

Obtaining an Academic Position – Job Hunting Strategy and Resources

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Abstract

Even in this age of seemingly endless information available on the internet, job postings for academic positions can be difficult to find and even more difficult to evaluate.

Contrary to the industrial job hunt, potential employers do not generally come looking for entry-level faculty members. Academic positions are not handled at career fairs, and headhunters are seldom employed to find an entry-level academician. Thus, the burden of effort falls to the job seeker. In this paper the author lists helpful locations to check for information, both high-tech and low-tech, regarding entry academic job openings as well as institutional data which might be of use in evaluating job opportunities.

To add to the fun, the schools which need new faculty members are widely varied not only in geographic location but also in focus. Schools value different experience and abilities based on their departmental needs and school academic or research mission statements. Determining and finding the right mix for the candidate is imperative for a good pairing, so the author discusses some considerations which aid in determining whether openings match a candidate's preferences.

With the proper approach and information, the academic job hunt can be a manageable process with a favorable outcome. A logical set of steps to follow when seeking an entry-level academic position, with resources for each step as needed, form the framework of this paper.

Overview

Job hunting information will be presented as a 16-step process. Figure 1 gives an overview of the whole process, showing decision blocks. The rest of the paper elaborates on this breakdown.

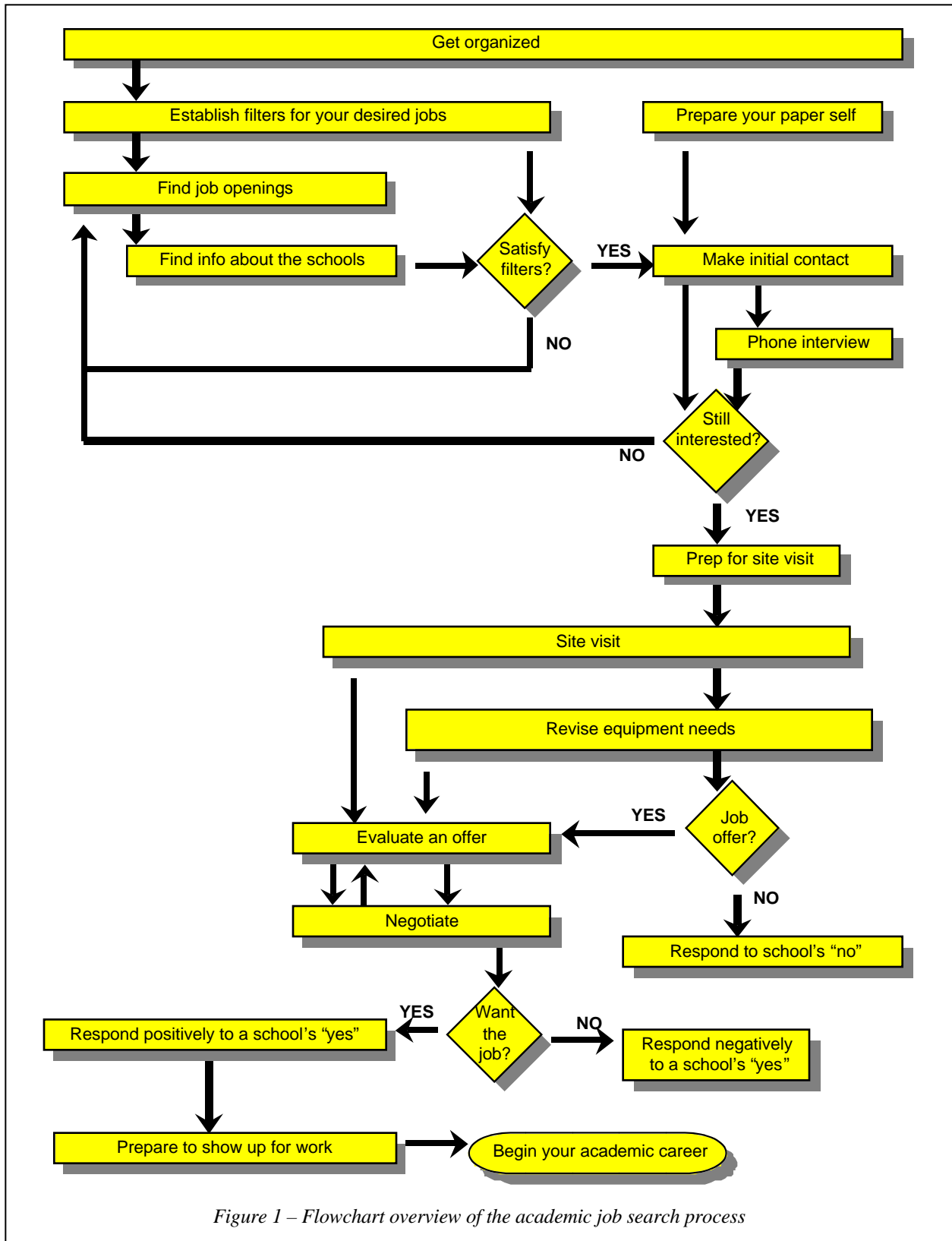


Figure 1 – Flowchart overview of the academic job search process

STEP 1: get organized

This very first task is to set up a filing system for all items related to the job search process. For paper items, this can be as simple as an expanding folder or as elaborate as a file box. Don't forget about computer files as well. Set up a file hierarchy so that you can find anything you need. Don't do this midway through the process – catching up is not fun!

Keep a copy of everything – even a record of or notes from phone conversations. It is much better to have information and not need it, than to need it and not have it.

STEP 2: establish the filters for your desired jobs

Do a little personal soul-searching about where you want to be and what you want to be doing. This should be both professionally and personally.

For the job, think about preferred class size for teaching, research group size, even department/school size. Do you want to be in a place that is growing or shrinking, that has an undergraduate or graduate focus (which tends to rank teaching versus research)? Would you like other faculty doing similar research? Do you prefer a private or public university? A tenure-track or non-tenured position? Clearly, applicants must understand the tenure system and corresponding academic job titles to make such decisions; Figure 2 lists some resources for deciphering and evaluating tenure and academic rank.

NEA Higher Education	http://www.nea.org/he/truth.html
Tenure Status of Postsecondary Instructional Faculty & Staff	http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2002/2002210.pdf
Doctoral Scientists and Engineers in the United States	http://www.nsf.gov/sbe/srs/nsf99305/chap3.htm
Study in the U.S.A. – Scholars and Professionals	http://www.usa.or.th/services/irc/stu_scho.htm

