

Course 1: The Strategic Postdoc

Module 2: Applying for and Choosing the Right Postdoc

Session 4: Post interview

Activity 4.3 (Answers): Negotiating Your Exit Strategy

Carefully read the following case studies and answer the reflection questions below.

1. Ashley is a 5th-year PhD candidate who has recently accepted a postdoc position and is excited about pursuing an academic research career. For her PhD she created a new technical method that has been well received because of its effectiveness. During one of their weekly meetings, Ashley's research advisor, Eric, told her that he wants to pursue patenting this method and thus he does not want to publish the method or share it with anyone until it is well into the patenting process, something which could take years. Ashley is worried because she has not published her first author paper and she wants to hit this important milestone and be more competitive as an incoming postdoc, as well as for potential fellowship applications. In addition, this method was also a strong 'selling point' during her interviews. She's two months out from her postdoctoral start date, has fulfilled all of her requirements for graduation, and is preparing her transition strategy, but now she feels conflicted and does not know how to resolve this issue without harming her relationship with her advisor.

- a. Which of the 3 transition issues discussed in the course (start date, ownership, or productivity) is causing problems in this case? What is the perspective of Ashley and Eric in this case?

Ownership. Ashley has not been transparent about the importance of publishing for her career or of her desire to take the new method and use it in her postdoc lab.

Although this technique is her most important scientific contribution and an important building block in the next stage of her career, she doesn't want to have conflicts with her PhD advisor. Eric sees that this new technique has the potential to be patented and possibly commercialized. Given that the method was developed in his lab, he feels that he should have exclusive access to it.

- b. How can Ashley negotiate with her advisor to reach a compromise?

First, she can seek advice from her circle of support, specifically members of her thesis committee. She can come up with a plan to tell her PhD advisor about her intentions of using this method in her postdoc lab. She can clarify what type of projects she intends to apply her methods to ensure that it's not directly competing with her advisor's interests and jeopardizing the patent process. She should also discuss with him the timeline and plan for the patent submission and her desire to collaborate with him to publish the method as soon as the patent is filed. In this way she can make sure that her important contributions will be recognized through an academic publication, a product that is of higher value than a patent for her career objectives.

- c. If you were in Ashley's shoes, what steps would you have taken to avoid or manage some of the conflicts here?

Ashley should have talked to other people in the lab to get a better understanding of how the 'ownership' process typically occurs when someone is leaving the lab. This would have helped her build a more compelling case with her advisor and create a better exit strategy. Moving forward, she should clarify what she wants to take with her and be sure to get their agreement in writing. Looking ahead, she should clarify ownership 'rules' with her new advisors to avoid this from the beginning.

2. Jacob is a 7th year PhD candidate and is starting his new postdoc position in four months. He is currently working on his second manuscript which has the potential for major impact. Jacob promised his advisor that he wouldn't leave the lab until his manuscript was published. Maria, Jacob's advisor, has invested years into this project and recently presented it to her colleagues and found out that another lab had similar findings. She tells Jacob that they need to get the publication out as soon as possible so they do not get "scooped." After submitting the manuscript, they received extensive reviewer feedback and realized it would take at least eight months to address the reviewer comments. Jacob is conflicted because he has a fixed start date with his new research advisor but Maria is expecting him to stay – as promised.

- a. Which of the 3 transition issues discussed in the course (departure date, ownership, or productivity) is causing problems in this case? What is the point of view of Maria and Jacob?

Departure date and productivity. Jacob shouldn't have attached a productivity goal to his departure date. The timeline to submit a manuscript is subject to change. But there is no flexibility in his start date, and he runs the risk of tainting his relationship with his postdoc advisor. Maria doesn't want to get scooped by a competing lab and reduce the impact of their research. If he leaves prematurely then she might not be able to submit before their competitors.

- b. How can Jacob negotiate with Maria to reach a compromise?

Jacob needs to make a decision, does he want to stay in the lab for 8+ months and finish the publication, or does he want to move on and start his postdoc? As part of this decision he needs to understand how flexible his postdoc position is, and if he can delay his start date. He can consult with his circle of support as he makes this decision. If he decides to stay, he needs to talk to Maria about a plan of action in case things are not finalized within eight months. If he decides to leave, he needs to negotiate with Maria and see if there is someone in the lab that he could train in order to continue the experiments and complete the publication. As part of the conversation with Maria, he needs to talk about who gets ownership of the paper if someone else takes the paper to the finish line.

- c. If you were in Jacob's shoes, what steps would you have taken to avoid or manage some of the conflicts here?

Jacob should have taken the time to build a strategic exit plan before choosing his end date. This would have allowed him to set a hard date and avoid upsetting his

previous advisor. He should have talked to other members of the lab to seek advice before he committed to the publication goal. Moving forward he should make a timeline that both he and his advisor agree on to avoid future incidents.