Ben Tolchin: One Job Seeker’s Perspective on the Job Hunt

Job search can be full of surprises, as well as ups and downs. For Ben Tolchin, a clinical epilepsy fellow in his last year of training at Brigham and Women’s Hospital and Harvard Medical School, the search for employment has taken some interesting turns.

His goal, after more than six years of increasingly intensive post-doctoral training, is to work in a dual role: First, as an academic epileptologist, where he can pursue a clinical and research focus in psychogenic nonepileptic seizures (PNS) and the issue of treatment adherence; and also as a clinical researcher involved in the “bread and butter” issues most commonly treated at epilepsy centers. Tolchin says this combined interest has been honed by his training experiences to date, including participation in a multi-year research project funded by the American Academy of Neurology as part of the Academy’s Practice Research Training Fellowship.

You might think the world would be small for a doctor with such a finely-articulated career objective. In that you’d be right—but only in the most positive sense. Rather than finding that opportunities are limited by the narrow scope of his goal, Tolchin has been discovering that the camaraderie of his specialty is an asset.

Meeting colleagues in the interview process

“I’m struck with how small the world is in my field of epilepsy research,” he says. After only a handful of interviews, he reports hearing potential colleagues tell him, ‘Listen, I hope we’ll work together, but whether we do or not, let’s collaborate in the future.’ For Tolchin, “That’s been a good outcome of the interview process. It’s struck me how many people I’ve run across in interviews that I had already met in a conference or another setting. Or they’ve been senior residents or fellows that I interviewed with as a fellow that I’m now seeing as interviewers.”

Since his earlier interviewing experiences had been for training roles, Tolchin wasn’t entirely prepared for the collegial tone of meetings at this level. “There have been some things that shook my conceptions about the interview process,” he says. “Particularly, how helpful it is to hear about what kind of research is being done in projects tangential to my own clinical research. That was kind of a surprise to me and I’m finding it very thought-provoking. It’s been pushing my thinking into new directions, and giving me new ideas and new materials to work with. That’s not something I anticipated when I started the interview process.”

Gaining confidence in the job search process

So what was he expecting instead? When Tolchin spoke with Career Compass for this story, he was only a few weeks into his search for a job he could begin in July 2017. He had already started Skype and in-person interviews but had not yet begun to receive offers. Initially, he says, he found job search to be “a pretty daunting and frightening process. But once I started to talk with people and meet with people, it’s definitely been reasonably warm and comfortable. The initial anxiety and trepidation that I felt, I don’t feel as much.”

According to Tolchin, the key to the transition from trepidation to confidence came from realizing his interviewers were colleagues with similar interests, who are proud of the institutions they represent, just as he is. Now he’s excited about the prospect of interviewing more. “For me, it’s been very helpful to see different locations and hear about different positions before making a decision or signing a contract,” he says. “I’m hoping to look at a few options before making an informed decision.”

His process, and advice for others

While Tolchin is quick to say that he doesn’t feel like an expert in the job search process, he’s happy to share the steps that he has followed and the lessons he’s learned so far. For example, he says, “I’ve learned that it’s accepted—indeed, expected—to send out letters to programs you’re interested in or would like to learn more about. Program directors have been very welcoming when I’ve contacted them. I was given that advice by an
AAN career specialist in a phone coaching session and it’s been working well.”

Along with sending letters of interest to program directors, Tolchin advises job seekers to be open to the professional relationships that develop from interviews and other job search processes. “You learn a lot about what’s going on in your field simply by going through the interviews,” he notes. “That can be very informative not just for the job search but for the research aspect and potential collaborators.”

As a final piece of advice, Tolchin recommends that other fellows and residents attend conferences whenever possible, both for the training offered but also to establish professional relationships. He also finds conferences valuable for learning about other centers and the research being conducted, and for becoming known by other attendees through presentations of one’s own. Among Tolchin’s favorite conferences have been the AAN’s Annual Meeting, as well as sessions offered by other professional associations. As an additional strategy, Tolchin notes that his division chief has been active in introducing him to her colleagues at the conferences: “I think it’s important to take advantage of those introductions and put your best foot forward and learn what others are doing,” he says.

For his part, Tolchin says he plans to stay in contact with people he’s been meeting as a candidate, even if he doesn’t end up working at their institution. He also expects to use his growing network more fully in future searches. “Knowing what I do now, I would look for past connections when I’m looking to interview or explore new options,” he says. “I would connect with that network of people as I’m finding new opportunities.”