environment and relationships,” she says. “Then ask yourself if moving to another lab will give you more opportunities and more viable projects that result in papers or publications.”

As they weigh up their options, postdocs should consider talking discreetly to other principal investigators about joining their labs. It’s also a good idea to learn as much as possible about the principal investigator and lab environment from current and past lab members. “You want to make sure you don’t go from one bad situation to another,” says Sanford. She advises that postdocs find out exactly what would be expected of them. They should discuss the skills and training they have, and what they need to develop in the next year. “It is also important to understand what the lab direction is, what the principal investigator wants to do, and what the grants situation is,” she says, “so that there are no surprises.”

When approaching new labs, a postdoc should avoid disparaging the principal investigator of the lab he or she is leaving. “You can say there were challenges, but focus on the lessons learned and skills gained,” says Anderson-Thomkins. “It is okay to say that you wanted to pursue other opportunities, but you don’t have to say how bad the lab or the principal investigator was.”

If, after careful consideration, a postdoc decides to leave his or her lab, the postdoc should inform the current principal investigator of the decision promptly, and make sure the conversation focuses on professional rather than personal issues. Discussions should also focus on finishing existing projects or handing them over to other members of the lab. “Give them plenty of lead time and wrap up what is going on,” says Anderson-Thomkins. “That will help you leave on the best possible terms.” It could also mean that the postdoc is still able to garner a supervisor or a close friend to someone on a hiring committee. “You want to walk out the door with a good reputation,” says Anderson-Thomkins. “Don’t do anything that will hurt your career.”

Laura Bonetta is a freelance writer based in Garrett Park, Maryland.