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# navigating postdoc **interviews**

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# my experience on **hiring panels**

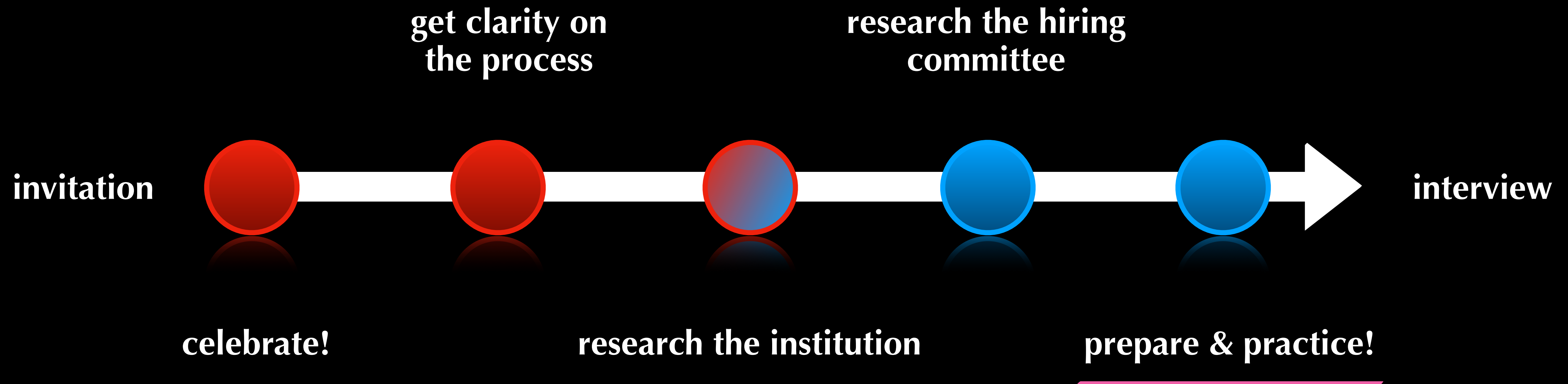
- for four successive years (2017-2020) been a member of **postdoc fellowship** selection committees at Harvard
- **ICC postdoc** selection committee in 2021/22, 2023/24, 2024/25
- chaired ~5 **faculty search** committees at Durham since 2023
- **observer** for UKRI Future Leaders Fellowship sifting rounds
- tasks include developing a exhaustive selection rubric for candidate assessment, evaluating applications, short-listing, conducting interviews

# what is the **purpose** of an interview?

- the interview should be treated as a **2-way process**: for the panel to get to know you better, and for you to get a taste of the institution
- for the **hiring panel**, it is an opportunity for them to humanise the applicant behind a large chunk of paperwork, to gauge their preparedness for the position, and to identify any red flags
- for **you**, it is an opportunity to make your strengths shine, to understand the role/future prospects better, demonstrate your investment in job, and to judge institutional culture
- for both, it is a chance to judge/present **that extra X%**, beyond the paper application, that can really **set you apart** from your competition

