

## Perfecting The Job Talk

- The JOB TALK is probably one of most stressful parts of the job interview process and one of most important. Truly can make or break the interview (e.g., I was 3<sup>rd</sup> on short list of both jobs; got the job offer in both cases. I was told gave a very good job talk, but more importantly, was also told that several of the other candidates had not and that had ruled them out).
- Important Point: Some faculty will only go to your job talk (don't schedule interviews, or only do so after hearing the candidate). Hence, will base their decision on talk & CV.

### I. What do they really want to know?

- A common misconception is to view the job talk & interview as the process by which search committees assess the candidates basic qualifications.
- It's not. Search committee has already have evaluated your qualifications in the review & short listing process. If you have been offered an interview, they think you HAVE the basic qualifications. So it's not about proving your basic proficiency, per se (unless you've exaggerated and they'll find that out quickly).

- Rather, it is about 2 things:

(a) Exploring the range and depth of your expertise.

What underlies the knowledge, skills and experience indicated by your CV? Is your knowledge in your area deep or superficial, did you ride on your adviser's/labmates coattails, or they on yours? How broad is your range of interest and competence? Is there more than appears on your CV? Do you have even more talents? Are you a star in the making or a one-trick pony who does that trick well?

May seem a minor distinction, but it's an important one for your mindset. Don't have to PROVE your competence. This is not a TEST or a combative exercise, even though it may feel that way sometimes. You want to illustrate your range of abilities - this is an opportunity show your excitement and ability to contribute & collaborate.

➔ Take-home: Not a DEFENSE of your stated skills but a DEMONSTRATION of them.

(b) Determining whether you fit.

This, is the real key. Once they have decided that you meet the basic job qualifications, the department really wants to know how well you will fit as a teacher, a scholar and colleague. Can they live with you? Will you succeed (maintain a good publication record? Find funding? Attract students and build a program)? Will you be a good educator and mentor?

- Determining your FIT is based on 3 components:

(a) Teaching potential:

- Can you teach?
- Will you be an exciting & engaging teacher?

- Are you organized & logical in your presentations?
- Can you convey complex concepts in an accessible manner?
- Do you prepare & use presentation material in an effective way (e.g. PowerPoint slides, additional material, etc.)?
- **Note** that some departments may ask you to give a separate teaching seminar (to faculty, grads or undergrads) on either a topic of your choice or one they assign. Others use the job talk to assess teaching ability. Find out and prepare to demonstrate these skills.

➔ SKILL as a communicator and interpreter

(b) Research potential:

- Is your research interesting, cutting edge? Does it contribute novel information or is it more confirmatory in nature?
- How does your work fit into a broader conceptual or theoretical framework and what, specifically, is that framework?
- How does your work integrate with that of other members of the department? Does it build on an area of strength? Does it complement (or conflict with) work of other colleagues? Would it be an exciting new addition or a minor satellite?
- What is the potential for growth in your field (i.e., further research, but also funding, fitting grad students in)?

➔ SKILL as a critical and thoughtful thinker (your curiosity, ability to generate novel and insightful perspectives)

(c) Collegiality:

- May be one of the most important aspects, often under-appreciated. The search committee & department are deciding whether they like and can live with this person, at least for next 5-6 years (to tenure) and perhaps an academic lifetime (if tenured).
  - Don't want a blowhard or super ego who will demand attention, resources, cause conflict.
  - Also don't want a recluse who will hide in their office, not contribute to departmental functions (seminars, serving on committees) or will avoid their role in teaching large service classes, etc.
  - Ideally, someone who is interesting, a "team-player", engaging, possible collaborator or co-teacher.
- Can be a very fuzzy distinction and hard to prepare for. But some suggestions:
- (a) Know something about the members of the department. Do some research; find out their research interests contributions to teaching, grad student projects. Not only helps to see who makes up this particular community and

how you might fit in, but also will give you something in common to talk about in one-one interviews.