Figure 2 – Resources discussing academic rank and tenure

Personally, consider geographic preferences whether they be for weather or proximity to family or friends. Do you want to live in a big city or a small town? Is home ownership a big issue? Must you consider finding someone else a job in the same area?

Financially, take a long hard look at existing salary information, cost of living information, your personal financial situation (loans, etc.), and come up with what you feel is an adequate starting salary for an entry-level academic position.

Try to come up with a list of things you want, in order of importance. It is very rare that you get everything you want, so order is important.

STEP 3: find job openings

There are several general and department/discipline-specific sources which list faculty positions. Always consider your own desires and qualifications as you read job announcements.

There are three main ways that schools announce their openings. One is by direct contact of other department chairs or faculty currently in the field, either by phone, e-mail, or letter. If you want a faculty position, let your department chair, research advisor, and any other faculty around your department know. If they hear of something, they'll pass it along to you. Another method is

placing print ads for the opening. Commonly these will show in *The Chronicle for Higher Education*, professional society magazines such as ASEE's *Prism*, or even department/school newsletters; positions are also posted at professional conferences and meetings on a "positions available" bulletin board. The third method is posting ads on the web. Figure 3 lists some of the web sites which list faculty openings. Sites vary by field, type of job, and currency.

<u>General:</u>		<u>Field-specific:</u>	
recruit.sciencemag.org	post-docs.com	bmenet.org	asce.org
chronicle.com/jobs	higheredjobs.com	bmes.org	ieee.org
facultyforthefuture.org		asme.org	(other societies)

Figure 3 – Web sites listing faculty openings

I recommend using the web sources over print since they are, in general, easily searchable – print ads and word of mouth should not be ruled out, though. The truly general job web sites don't normally carry academic postings – it may be a good idea to check sites like *monster.com* or *hotjobs.com* just in case, but it may not prove very fruitful.

Once you find a bounty of job postings, read the announcements very carefully. Do you fit the description? Does the job fit your preferences? If you are in a multidisciplinary field, you may find that you don't fit anywhere well. Note the due dates for application; are the postings still current? Do announcements posted with multiple sources agree?

STEP 4: find out about the schools/departments with openings

Once you have found a job opening you're interested in, you need to find out as much as you can about the school and department.

A first concern may be licensure requirements. These are mandated by each state, and can generally be found through the state's professional engineering board website.

School information such as departmental research budgets, people, facilities, ongoing research, and classes can often be found at the school's website – annual reports can contain such information, as well as department or school websites. Many institutions now post their faculty handbooks online, making information on tenure and promotion more easily found. Additional information can be gleaned from online college guides such as *petersons.com*, or from ASEE's own college database at *asee.org/colleges*.

