

So You're a Postdoc. What next?

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The majority of postdocs will leave their current positions within the next three years, either through choice or, most likely, necessity, as they are usually employed on fixed-term, funding-linked contracts. Where do they go, where do they want to go and, most importantly, how can they be supported to succeed?

This article gives some practical tips for postdocs on how to go about finding, and achieving, their 'What Next?'. It also gives practical tips for PIs and for Institutions on how they can support career independence for their researchers. The advice below is based on my work with postdocs and new academics on achieving their own career progression, as well

and leadership. As a postdoc, you have these in abundance. The knowledge-base you draw upon may be different beyond academia, but a postdoc position demands that you are a fast and efficient learner so picking up new knowledge shouldn't be a problem.

Advice for postdocs

Start early, plan ahead.

It's very easy to put off thinking about your long-term career goals, particularly if you're on a fixed-term contract. Initially you are focused on getting up to speed in your new position, settling into a new group/institution/city/country, then on producing research outputs. There's never any time to think about 'What Next'. Suddenly the end of your contract is six months away and you only have time to apply for other postdoc positions.

It can be hard to break this cycle and progress to another, 'non-postdoc', role. Finding a position you are confident will be fulfilling and enjoyable will take time and hard work. However, with some planning and commitment you can do it alongside your current role and be ready to make the transition when your contract ends.

The 'What Next' can seem overwhelming and you might even be



Develop yourself.

If you're not confident about giving this kind of advice or how you might support your staff, take some time to find out how. Most institutions will have courses on people management which should provide you with tools for supporting your staff. You could also talk to your colleagues and ask how they do it.

Advice for Departments*Don't let your postdocs get hidden.*

Postdocs are sometimes grouped together with research students and/or new academic staff. However, postdocs have different needs from either of these groups, which can easily be overlooked. There are times when these groupings are appropriate, but step back and ask whether you are supporting all your postdocs or whether they need something separate or additional.

Do you have ways postdocs can represent themselves in your department/faculty/institution? They will be able to help you see areas where they need support which permanent staff might overlook — and identifying these is a valuable career development experience in itself. You could have representatives on committees and/or organise regular (e.g., annual) forums or focus groups.

Provide opportunities for career development.

Be explicit in your support of career development for postdocs. Encourage your PIs to support their postdocs' career development and provide postdocs with time for development opportunities outside of their day-to-day research activities. Consider implementing a policy around how much time this should be.

Whatever career path they follow, your postdocs will need to be able to demonstrate their independence. Are there ways you can involve them in the running of the department? Are there responsibilities they can take on? Are there projects they can get involved with?

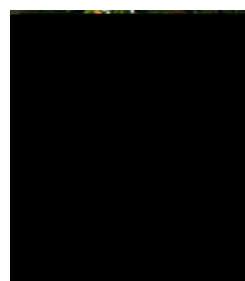
One of the most effective approaches to providing career development opportunities is to create (and -

nancially support) a Research Staff Association (RSA). These are groups/committees of postdocs that provide representation and a voice for themselves as well as potentially organising events. It is a fantastic opportunity for postdocs to develop leadership skills and independence outside of their immediate research area and to build a wider network, whilst also contributing to the department.

RSAs take many forms and can reside within a single department or across a whole institution (or even a country). If numbers are small in a department, is there a related area you could join up with or could you organise something less formal such as a regular coffee morning which will bring the postdocs together? As soon as they start meeting, ideas will flow!

FURTHER READING

- [1] R. Mellors-Bourne, J. Metcalfe, *Five Steps Forward*, tinyurl.com/ycrr88xh, 2017.
- [2] *The Scientific Century: Securing Our Future Prosperity*, Royal Society Policy document 02/10, tinyurl.com/y8h5rlf6, 2010.
- [3] K. Haynes, J. Metcalfe, M. Yilmaz, *What Do Researchers Do Next?*, tinyurl.com/y8264f8o, 2016.
- [4] *The Concordat to Support Career Development of Researchers: An Agreement between the Funders and Employers of Researchers in the UK*, tinyurl.com/y7bnjcl6, 2008.
- [5] *The European Charter for Researchers and The Code of Conduct for the Recruitment of Researchers*, European Commission, tinyurl.com/ycorlsul, 2005.

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