Academic Job Search: 
Perspective of a Recent Hire

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Washington State University
Pullman, WA

February 28, 2014
OUTLINE

PROCESS

APPLICATION MATERIAL
Cover Letter
CV
Research Statement
Teaching Statement
Recommendation Letters

INTERVIEW
Phone Interview
Campus Interview

OFFER

TIPS
OUTLINE

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- I had 14 interview invitations, went to 8 in the United States, and received offers from 5.
- I love this job; it’s rewarding and fun.
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**About You**

By show of hands

- How many of you have decided what type of job you want (academia, industry, or research labs)?
- How many of you are not 3rd+ year PhD student or postdoc?
- How many of you have started drafting your application package?
- How many of you know the tenure requirements?
- How many of you are not within CEA?

What’s the purpose of job search? To find the best possible job for you.

- Know what the best job for you is.
- Convince the employer to give it to you.

Not every PhD is supposed to go to academia, nor is it necessarily the best job out there.
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OVERVIEW OF THE PROCESS

- School posts the ad.
- You decide to apply and submit your application (100+).
- Search committee reviews applications and creates a short list.
- Sometimes a phone interview is conducted (∼10).
- You are invited for a campus visit and interview (∼3).
- The search committee decides on the successful candidate (∼1).
- The chair reviews the decision and communicates it to you.
- You and the chair negotiate the parameters of the offer.
- You receive an official letter signed by the chair, dean, and provost.
- You start your new position.
TIMELINE

- Start early. **Start planning in your 3rd year.**
- Preparing (quality) documents takes time.
- Apply at the beginning of your fourth year.
- Apply well before the deadline. Sometimes they start filtering out sooner.
My Timeline

2007
- Started PhD

2008
- Sent 1st application

2009
- Received 1st invite
- Started process

2010
- Received 1st offer
- Graduated

2011
- Offer

2012
- Started job
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apr, may, jun
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Timeline:
- apr: V, U, U, C, N
- may: 
- jun: F
WHERE TO APPLY

There are two schools of thought:

▶ Apply to any place you even remotely think you will be interested in. Rankings can be deceptive.
▶ Apply to a select few and focus on them.
▶ Apply to as many as you can; focus on a few.

How to find where to apply?

▶ Magazines, e.g., Spectrum in electrical engineering.
▶ Your professor, friends, colleagues, and conferences.

When to apply?

▶ Defence first or interview first?
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Department of Automotive Engineering
Posted Jul. 7, 2013

Professor, Associate Professor, Assistance Professor
Kuwait University
College of Engineering & Petroleum
Posted Feb. 21, 2013
GET ORGANIZED

If you are applying to 10+ places (which you should) organization is the key. Create a spreadsheet (preferably on Google Drive). For each posting, record the following:

▶ Date of posting, application, and follow-up
▶ Documents they need (and number of references)
▶ Field and title of the job
▶ Where you saw the ad
▶ URL of the department
▶ Name and information of the contact person
▶ Status of application

Also create a folder for each university and keep a copy of your package. If you are more comfortable with hardcopies, print.

Plant a tree later.
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# Master Spreadsheet

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**Legend:**
- Process
- Application Material
- Interview
- Offer
- Tips
**Many Kinds of Professors**

Common tenure-track positions are

- Assistant professor
- Associate professor
- Professor
- Instructor

Common nontenure-track positions are (titles are not standard)

- Research professor
- Clinical professor
- Contract position

Job descriptions are different. At WSU, expectations are

- 45% Research
- 45% Teaching
- 10% Service

(Not all 45% are equal.)
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TIPS
The cover letter brings your application package to life and highlights the important parts. A cover letter is 1 page (or just a bit over one page) long and has a relatively standard form:

- Address it to the chair of the search committee. Customize.
- Four standard and relatively short paragraphs.
- P1: Mention the position, where you saw the ad, and your status:

**Example**

I am writing to apply for the position as Assistant Professor in Power Engineering as advertised in Spectrum. I am currently a doctoral candidate at the University of Toronto and expect to complete my degree requirements by X. I am pleased to learn of the opportunity to join Washington State University and contribute to its progressive and vibrant power engineering group.
COVER LETTER II