Don't forget about the community the school is in. Is it large or small? Is it safe? How expensive is it to live there? Is it somewhere you could live comfortably and happily?

From information about the school, department, and community, you should be able to make a preliminary assessment whether the job fits your desires (as determined in step 2). If so, proceed further with the process.

STEP 5: prepare your paper self

As you are finding target positions, you need to prepare the items that any search committee will need to see. These papers will form the only representation that the committee has of you for its initial decision.

For most academic positions, a *curriculum vitae* (CV, or just *vita*) will be requested. This document lists items regarding your training and experience in research and teaching in a more verbose manner than a résumé; there are no implicit or explicit limits on length. A list of research interests and required equipment to perform said research is also often requested. A teaching portfolio can be needed, containing information about courses you have taught or wish to teach; this can be tailored to each individual school to which you apply.

Many excellent resources exist, both printed and human, which can aid with the generation of all these documents. Check with your school library, career center, etc. for help. Please remember that your school career center may not be intimately familiar with aspects of applying for engineering positions (there are a lot of liberal arts folks out there). Another valuable resource is a current faculty member who was either recently hired or a member of a hiring committee; s/he can tell you field-specific information on formats, buzzwords to include or avoid, and reasonable expectations for salary and startup packages.

You will need to tailor things to the position being applied for, to present yourself as the best possible match for the position. Include what is needed but don't just run on – realize that a search committee will be reading a lot of applications (67+ for one position I applied for) and show respect for their time.

STEP 6: make the initial contact

The first contact is usually initiated by the applicant. It could be a request for further info about the opening, for instance whether the position is open due to growth, departure, retirement, or death. It could be the application and cover letter itself. In general, don't send items that were not requested, unless you feel strongly that the items are needed to support your application. Stress aspects of your abilities and experience that fit the position well from the university's perspective (especially those specifically listed in the job description). Yes, you have now become a salesperson. Sell! Sell! Sell!

Whatever the nature of the first contact, make sure it is written well. Double-check grammar and spelling, especially on e-mails – for some reason, errors are harder to find on a computer screen than on paper. Our mothers were right – you never get a second chance to make a first impression.

STEP 7: take part in a phone interview

For some schools, the next step in the process after submitting an application is a phone interview. This step will be initiated by the university, and it is an intermediate step (less qualified candidates have already been culled from the list by this point). A phone conversation is a school's first chance to get a perspective on you other than on paper, and also your first chance to get a perspective on them other than paper. Record your impressions after the call.

STEP 8: do your homework before a site visit

Most schools will invite the most promising candidates to their campus for a site visit during which time the faculty will meet with you, you will generally give a talk, and you will peruse their facilities. Keep in mind that budgets are tight, so if a school invites you for a visit they are interested in you. If you are at all interested in the position, go on the interview; if not, don't waste your time and theirs by going on the trip.

Confirm beforehand what the school's reimbursement policies for the trip are, figure out the logistics of the trip (timing, transportation, lodging, etc.), find out the audience and desired length for your talk, and verify that necessary audio-visual equipment will be available.

Before you set foot on the campus, know the basics about the school (which you found in step 4). You don't want to ask things that you could find out through other methods. If possible, figure out what equipment they have that you'd need, and who controls it (so you can talk with them when you are there). Figure out how much it would cost to live in the area, in the manner to which you want to become accustomed.

STEP 9: make a site visit

A site visit really does provide an opportunity to learn things you can't find out any other way. Make sure to dress appropriately, not only in level of dress but also for weather and activity. Take the opportunity to talk to people with whom you could collaborate. And, if at all possible, talk to the graduate and/or undergraduate students – they have no reason to deceive (other than if they really want you there!), and they may be able to shed light on any recent faculty turnover, tenure decisions, and the like. Write down your impressions before you forget them, or confuse them with another campus – the long wait at the airport for the flight home is a great time to do this.

If you can, spend some time exploring the surrounding community. Be mindful of where you might live as well as what things there are to do.

Even if the site visit goes very well, schools rarely make a job offer on the spot. They may hint that an offer will be on its way to you soon. Be prepared if the chair asks some rather direct questions about expected salary, timing for being able to start working, etc.

STEP 10: list necessary lab equipment, etc. to purchase (with costs) based on site visit

Refine your needed research equipment list (already generated in step 5) based on possible shared/existing use as assessed after seeing the school's facilities and meeting potential collaborators.

