

Lab Setup Interview Guide

Goal

Use this tool to gather information about a specific recruit's lab needs and set expectations about lab renovations.

Intended Users

Research facilities leaders, department chairs, faculty search committees

Overview

This tool helps facilities, research, and academic leaders obtain valuable information about a recruit's desired lab setup and educate them about lab renovations during the recruitment process. This interview guide includes questions to ask new hires, recommendations for information to share with them, and guidance to help leaders conduct interviews. Users can adopt the guide as is or adapt it to their institutional context.

Tool: Lab Setup Interview Guide

Scheduling the Lab Interview

- Leaders should interview potential new hires about their lab needs early in the recruitment process.
- Institutions should dedicate at least 30 minutes for a lab interview when recruits visit campus. Leaders can combine this with a tour of research facilities if time is limited.
- If leaders are unable to conduct a lab interview while a recruit is on campus, they should schedule a virtual meeting as soon after the recruit's campus visit as possible. They should also consider asking recruits to give them a virtual tour of their current lab setup at that time.
- Prior to the lab interview, leaders should ask recruits to complete a lab needs checklist and share photos of their current lab setup.

Most institutions wait to gather information about a recruit's lab needs until after they have accepted an offer. This inhibits planning and delays lab setup.

Incorporating a lab needs conversation into the formal interview process signals to recruits that the institution is invested in ensuring a quick and smooth lab setup. Ideally, institutions should have a representative from the facilities or research office who possesses both infrastructural expertise and research experience (e.g., associate vice president for research facilities) lead this interview.

Pre-Interview Preparation

- Read the recruit's curriculum vitae and other application materials
- Review the recruit's completed lab needs checklist (if applicable)
- Examine photos of the recruit's current lab setup (if applicable)
- Look up information about lab layouts and renovations previously completed for researchers within the same discipline and/or department
- Develop a supplementary list of recruit-specific questions (as needed)

Leaders should come to interviews with a basic understanding of the recruit's discipline and research interests. This helps them build rapport with recruits and saves valuable interview time for discussing lab-specific needs.

It is helpful for leaders to have a general sense of lab layouts in the relevant department so they can gauge whether the recruit's current and requested setup is on par with disciplinary standards.

Tool: Lab Setup Interview Guide (cont.)

Conducting the Interview

Step 1: Explain the purpose of the conversation

Recommended Scripting

- We recognize that getting labs set up quickly is critical for enabling new hires to begin or continue their research once they arrive on our campus.
- We gather as much information about potential lab needs as possible during the recruitment stage so that we can identify adequate lab space and expedite any needed renovations if you receive and accept an offer of employment.
- The purpose of this conversation is two-fold: 1) to identify your specific lab needs and priorities and 2) to explain how we approach lab setup and renovations.

Guidance for Leading the Discussion

Articulating the potential benefits for the recruit can increase their willingness to engage in the conversation and share information.

Step 2: Solicit detailed information about the PI's lab needs

Interview Questions

- Describe a typical day in your lab. What processes or procedures are you executing? Who is involved?
- Describe your current lab space and setup. Is there anything that you would like to change about it? What would your ideal lab setup look like?
- What are the one or two features that are critical for your lab to be functional?
- Are there any specific environmental conditions that are needed for your research to go accordingly (e.g., temperature or humidity level, minimal vibration)?

Guidance for Leading the Discussion

Make it clear that while the institution strives to provide the recruit with a desirable lab setup, space and resource constraints will require some tradeoffs. This question is designed to help leaders get a sense of the recruit's priorities and needs.

Since many existing facilities lack environmental control capabilities and specialized spaces, leaders must identify unique setup needs early so they can gauge which buildings could accommodate the recruit's research.

Tool: Lab Setup Interview Guide (cont.)

Step 2: Solicit detailed information about the PI's research and lab needs (cont.)

Interview Questions

- What equipment will you need in your lab? Do you plan to use any shared or core facilities on campus?
- Do you have any grants that have explicit space specifications? Do you plan to apply for any new grants that would require a certain lab setup?
- Are there any new research projects you plan to start or equipment you hope to acquire in the near future?
- Is there anything else we should know about your research that may affect lab setup?

Guidance for Leading the Discussion

Researchers often underestimate the impact that equipment has on determining the appropriate lab location and setup. In some cases, they may assume labs automatically come with the equipment they are accustomed to and therefore fail to disclose their needs until after renovations have begun.

Some funders require grant recipients to meet certain lab setup or security requirements. Failure to do so could result in loss of funding or compliance-related issues. The research office can help campus partners interpret grant-specific space requirements as needed.

Since researchers tend to focus on their immediate lab needs, they may overlook how upcoming changes will impact their lab space. This question helps leaders gather info about medium-term lab needs so they can plan appropriately.

Step 3: Preview the lab setup process, including roles and responsibilities

Recommended Scripting

- Once a recruit accepts an offer, we formally initiate lab setup as soon as possible since lab renovations can take months to complete (depending on the scale and scope).
- The relevant dean and/or department chair determines the new hire's official lab assignment and coordinates renovation budgets and project requests.
- The research office provides support and technical expertise related to lab equipment, grant requirements, and researcher needs.

Guidance for Leading the Discussion

Most researchers do not fully understand renovation logistics and tend to underestimate how long lab setup can take. Consider customizing this scripting using institutional data on lab renovation timelines.

Explaining each campus unit's responsibilities helps recruits better understand the coordination involved in lab renovations and where to direct specific lab-related questions. Customize this scripting based on your institution's unique approach to lab setup.

Tool: Lab Setup Interview Guide (cont.)

Step 3: Preview the lab setup process, including roles and responsibilities (cont.)

Recommended Scripting

- The facilities office coordinates with campus partners to set up labs. They provide project-specific cost estimates, manage the renovation process, and ensure the project stays on budget and schedule. When planning lab renovations, facilities leaders carefully assess the existing building infrastructure (e.g., HVAC system, power capacity) and compliance requirements to ensure your planned research can be conducted in a safe and efficient way. In some cases, this requires adjusting renovation plans and expectations. This is a normal part of the project planning process at every institution. Facilities will notify new hires about any infrastructural or compliance-related limitations and work with them to develop alternatives as needed.
- The new hire is responsible for providing timely and accurate information about their lab and equipment needs. They will receive renovation progress updates at pre-determined project milestones. They should monitor their email for additional requests for information or input prior to arriving on campus. They also should proactively notify unit leaders and the facilities team about any new equipment, desired layout changes, or critical deadlines (e.g., sponsor timelines, grant milestones).
- Do you have any questions about the lab setup process?

Guidance for Leading the Discussion

Researchers rarely understand the infrastructural and compliance considerations associated with lab renovations. As a result, they often become annoyed when they later learn about limitations or changes to renovation plans. By explaining these considerations upfront, leaders can better set their expectations and reduce future frustrations.

Many new hires have never been engaged in a lab renovation to date. This makes it difficult for leaders to get the information they need, especially if the renovation occurs during the summer when researchers are less accessible. Use this conversation as an opportunity to remind recruits that a successful lab setup depends on their participation and consistent communication.



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