- P2: Discuss highlights of your past research (overview, awards, papers); plans for future research; funding plans.
**COVER LETTER III**

- P3: Discuss your teaching experience

**Example**

As my curriculum vitae shows, I am firmly dedicated to the education of electrical engineering, and I have welcomed every opportunity to teach during my studies. I have also participated in various programs on the pedagogy of teaching. In addition to being a teaching assistant for about twenty courses, in an outreach activity, I taught a course on introduction to electrical engineering. I have consistently received superior student evaluations, mainly because I incorporate elements of my research in my teaching: I have authored a journal article on the educational aspects of potential functions (a theme of my dissertation). I have also developed a teaching portfolio for a new course on energy storage systems. I look forward to utilizing my teaching experience in designing new courses and teaching existing courses in the school.
COVER LETTER IV

- P4: Reiterate your interest and close; welcome the opportunity to discuss further; mention what is enclosed.

Example

I would be honored to help build on the EECS school’s tradition of research and education success. I welcome the opportunity to further discuss my teaching and research interests with you. I have enclosed my curriculum vitae, statements of research and teaching, and list of references. Please do not hesitate to contact me if you need further information or additional material, e.g., papers and teaching dossier. I look forward to hearing from you.

Encl: Curriculum vitae, statements of research and teaching, and list of references.

- Common mistake: “attached please find my application.”
Curriculum Vitæ

CV is the first document the search committee will look at.

▶ Make your CV look professional. First impression counts.
▶ Everything on CV must be in reverse chronological order.
▶ Be selective but include all important information: employment, education, research experience, awards and honors, teaching experience, professional service and activities, publications (separate conference and journal; submitted and accepted), talks, and posters.
▶ Don’t pad your CV by counting “in preparation” papers.
▶ Probably the most important measure is the number of your papers.
▶ Leave plenty of white space.
Ali Mehrizi-Sani
Ph.D. Candidate

EDUCATION

2007–2011
Ph.D. in Electrical Engineering, University of Toronto, Toronto, ON.
Dissertation: ‘Potential Function Based Secondary Control of Microgrids’
Supervisor: Professor Reza Iravani
GPA: 4.5
Expected graduation date: May 2011

2005–2007
M.Sc. in Electrical Engineering, University of Manitoba, Winnipeg, MB.
Thesis: ‘Advanced Modulation Techniques for Power Converters’ (Best Thesis Award)
Supervisor: Professor Shaahin Filizadeh
GPA: 4.5

2000–2005
B.Sc. in Electrical Engineering, Sharif University of Technology, Tehran, Iran.
Option: Power Engineering
GPA: 18.2/20

2003–2005
B.Sc. in Petroleum Engineering, Sharif University of Technology in collaboration with Petroleum University of Technology, Tehran, Iran.
Option: Reservoir Engineering
GPA: 18.0/20

RESEARCH EXPERIENCE

Sept. 2007 to Present
Graduate Research Assistant, University of Toronto, Toronto, ON.
- Conceptualized the notion of secondary control for microgrids;
- Proposed application of potential functions for secondary control;
- Investigated the application of potential functions in engineering and the sciences;
- Developed several visualization platforms, freely available for download;
- Conceived of set point automatic adjustment (SPAA) for trajectory shaping;
- Studied and implemented model predictive control for power system applications;
- Investigated control of DER units using frequency partitioning of the control signals.

Jan. 2009 to Dec. 2010
NSERC/MITACS Intern, Digital Predictive Systems, Mississauga, ON.
- Developed control strategies based on potential functions;
- Designed potential functions for the voltage control of the DER units;
- Created simulation case studies based on the CIGRE and IEEE benchmark systems;
- Identified system specification requirements;
- Studied interfacing in LabVIEW.