STEP 11: respond to a school's "no"

If you get a letter from the school telling you that they will not be needing your services ("we were unable to find a position which met your qualifications" was the infamous quote from my days hunting an industry position out of college), realize that it is a game of numbers. Academic positions currently get a lot of applications per position, so there will be a lot of qualified people who do not get employment offers.

It is best to send something back to the school. Acknowledge/confirm receipt of their notification. You can ask why, but you probably won't get an answer. Thank them, and wish them luck in the future – remember, they will be your colleagues. Don't burn any bridges. Above all, be gracious.

STEP 12: evaluate an offer / startup package / fringe benefits

If you get an offer of employment from a school, now the task of evaluating it begins. If you are lucky, you may have more than one offer to entertain. This is the time to compare and contrast them in order to make an informed decision.

The first thing just about anyone will look for is the salary offer. Salary at academic institutions is handled differently than anywhere else I've seen. Salaries are indicated as 9-, 10-, 11-, or 12-month – in general, the lower the number of months, the greater portion of your salary you will be responsible for covering with grants, consulting, or supplemental teaching. 12-month appointments are generally reserved for positions either with significant administrative responsibilities (dean, department chair, etc.) or funded by grants (postdocs, research professors, etc.), so they are usually not applicable to new faculty. Salary is generally paid in 12 equal monthly payments regardless of the appointment length; remember that the your monthly salary also factors into relocation packages, grants, etc. Most schools like you to show up considerably before classes start – do they pay? You should take into account regional cost of living variances when determining whether a salary offer is adequate [www.homefair.com/homefair/calc/salcalc.html].

Benefits are a big part of the employee compensation package, typically costing an employer ~40% of the actual salary offer. Look at health benefits – coverage information should list required employee premium costs, deductibles, office and drug co-pays. Another part of the package includes programs such as pre-tax spending accounts, employee savings plans, tuition reimbursement, family benefits, and pension.

Relocation benefits should be enumerated. These will include moving costs (either by direct payment of a moving company or reimbursement of allowed expenses), any initial startup bonus paid, and the tax ramifications of all that. Do you get a paid house-hunting trip to find a place to live? Does the campus housing office help faculty to find housing (or provide faculty housing)? Be mindful that moving costs are generally tax-deductible, not tax-exempt; if you don't currently itemize deductions, you can end up with a tax liability of ~1/4 of your moving costs.

Your offer should include a detailing of any initial reduction of teaching duties, assigned lab research space and available equipment, lab and office furniture, and startup funds. You should incorporate the presence of any interested pre-existing graduate students, plus your assessment of the working environment, into the value of the offer.

STEP 13: negotiate

Each department/school will generally have some negotiating leeway, but they can't grant every request. The key to successful negotiation is remembering that both sides must benefit. The school should get a good faculty member, and you should get the support you need to be that good faculty member.

Establish what you think you are worth, monetarily and otherwise, and if it is vastly more than the offer you will need to negotiate with the school. Be sure you can substantiate your requests. Pick your battles – don't sweat the small stuff. Be mindful of your competition for the job as well – you could price yourself out of the job. Above all, be reasonable – assuming a successful outcome, the folks you're negotiating with may make your tenure decision later.

Make sure you get the renegotiated offer from the school in writing, and that it incorporates everything discussed and agreed upon in your phone conversations.

STEP 14: respond negatively to a school's "yes"

Should an offer be unworkable, you will need to inform the school. Acknowledge/confirm receipt of their offer. Tell them you won't be able to accept. State the reasons for turning them down, if

you wish. Thank them, and wish them luck in the future – remember, they will be your colleagues. Don't burn any bridges. Above all, be gracious.

STEP 15: respond positively to a school's "yes"

Once you have decided to accept a school's offer of employment, inform the school. Confirm the specifics of their offer, in writing. Restate the offer, as you understand it, in your acceptance; this should avoid any miscommunication or misunderstanding. Let your enthusiasm for the position show, if applicable. Any negotiation must take place prior to acceptance – you generally can not change things later.

STEP 16: handle the logistics of showing up to work

Before you head to the new campus, make sure everything is lining up as you expect. Reconfirm everything; assume nothing. Double-check dates and vendors for movers and car-haulers. Remember that many things won't be carried by moving companies (live plants, flammables, caustic materials, etc. including paint and many cleaners), so make allowance for taking them yourself.

Once you get to campus, allow at least a couple of weeks to get the infrastructure set up (phone, e-mail, computer accounts, ID, parking). Some universities conduct training sessions for new faculty; check with your department to make sure you don't miss any such activities.

Conclusions

Following the rough framework given in this paper and using the resources listed should aid in the process of obtaining and evaluating job offers, resulting in a first academic position.

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