology and curator of ichthyology at Louisiana State University (LSU). And how do you know which opportunities to pursue and which to let go? At Argonne National Laboratory, which hosts 320 postdocs, “we try to emphasize that part of their job here is to get a job,” says **continued**>

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Kristene Henne, postdoctoral programs coordinator. So pursuing other opportunities to progress is something that is promoted and encouraged. “Certain collaborative opportunities, even in the next lab, people might not be aware of without having conversations,” she stresses.

But whether you consider opportunities before, during, or even after the postdoc, a strategic approach to selecting opportunities still needs to be part of your career planning process. “It’s never too late to think about and explore options that may make you really happy and excited to come into work every day,” says **Melanie Sinche**, director of the Faculty of Arts and Sciences Office of Postdoctoral Affairs at Harvard University.

Metrics for Opportunity Selection

Selecting opportunities doesn’t have to be as rigorous a process as science itself, but it should involve proper planning, self-assessment, and awareness of available and needed resources, like money or time. **Christina Ragan**, a postdoc at Michigan State University, bases some of her strategy for choosing opportunities on how time-intensive they are. When she first began her appointment, she erroneously believed that she had lots of extra time because she wasn’t taking any classes or teaching, so she sought out myriad outside opportunities to volunteer and network. “But that time gets sucked up so quickly,” she says with a laugh.

She realized that she needed to adjust her schedule considerably based on her immediate needs and responsibilities to conduct research and publish. As a result, Ragan now commits herself to only one outreach activity a semester, and has cut back on active networking for now as well. “As my career progresses, a different amount of time will be spent on different priorities,” she says.

For any opportunity, **Eric Brown**, deputy group leader in the Physics Division of Los Alamos National Laboratory, advises weighing “the potential return on investment (ROI) versus the time you would put in and whether you’ve done something that can achieve this goal in a different way.” An example of a respectable investment of time would be while you are at a conference, attend meet-and-greets with senior members of the professional society. “You’re already there, so it’s good ROI,” he concludes.

Opportunities on your own campus can also deliver great ROI. “Often people don’t take advantage of or understand that there’s a wealth of information at your university, and people really do want to see you succeed,” says **Cheryl B. Schrader**, chancellor of Missouri University of Science and Technology. For example, there are numerous professional development training resources for tenure-track faculty at universities that can often be shared by postdocs. **Lorraine Tracey** realized the potential goldmine of internal advancement resources while a postdoc at St. Jude Children’s Research Hospital. In pursuit of a career as a medical science liaison for a pharmaceutical company, she sought out the chance to participate in clinical shadowing and conduct lab tours to learn and practice coveted skills like communication, time management, and relationship building, and to gain a better understanding of



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clinical practice. To optimize her time, Tracey stayed within the borders of the institution.

But “thinking local” should be only one metric for choosing opportunities. Doing a thorough self-assessment and understanding your career aspirations and the steps to achieving these objectives is also a key component to prioritizing, says **Nadia Stegeman**, an NIH-funded postdoc at Oregon State University. “Know the skills that help you answer the interesting research questions,” she says. “Have your top priorities in mind and seek to maximize learning opportunities. Everything else is details.” In her case, she aspires to a career as a conservation medicine/field forensics veterinary consultant who assesses the health of a population or ecosystem, so she narrowed down her opportunities to those that allowed her to sharpen her clinical skills in evaluations of population health and toxicology. “Don’t let school get in the way of your education,” Stegeman cautions. “You are responsible for gaining those skills. Be bold. If you want something, say it and go after it.”

Keep Up Your Output

Of course as you hunt opportunities, you have to make certain you are still doing what is anticipated of you by your boss. “It’s so easy to get bogged down in opportunities and think you have to respond to everything,” notes Brown. “Nothing can derail a postdoc faster than if they follow every opportunity out there

at the expense of what they need to do in their research.”

“Be upfront with your advisor about what they expect and the mechanisms you should use to meet those expectations,” says Stegeman. By clarifying your promises, you also reduce restrictions on tracking other opportunities, she continues. A carefully worded discussion with your PI can articulate the message/request that if you meet certain expectations, then the rest of your time can be spent on other activities to move your career forward. “If you don’t communicate your goals and your desired skill set, your advisor will never know and you both will suffer from this lack of communication,” she warns.