EMPLOYMENT

2011 to Present
Assistant Professor
Edward S. Rogers Sr. Department of Electrical and Computer Engineering
University of Toronto
Toronto, ON

Research and Work Experience

Graduate Research Assistant
University of Toronto
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RESEARCH STATEMENT

Research statement reviews your past accomplishments and sets the roadmap for your future research direction.
TEACHING STATEMENT

▶ What do you think about your approach to teaching? Answer these questions:
  ▶ How do you think students learn?
  ▶ What can you do to facilitate their leaning?
▶ Demonstrate you know about/of pedagogy /ˈpɛdəɡɒdʒi/ of teaching (art and science of education).
▶ List the courses you can teach. Naturally these will be courses in your area, but also some junior and graduate courses. Customize for each school with their course numbers.
▶ Writing a mediocre teaching statement is easy. Writing a good teaching statement is very difficult. There are lots of teaching statement samples on the Internet. The search committee knows this too!
▶ Common mistake: plagiarism on teaching statement
**RECOMMENDATION LETTERS**

- Recommendation letters are very important. 3–6 required. One *has to* be from your doctoral advisor.
- Make sure your references can comment on your research capabilities (if you’re applying for a research position); it’s good if they can elaborate on your teaching skills too.
- Most schools ask for letters only for shortlisted applicants; sometimes only after interview; sometimes at the beginning.

Send your package for review.

Sometimes they ask for other material too: teaching dossier, transcripts, diversity statement, and samples of papers.
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#### Tips

24 / 51
Phone Interview

To shorten the “shortlist” of 10 candidates to 3 with minimal time/money commitment.

Cons:
- You can’t read them.
- It is not very natural.

Pros:
- They can’t read you!
- You can use/take notes.

Questions—always have them:
- Where are you in the hiring process?
- What is expected of the successful candidate?

Update your application if needed. End with thanking them for their time; say that you look forward to hearing from them.
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**Campus Interview**

Campus visit is usually 1 to 2 days. The point of campus visit is for them to

- Evaluate your research rigour: talk, discussions, questions.
- Assess our attitude and citizenship.

And for you to

- Make sure this is the place you want to be; know the culture of the department.
- See the facilities.
- Get a first-hand experience.
- Ask questions.
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ELEMENTS OF CAMPUS VISIT

Your day will be long; sometimes from 7 am to 10 pm. Make sure you are at your best: energetic, aggressive, and polite.

- Research seminar
- Teaching seminar
- Meals
- One-on-one or group interviews
- Graduate students—sometimes the most dreadful, least discreet.
- Tour of labs
- Real estate agent tour of the city
- Interview with the chair
- Interview with the dean
**Research Seminar**

Prepare for the talk. The talk is usually either 1 hour or 1.5 hours, questions included. Tell a story:

- Request for 15 minutes before the talk.
- Start from basic concepts (everybody should be able to follow)
- Discuss the technical details of your work (you will lose the nonexperts)
- Wrap up and present conclusions (reconcile everybody)

Don’t leave town before having presented your talk for your advisor and classmates at least a few times. Save yourself the embarrassment. It’s better to see mean people at home than at the interview site.
OUTLINE

PROCESS

APPLICATION MATERIAL
Cover Letter
CV
Research Statement
Teaching Statement
Recommendation Letters

INTERVIEW
Phone Interview
Campus Interview

OFFER

TIPS
Offer and Negotiation

The chair calls you (or sends you an email).

They want you to succeed. Most public universities hire “for tenure,” meaning that they invest in you in the hope that get past tenure. At this point, the chair is on your side, but not everything can be negotiated. Remember:

▶ The best scenario is when you get multiple offers.
▶ Your negotiation room also depends on the personal attitude of the chair or the institutional policy.
▶ You can’t (and probably won’t) get everything you want.
▶ You can’t take forever to respond. But if you are waiting to hear from other institutions, you can certainly tell other schools that you already have an offer to speed up.
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START-UP PACKAGE

- Salary
  - Salary of public employees (state or federal) is public information. Go online (e.g., fiscal.wa.gov/Salaries.aspx) or check their library.
  - Sometimes salary is mainly determined by HR.
  - Be aware of salary inversion.

- Summer salary (9 vs. 12-month appointment)
- Support for graduate students
- Funds for equipment, travel, and immediate needs
- Moving expenses
- Spousal accommodation
- Course release
- Lab space

If it’s not in writing, it doesn’t exist. Know the time limits.
DECISION FACTORS

Most of these factors are very personal.