- (b) Be yourself - biggest mistake might be trying to act differently than who you are and then either having to continue that pretence for the rest of your career or, more likely, having them see very quickly through you. If they don't hire you because of your personality, you might not have been very happy there in the long run (not just sour grapes).
- (c) HOWEVER, don't let quirky aspects of your personality dominate -- especially ego! (e.g., a colleague of mine was very bright and could be arrogant, especially when challenged. Had 15+ interviews and was 2<sup>nd</sup> on all - due to perceived arrogance. And yet, was actually a great colleague once knew him. Problem was, when challenged he would rely on his greatest asset (intelligence) and would fire back with both barrels (usually with deadly consequences). Eventually trained himself to turn off that over-powered response and got several job offers).
- (d) Many departments will have graduate students and often undergraduate students reps on search committees or at job talks and their input can be very important. Often schedule separate meetings with the students. In a job search at U of T, two candidates seemed very similar and equally qualified. Interacted well with faculty, bright, interesting. Then, found out from students that one was extremely condescending to the grad students and undergrads in their meetings and weighted the decision against this candidate. Don't forget that students are an important component of the community!

➔ Take-home: EGO & ARROGANCE can kill you on a job talk and interview - don't be overly critical or condescending. It doesn't impress and will only work against you. Don't compensate for nervousness with hubris. Be positive, constructive and friendly.

## II. The Job Talk

- So, the job talk itself. The three goals are to demonstrate:
  - Teaching potential - skill in communicating and interpreting complex concepts
  - Research potential - skill as a critical and thoughtful thinker (especially your curiosity, ability to generate new and insightful perspectives)
  - Collegiality - interpersonal skills; positive, friendly, constructive & collaborative
- Idea is to showcase both your science and you - the person.
- Requires all the presentation skills of any seminar (won't go into those) but is very different in that a regular seminar focuses almost entirely on the content. A JOB TALK is not only about content, but about the person and their skill at presenting and exciting the audience about the content.

### A. The Audience:

- Find out from chair before; could be:
  - (a) Just colleagues in your general area (unlikely unless it is a huge department with very specific areas); colleagues in entire department (diverse) or colleagues from across campus (unlikely but possible if high prestige position)
  - (b) Just faculty (unlikely), faculty + grad students (typical) or faculty + grad students + undergrads (asked or assigned)
  - (c) Research position/school (more emphasis on content) teaching position (emphasis on presentation - how content presented).
- ➔ General rule: "sophisticated, not specialized" - don't assume your audience is in any way familiar with your work or area, but don't assume they are idiots either.

### B. The Content of the Talk:

- I have always felt that a good job talk should illustrate 3 aspects of your work:
  - (a) **Depth** - the heart & soul of your work.
    - Need to demonstrate that your work has addressed an important area, has done so with rigorous and perhaps novel methods, and that the results have shed new insight or given us new perspectives. What is your contribution and why important (need to be able to answer the question "SO WHAT?")
    - Often is the core of your dissertation work.
    - Don't try to present your entire dissertation - pick out one or two key elements (15 min each). Not the goal to tell all your story; better to provide succinct story that shows how you can think deeply and in a logical and critical way.
    - Stick with what is familiar - don't present your risky, newest and most uncertain stuff (not as the meat of the talk at least). Stay on certain ground for the main talk.
  - (b) **Breadth** - also want to show that you are not just a one-trick pony.
    - Have ability to think about other areas, other applications of your work, different hypotheses or research questions (illustrate ability to grow and think widely).
    - This is where might briefly touch on other chapters of your dissertation ("I've also looked at these other components"..) or could talk about other research in which you have collaborated.

- Don't get too far off-topic (don't want to jump around and come across unfocused just to show how broad you are). But doesn't hurt to briefly indicate your other areas of interest and how they relate to your overall research program. Sometimes called the T-principle; vertical part of T is depth, top cross bar represents breadth.

(c) **Future** - Finally want to show that you have thought ahead.

- They will know what you have done from CV and from first part of talk. They also want to know what you will do.
- What are your next steps in your research program (Is there a future? How will it add to what you have already done? Is your work building to a crescendo or fizzling to an end?)
- Also - how will your work fit in with the department? Location? Facilities? Potential new collaborators (don't have to say explicitly, but should be obvious how your future work will integrate and complement).
- How and where will graduate students fit in. It is easy to overlook the fact that this is an important transition you will be making - from student to mentor. So, it is not JUST about YOUR work anymore ... what is future potential for new projects & students.
- DO YOU HAVE A RESEARCH PROGRAM, not just a research project?

