

The Job-Talk Colloquium

My Advice to Fresh PhDs and Post-Docs

Like everybody else, I have my own ideas about what makes a job talk successful. No real surprises...

1. What have you done and how?

What is your research about? Explain the central contributions making clear how your work builds on the prior work of others. What distinguishes your research from ongoing related research? Regarding less-central contributions, practice good journalism by being brief but informative. Guard against the tendency to overstuff your talk with results and philosophy by having a well-organized, personal website that lays it all out..

2. What will you do and why?

Communicate your near-term research agenda much as you would in a research proposal to a funding agency. This should include a modest vision of where your field is going and why your chosen topics of study resonate with that direction. A personalized step through a short list of important open problems is one way to inspire confidence that you will be an active and productive researcher for years to come.

3. How well did you communicate and deal with breadth versus depth?

Being able to explain your research to a broad audience is as important as the research itself. Your audience will include graduate students and faculty across the entire department. Depending on your research area, there will also be attendees from nearby academic units. In any case there will be both non-experts and experts in the audience. The challenge is to give enough of a high-level picture so that the former appreciate your work and enough detail so that the latter understand your work. In striking this balance, it is important to be solicitous of questions from the floor, taking the time to clarify ambiguities and knowing when to take overly detailed conversations off-line.

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