- Start-up package: How you weight different components is up to you.
- Status and standing of the institution/program
  - Established program vs. new program
  - Land-grant vs. selective college
  - Liberal arts vs. research intensive
  - HBCU
- Culture of the institution
- City: big city vs. small town (cost of living, connectivity)
- State
- Family
REJECT OTHER OFFERS

Example

Dear Professor X:

Thank you very much for your telephone call and email regarding the details of the position. I would like to express my gratitude for offering me the position of Assistant Professor at X. I very much enjoyed my discussions with you and with the search committee.

As I explained earlier, I have received offers from other institutions, which I believe more closely align with my career interests. Therefore, even though it was a difficult decision, I regret I must decline your offer.

I sincerely appreciate your interest in having me at X. I hope we have the opportunity to collaborate and discuss areas of mutual interest in the future; I was impressed by the quality research done at X.

Again, thank you for your consideration.
ETHICS

- Accept an interview invitation only if you will go there if they offer a reasonable package.
- As soon as you accept an offer, withdraw your applications. It’s fine to ask for extension of the grace period to see if you get other offers.
- It’s okay to move, but don’t go somewhere with the intention of only moving later.
**Welcome to Assistant Professor Life**

You will probably shift from a researcher to a research manager. You have to work toward establishing your career. Your success is recognized by being granted tenure.

- Write proposals to different agencies
- Write papers with your students
- Attend conferences and present your work
- Advise graduate students
- Teach courses
- Serve on committees
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TIPS
TIP: AIR TRAVEL

Hope for the best, but prepare for the worst. Accidents do happen (lost luggage, traffic, and rain and snow).

▶ You should belong to one frequent flyer program.

🌟 Star Alliance (e.g., United, US Air, Air Canada, and Lufthansa)

✈️ SkyTeam (e.g., Delta, KLM, and Air France)

👨‍💼 Alaska; partners with some of SkyTeam and OneWorld

▶ If connecting, do not fly on the last flight of the day.
▶ If your first meeting of the day is at 9 am and it’s December, fly the night before.
**Tip: Reimbursements**

Create a spreadsheet to keep track of them (date, item, amount, purpose). Keep in an envelope. They may get lost.

- They pay for everything: meals, flights, hotel, and taxi. No need to ask
- The process is expensive. Save money.
- It doesn’t happen overnight. Give it a month.
- Keep receipts. Leave tips.
**Tip: Scheduling Interviews**

- You will probably get back-to-back interviews.
- Schedule slack into your schedule. Pay attention to different time zones. Typical weeks:
  - Two two-day interviews: Mon/Tue and Thur/Fri (college town limitations)
  - Three one-day interviews: Mon, Wed, and Fri.

One two-day interview is easier than two one-day interviews (one talk, familiar place, no travel).

- Once you have an invitation, let other employers in the geographic area know. It’s less expensive for them and they view you as more desirable.

- You should receive an itinerary. Ask if you don’t have it on the day before the visit. **Print** it and take it with you.

- If you need a visa, apply early (possibly before invitations).
Tip: Before Each Interview

Do your homework about each institution.

▶ Know funding agencies, local industry, state funds, foundations.
▶ Print bios and pictures of faculty to read on the plane. Impress them by showing that you cared enough.
▶ Keep a journal; include technical discussions, your impression, thank you notes.
▶ Let employers know that you are in the geographic area.
▶ Research the program and university: new hires, seniors, and funding history.
Tip: What to Take with You on an Interview

- Comfortable shoes, nail clippers, wheeled carry-on, passport, driver’s license, cell phone, USB drive, Tylenol, and laptop.
- Formal dress. Also descent informal dress in case they pick you up at the airport.
  - For guys, black or dark suit, white or off-white shirt (2), conservative tie (2). Probably you’ll have to dry clean a few times. Unpack, iron, and hang the night before.
- Don’t check the stuff you can’t absolutely live with.
- Use technology (Google drive, Google maps, Dropbox), but don’t trust technology (and wifi). Keep offline copies.
**Tip: Meeting with Administrators**