➔ Take-home: Demonstrate depth (30 min), breadth (10) and future potential (5-10 minutes).

### C. Preparation & Presentation:

- Practice is critical; my two job talks were probably best I have given -- because I practiced (and have simply not done so to the same extent since).
- Do it out loud to yourself (to get content, flow & timing). Then in front of friends & colleagues. Ask them to be critical. Go through each part (each slide) and ask if it is needed, if sensible, if can be easily read and interpreted. Remake slides. Don't put too much information on each slide. Don't get cute with powerpoint. Keep the focus on you and the content, not the jittering multi-color slide formats that PPT allows.
- DON'T use humor - let it come naturally if it does, but don't be cute or try to be funny. They are not hiring a comedian and there is NOTHING more deflating than to have a joke bomb early in the seminar. If you do use humor, save it to the end and keep it light.
- Avoid jargon and acronyms. It doesn't demonstrate that you know anything more and it just excludes those who don't know the field (and makes you seem insecure and exclusionary). Remember the audience is evaluating you as a teacher, not just a hot-shot researcher who knows all the buzz words.
- Keep to the time limits - better, keep it under time! There is a real temptation to want to show ALL that you have done and to eek out every possible minute. Don't! The best impression you can leave is to come across as respectful of other people's time

and to be able to convey a message economically. They will love you if you finish early and it leaves more time for questions.

- Check out the room in advance (know where light switch, slide projector etc.) is.
- Plan for disaster (have overheads, make sure PPT works on the system they have, be able to talk if there is a jam etc.). Go to the room before your talk and do a run through if you can (at least make sure everything works).
- Go to other JOB Talks - see what works and doesn't.

#### **D. Questions & Answer:**

- For me, this is always the hardest part. I'm usually tired, unsure of what is coming and afraid to make a gaffe. I've seen brilliant talks torpedoed by bumbling answers (happened to me as a PhD student .. one faculty said, to audience, "I thought this was one of the best talks I've heard this semester until that you answered that last question ..")
- Anticipate questions (can even leave some obvious ones hanging ... bait the audience although can be dangerous). Have colleagues go over the kinds of questions they would ask.
- Take time to answer. Shows you are thoughtful and gives you time to make sure you understand the question. If not clear on exactly what they want, ask for clarification. Effectively, all those skills learned in prepping for oral qualifying exam.
- Don't be afraid to say "I don't know. That's a great question and I'll have to think about it". Or, "that would be a great follow-up research project". Just don't do this too much.
- Think of questions as part of a dialogue, not as criticism you must deflect. Treat every questions seriously and with respect (even the really dumb ones).
- Remember that YOU do have control of the Q & A session - you are not simply a victim thrown to the wolves. Be ready to steer questions to areas you want to talk about or to use questions as a way to talk about aspects of your talk that you did not have sufficient time for during the lecture. In all cases, be friendly, interested, and conversational, even if questioners become aggressive. In many ways, the Q&A session is more about HOW you deal with questions and questioners as it is on your answers, per se.

#### **E. The Bottom Line:**

Ultimately, I think the best jobs talks I have seen were those that illustrated the following:

- Energy and excitement about the work (can be contagious). You fell in love with this topic; why & how? Communicate this.
- Organization and a logical flow (don't make the audience struggle to follow the flow).

- Enough depth to show the significance of the work and make the audience believe it, but not so much as to bore the audience with unnecessary details that would be more suitable for a specialized audience.
- Nice graphics (interesting slides, not just text) but not "Powerpoint on LSD". Don't let the medium become the message!
- A personal presentation - evidence of the desire of the speaker to engage the audience, not impress them.
- Don't worry about reaching every member of audience -- it has been estimated that even a great speaker on a great day doesn't reach 20% of audience. Aim for that 80%.
- Finally, have fun. Really. What is the worst outcome? You received an expense-paid visit to a new school, met with interesting folks, impressed many (perhaps not all, but even if you don't get the offer, it doesn't mean you haven't made a mark), you are clearly in the running (since you were invited for an interview) and you probably have some great ideas on what to improve or modify for next time. The less you look on each job talk as a must-have, do-or-die situation, the greater the chance that you will be able to convey your true personality and enthusiasm. And that will go a long way in the final decision.