

Lessons from my post-docs years

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1) Project position (project defined by grant)

Advantages

- Well-defined, well thought-out, all background research done
- You can use someone else's (sensible) idea when you were too busy finishing your PhD and come up with your own idea
- You want to expand your skill set and change fields
- You want to join a well-known lab to profit from their expertise & acquire a high profile referee/mentor
- Less competitive
- Easier to get at short-notice as often advertised with only 4-8 weeks till start date

Disadvantages

- Pressure to run the project as proposed and funded
- You may not have the opportunity to pursue your ideas if deviant from those of the lab leader's
- Position less prestigious
 - ⇒ Less valuable for your CV
 - ⇒ More difficult to build up your own research profile

2) Self-funded position: winning your own fellowship

Advantages

- Investigate your own ideas independently
- If published, establish track record of your original contributions to the field
- Shows that you are competitive and win grants

Disadvantages

- Confidence in your methods/techniques, they need to be developed enough so you can succeed independently
- Long run-up: initial contacts, proposal development, write-up & submission, waiting for outcome take ~ 1 year
- You are on your own in scientific as well as financial & administrative decisions – no protective hand

The 2 biggest lessons I learnt

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1) Everyone encounters bumps and difficulties along the way

- Don't despair
- Embrace it as opportunity to learn the skills that get you through tough times
 - Perseverance
 - Conviction that this is the career you want to pursue
 - How to create opportunities for yourself
- If you get through it, you will feel better for it

2) Create your own opportunities

- People (ie your advisers) have no interest in you other than your work power, won't improve your CV for you
- ⇒ Don't wait for others to create opportunities for you
- ⇒ Stand up for yourself, be assertive, don't be modest with your skills/knowledge
- ⇒ Take initiative to apply for grants/fellowships/jobs
- ⇒ Present yourself to the wider academic public, eg by giving talks
- ⇒ Agree to collaborate on grants with others when invited

- Start searching for your next post early
- Create and nurture connections throughout your academic career
- Publications single more important aspect of your CV
 - ⇒ Make sure you have enough time to do research & publish
 - ⇒ Limit your time spent teaching
- The university's name does carry weight & might make the difference in a competition with an equally qualified candidate for the next (academic) job
- Build up a second specialty
 - ⇒ Increases your flexibility when job searching
 - ⇒ Opens opportunities for unique multi-disciplinary projects
- Find a mentor
- Permanent job by a certain age