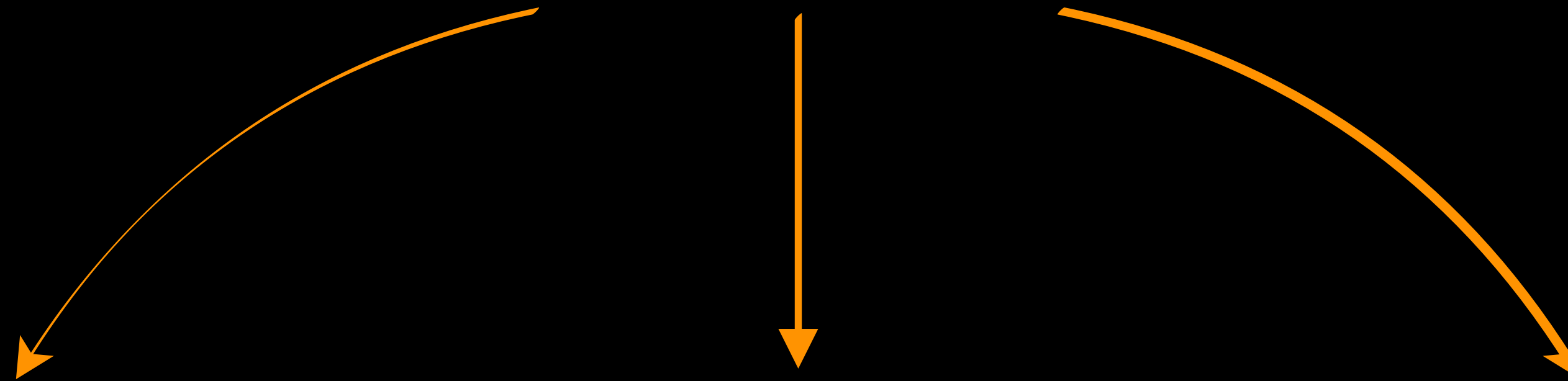
# in **advance** of the interview

know your audience: it won't help your cause if the non-expert(s) on your panel don't understand a word about your research and its importance!



do not discount the value of practicing your interview technique. how you come across in an interview is nearly as important as what you say—sound confident so you can project confidence

# types of interviews: **format**



## no interview

not all positions involve interviews as part of the recruitment process!

## PDRA positions

interview panel inc. the person who will be hiring you

- \* 20-30 mins, online
- \* 5-10 min research summary, followed by panel questions

## fellowship positions

interview panel potentially with individuals outside the hiring department

- \* online or in-person visits
- \* 5-50 min research summaries or talks, followed by panel questions

# anticipating common questions

postdoc interview questions tend to be *highly* predictable... so it looks especially bad if you are underprepared for commonly-asked questions

# commonly-asked questions

## typical questions you will almost always be asked

- tell us about your research
- [technical questions to establish your skills & experience]
- what is one research accomplishment you're most proud of?
- why do you want to work here?
- what are your objectives over the 3/5 years you'll be in this position?
- *what resources will you need to do this work? who do you see yourself collaborating with?*

## curveball questions that can help set you apart from the competition

- what makes you a good candidate for this position? [read the job advert!!]
- what do you think will be a major breakthrough in your field in the next 5-10 years? [have a good view of the research landscape]
- what is a challenge/obstacle you have faced in your career and how did you overcome it?
- [\*an EDI related question]
- [\*a teaching related question]

about 20 mins to get  
through 5-6 of these



**you have ~20~ mins to **sell the idea of you** to a panel that has read > 100 applications**

**1. keep your answers concise & to-the-point**

**2. buy yourself 2 seconds after each question**

**3. avoid generality—give examples that backup your responses; deal in specifics (“what can i say that is different to what the 8 other candidates are likely to say”)**



**4. speak clearly, confidently, engagingly, but don't sound over-rehearsed—this is where practice is key**

**5. come across as someone they would like to work with, who will bring value to their institution both scientifically and beyond**

**7. this is not the time for modesty—if you aren't excited about the work you do / will do, neither will they be**

**6. give the impression that you are invested in this position**



# ***“do you have any questions for us?”***

department culture

collaborations: internal & external

research & travel expenses

moving expenses

opportunities for teaching /  
public engagement

can postdocs lead/act as PIs for  
X and Y proposals?

things you should already know  
about the place\*

not prioritising your questions—  
asking questions best pursued in  
a less formal setting

trying to negotiate an offer  
before you have it

“i have no questions”

# final thoughts

- enjoy the experience. interviews can be nerve-wracking but, with **preparation**, they can be fairly predictable
- the interview is **just one part** of the overall assessment process. it won't make or break your chances of success
- on the other hand, it is **the last impression** the hiring committee will have of you before making decisions—a strong interview performance can add that **extra X%** that differentiates you from a large pool of candidates
- **use your community** at your university/network to get practice navigating interviews—all of us have sought help in the past, so don't be shy about reaching out