Having a tool handy, like “My Individual Development Plan” (MyIDP.sciencecareers.org), through which you have solidified and organized your goals and needs, can be especially helpful when having that conversation with your advisor, notes Tracey, chair of the board of the National Postdoctoral Association. For example, if you desire the chance to chat with other scientists who are not in your immediate discipline, if it is on your plan, “it could be eye-opening to your PI,” she says. The ability for your manager to see essentially in black and white how these discussions will serve you (and perhaps even them as well), “can make your time in the lab more flexible to pursue these other opportunities.”

In fact, the more you can illuminate how your investment in pursuing a particular opportunity can provide hard benefits to your advisor, the more you may end up with time and other resources to explore them. This can even be a metric for determining whether you should investigate an opportunity in the first place. “Demonstrate that it’s a win-win,” encourages Schrader. **continued>**

Featured Participants

Argonne National Laboratory
www.anl.gov

Florida International University
www.fiu.edu

Harvard University
www.harvard.edu

Los Alamos National Laboratory
www.lanl.gov

Louisiana State University
www.lsu.edu

Michigan State University
www.msu.edu

Missouri University of Science and Technology
www.mst.edu

National Postdoctoral Association
www.nationalpostdoc.org

Oregon State University
www.oregonstate.edu

St. Jude Children's Research Hospital
www.stjude.org

The College of New Jersey
tcnj.pages.tcnj.edu

University of Cologne
www.uni-koeln.de



Cheryl Schrader

Are You Moving Forward?

It is critical to know that for every opportunity you explore, you are moving one step closer to your goal. But how do you quantify this? Reddi suggests that one litmus test is whether or not you are

getting feedback from your activities. For example if you publish a paper, “are you getting reprint requests? Are you getting requests to share your research?” he asks. “If it is always one-way traffic, that’s assuredly not going to get you anywhere. The single most important factor is how well others are respecting your work, how well you are needed in the field, and how well you are known.”

“Every step of the way to becoming a star you have to have those publications,” confirms Chakrabarty. And yet, as you begin to have significant output, you also have to ensure that others know about it. “In grad school, I didn’t think strategically,” admits Wund. “I thought that if my research is cool, everybody else will think that too. I soon realized I had to develop soft skills.”

Networking and self-promotion are two of those essential skills that not only must be learned, but also must be pursued as opportunities of their own. Schrader argues that “raising the visibility of you and your group’s accomplishments” is paramount. “Establishing your uniqueness will move the whole group (and field) forward,” she says. One opportunity that affords you the chance to build your “brand,” or promise of value, in this regard is to volunteer to be a technical reviewer for conference papers or a journal. “If you do this type of professional activity, you can very quickly become recognized as an expert. Establishing your technical expertise in a particular niche is very important early on.”

But be strategic about your networking endeavors in particular, cautions both Schrader and Chakrabarty. “The postdoc is a short time frame,” says Schrader. Prioritize your networking actions by looking for (1) leaders who are most directly related to your area of expertise, (2) institutions that have the best fit for the careers you want to pursue, or



Prosanta Chakrabarty

(3) support groups that will give you the help you need to succeed, she advises. Mentors also play a key role in helping postdocs assess the value of certain opportunities.

If You Think They are Slipping Away...

The postdoc experience is a roller coaster. “You’re going to be down at some point and you’re going to be ecstatic at some point, and that’s the nature of science,” says Chakrabarty. “No one’s going to pat you on the back. No one’s going to tell you you’re doing a good job. You have to figure it out yourself. The mistake people make is thinking that these opportunities happen on their own.”

But don’t think that just because you decline something now, that the chance is necessarily gone for good. “Some opportunities I have said no to, and they have come back and I was able to add more value the second time around,” says Brown.

Tracey acknowledges that the fear of opportunities slipping away can consume postdocs, and she always seeks to bring her own career development decisions back to her plan. It’s a way to parse opportunities, she suggests. “Try to understand what you want out of your career and where you want to be in 10–20 years.”

On the other hand, not all undertakings will bring you directly to your career goal, and that’s OK. “Many activities may lead to new options that will open up and more collaborative opportunities,” says **Martin Prechtel**, a chemist with the University of Cologne, in Cologne, Germany. Although he jokingly admits, “Sometimes it’s like a miracle to find the right job in academia because often it is difficult to predict where new positions will open in the next few years.”

Indeed, Reddi emphasizes that you must incorporate a mindset of making connections and looking for opportunities, even if they don’t seem to be leading to something very specific. The mere act of attending a talk “outside of your comfort zone,” he says, helps to “cultivate this type of thinking, an attitude of connecting” with others which will bring its own rewards. And to those who express concern about not having enough time, the engineer offers this wisdom: “It doesn’t take much time to light a candle. But after you light a candle, you can see everything in the room and how everything has its place among others.”

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