- Sometimes you get a hint from the professor who walks you to their office what they want to hear.
- Each meeting can range from low-pressure chats and even a walk on campus to intense technical chats or discussion on money and plans.
- Ask questions, but remember their answers are usually diplomatic.
- Sometimes deans are very aware of what’s happening in the departments under them.
Tip: Delivering your Seminar

▶ If using PowerPoint, use the Presenter View.
▶ Keep the time. Wear a watch or put one the desk. For a one-hour talk, speak only for 45 minutes.
▶ If the talk is the only one you do, it is also for assessing your teaching abilities.
▶ Sometimes chairs and faculty may leave your talk halfway. Often it is because they have other meetings and not necessarily because your talk bores them.
▶ Questions:
  ▶ Bring a bottle of water with you. Take a sip when somebody asks you a question. That buys you extra time to think.
  ▶ If the question is turning into a long discussion or if it is less relevant, say let’s discuss this offline.
  ▶ If you don’t know the answer, admit it. Don’t bluff. Your audience are quick to realize this anyways.
Be prepared to answer these questions.

- Why an academic job?
- Why this university?
- What was your research on?
- How much teaching experience do you have?
- Where do you plan to get funding from?
- What are your papers? Where do you publish?
- Know your home university.

Personal questions are inappropriate, but don’t be naive; they will be asked.
**Tip: Questions to Ask from Faculty**

Do have some questions to ask, otherwise it portrays lack of genuine interest.

- How long does it take for a typical PhD to graduate?
- Why did you choose this school?
- How is the department governed?
- How much time do people spend on teaching?
- What kind of services does the university provide for grant writing and application? How effective are they?
- What would you change if you could?
- What are the strengths of the ECE/EECS/etc program?
- Why is there an open position?
- Do you share equipment here?
Tip: Questions to Ask from Administrators

- What is the tenure and promotion process (time frame, emphasis, percentage, mix of TSR)? Which level is more important (department, college)?
- No salary question, but “typical start-up package”
- What’s the teaching expectation from a junior faculty?
- How do you decide on the TA support? How are TAs chosen?
- Are there mentor services for junior faculty?
- What admin support is provided by the department?
**Tip: Meals**

Meals are part of the interview.

- If you have dietary restrictions, tell them.
- Don’t order foods that are difficult to eat, like spaghetti or burger.
- If you don’t drink alcohol, simply say so and add “but don’t let me stop you.” Don’t drink too much!
- Dinner is usually a three-course meal. It can take long because it usually turns into social interaction.
- Know the etiquette and follow it, even if others don’t.
**Tip: Wait Period**

- Send an email and thank the chair and other people you met. (But don’t expect an answer; lack of answer doesn’t mean anything.)
- Wait is difficult. Finish your papers in the meantime.
- If you don’t get an offer, try again. Sometimes they are looking for a new faculty, but not necessarily in your field. Sometimes they don’t even know if they want an assistant or associate professor. And sometimes positions are already filled!
- Remain nice and positive. These people will be your future colleagues.
- If don’t hear “no,” it’s not really a good sign. It means you didn’t aim high enough.
RESOURCES

▶ “Preparing future faculty,”
www.preparing-faculty.org
The PFF initiative was launched in 1993 as a partnership between CGS and AAC&U. It also had the support of the National Science Foundation and was implemented at more than 45 doctoral degree-granting institutions.

▶ “Tips for Getting a Job in Academia,”
www.users.muohio.edu/shorec/apapff/resources/jobtips.pdf

▶ “Getting an Academic Job,” homes.cs.washington.edu/~mernst/advice/academic-job.html


▶ www.PhDs.org, www.ASEE.org

▶ …or simply Google “how to find a job in academia”
I can’t believe I did it. But you’ll emerge stronger just like after any other challenge. Have fun; you will go to lots of places and make lots of friends.

Ali Mehrizi-Sani
mehrizi@eecs.wsu.edu

http://eecs.wsu.edu/~mehrizi/AcademicJobSearch