

Cultivating Your Success as a Postdoc



Andrea R Hindman, BA, BS, PhD

Cultivating Your Success as a Postdoc

September 20, 2019 04:46 PM

Congratulations—you have checked the postdoc box! Plain and simple. You have taken that noble step to develop your skill set beyond graduate school while out from under the shadow of your graduate adviser. That alone earns you a nice pat on the back.

Many go-to lists try to define success for you in this precarious and often undervalued position. I have curated some of these here from various resources:

- Learn from great mentors to enable you to curate your professional network and find your professional “niche.”^[1] Or at least flexibility to explore your niche.
- Be more deliberate about expanding your professional network to support your career aspirations, which should lead to cultivating multiple mentor-mentee relationships. Use membership in professional societies to ease these connections! SOT is a behemoth resource for this; see their [Mentor Match](#) program or attend the coveted Mentoring Breakfast at the Annual Meeting!
- Take advantage of your “trainee” status! Speaking of professional societies and organizations, join the [National Postdoctoral Association](#) (NPA) and see their [core competencies](#).
- Continue the momentum of sharing your work as often as possible, as, hopefully, you did in graduate school.² Which leads to the next point—
- Perfect your elevator pitch—both for your research interests and to introduce your expertise with confidence.
- “Reverse engineer your success”^{[2]³} through use of tools like the Individual Development Plan (IDP) touted by National Institutes of Health ([NOT-OD-14-113](#)) to help your professional development as a trainee. Optimally, you are using this with your postdoctoral mentor as a pact to work together for your professional growth and to set reasonable expectations for both of you. The American Association for the Advancement of Science also has an interactive tool for this: [myIDP](#). Also see the GREAT (Graduate Research, Education, and Training) Group together with the Association of American Medical Colleges (AAMC) [Compact Between Postdoctoral Appointees and Their Mentors](#).^[4]
- Slow down. This is a time for intensity but also a time for thoughtfulness. Easy to relate to when approaching an experiment in the lab: What are the goals of these experiments? Will these experiments answer the question?² But this same process can inform many other aspects of your professional development and should also help ease the next point—
- Learn when to say no! Does the request fit with your goals? If not, move on. See IDP above.

Some of these, of course, are great to keep in mind! You can also tell that mentors themselves write some of these articles.^[5] However, let a fellow and recently minted postdoctoral research fellow be a

better judge of how you can define success and empower you to find greater fulfillment during this sometimes tumultuous time,[6] avoid burnout, feel like a complete person and thrive.

1. Sometimes you need more than chocolate (or coffee). Have a therapist—but not just any therapist: try a cognitive behavioral therapist! All those years in graduate school do something to your brain. You felt “less than” (Imposter syndrome? Anyone? Who am I kidding—EVERYONE!)[7] and felt that if things piled on too high and you mentioned something about it (to anyone) you were viewed as weak. Developing tools now to help reframe and navigate things that do not go your way both experimentally and in professional relationships will be an asset for you.

And bottom line: this is important because we do not talk about mental health enough! And it is something *everyone* struggles with. Though that does not mean *everyone* should continue to struggle in silence. And it is the responsible thing to do!

2. You have begun to curate a professional social media persona that has made your science and you as an expert accessible. It is your unsworn duty to usher the public into your scientific world.[8] Think platforms like Twitter and LinkedIn. Sure, this may depend in part on your ultimate career goals, but any increased transparency of science to the public is a win for science as a whole—do your part! In fact, this should honestly be a metric for things like tenure! Number of publications is archaic; number of tweets and likes should be a new metric ala—[altimetric](#)! Additionally, there are ways to tout your contributions to peer review through platforms like . Get creative.

At the least, this is something to consider. Recently, in an informational interview arranged by [Advancing Green Chemistry](#), a university press office representative commented that journalists are more inclined to check Twitter for the latest in scientific news and discoveries. That journalists are going to this platform preferentially over a scientific journal or university websites is an emerging shift we all should be keenly aware of, so the impact of your work reaches the public in the intended way—and is not left to alternative interpretations. Or worse, “misinfodemics.” [9]

3. Many articles on success as a postdoc discuss learning new skills and expanding your current skill set. But what about the skills you are assumed to have but would be embarrassed to admit that you do not? I would go as far as to say that your adviser lacks these, too. Many of these “assumed” skills refer to some of the NPA core competencies mentioned above, related to #5 (“leadership and management skills”) and #6 (“responsible conduct of research”). The NPA core competency #6 is especially important in the era of the US Environmental Protection Agency’s proposed Strengthening Transparency in Regulatory Science rule (EPA-HQ-OA-2018-0259). Again, do your part.

- Data sharing and management plans ([NOT-OD-19-014](#))
- Organizing digital files
- Effectively using Medical Subject Headings (MeSH) terms to purposefully and objectively use literature databases (not just PubMed!)
- Determining the impact of your research (see above altmetrics or [H-index](#))
- Managing time and projects (this is a good time to try out tools like [Trello](#), [OneNote](#), or [Basecamp](#), along with many more!)
- If you are establishing your own niche apart from your mentor—how do you know where to publish?

While these all seem intuitive, they are not, and you can make your life easier by finding better strategies for figuring them out.

4. Finally, and most importantly, you have taken your own emerging role as a mentor seriously. You are in some ways responsible for the longevity and relevance of your science through the innovation and creativity of the trainees and students you work with and who learn from you. This is where we can circle back to #1 above—having a therapist. Every person is different. It is never acceptable to dismiss a trainee because they have different needs than what you are accustomed to dealing with as a mentor. In a lot of ways, this relationship is meant also to teach *YOU* how to be a mentor. Their success is your success, and there should be the utmost effort on your part to meet them *at least*. Having a therapist can help you navigate these new directions in professional relationships and reframe the way you are programmed to think about your approach to them.

Remember: There are not necessarily “rules” to life after graduate school. Use short-term and bite-size milestones to manage your larger goals and track your progress. And be gentle and kind to yourself and those around you in the process! Because life also happens.

Let’s continue the conversation—find me on Twitter @andrea_hindman.

[1] <https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-019-00262-2> and Lienard JF et al *Nature Commun.* **9**, 4840 (2018)

[2] <https://blog.addgene.org/nine-tips-for-a-successful-postdoctoral-experience>

[3] <http://grad.berkeley.edu/wp-content/uploads/idp-berkeley.pdf>

[4] https://www.sciencemag.org/sites/default/files/business_documents/successful-postdoc-experience.pdf

[5] <http://postdocs.mit.edu/sites/default/files/documents/10-habits-for-successful-postdoc-Drennan-2015-03-27.pdf>

[6] <https://www.sciencemag.org/careers/2016/09/getting-most-out-your-postdoc>

[7] https://ideas.ted.com/4-ways-to-quiet-imposter-syndrome-and-start-believing-in-yourself/?utm_campaign=social&utm_medium=referral&utm_source=linkedin.com&utm_content=ideas-blog&utm_term=humanities and https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=3&v=WrnHxfz1lwU

[8] <https://www.nature.com/news/online-collaboration-scientists-and-the-social-network-1.15711>

[9] <https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2018/08/how-misinfodemics-spread-disease/568921/> and https://www.hsph.harvard.edu/magazine/magazine_article/off-the-cuff-fighting-misinfodemics/