

Guide to the Postdoc Timeline

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Introduction

The postdoctoral training experience is meant to be a relatively short, focused time of work, typically 2-5 years. To ensure you progress at the rate you choose, it is important to develop a plan early in your postdoctoral experience to keep yourself on track to achieve your professional and career goals. The National Postdoctoral Association (NPA) has developed this guide to help postdocs prepare for the future and utilize training time wisely.

It is also helpful to create and revisit your individual development plan (IDP) throughout your time as a postdoc, which can help you attain your professional and career development goals.

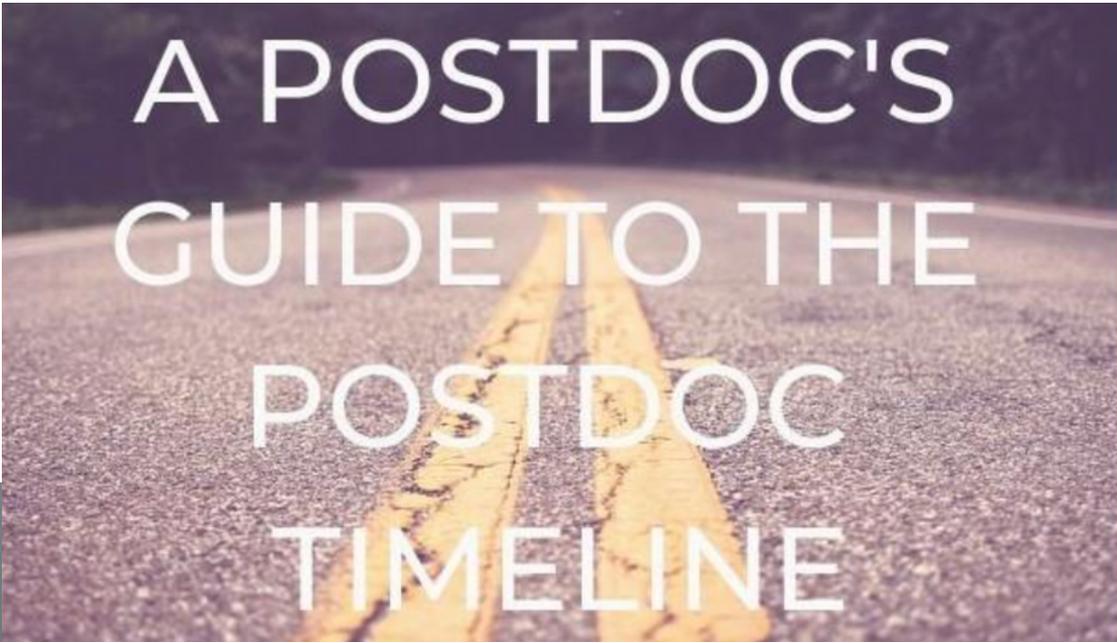
More information can be found on the National Postdoctoral Association's

(NPA) companion guide: [A Postdoc's Guide to Career Development](#).

The NPA has provided recommendations on key skills that postdocs should "acquire, maintain, or improve" during the postdoctoral experience. These skills are known as the [NPA's Core Competencies](#), which are:

1. Discipline-specific conceptual knowledge
2. Research skill development
3. Communication skills
4. Professionalism
5. Leadership and management skills
6. Responsible conduct of research

This timeline will also provide recommendations for building and incorporating these core competencies into your training.



A POSTDOC'S
GUIDE TO THE
POSTDOC
TIMELINE

Suggested Professional Development Timeline



FIRST YEAR:

- Lay the groundwork for your professional and career development through:
- Exploration and identification of your career path options
- Developing skills and knowledge targeting that path
- Exploring and enhancing your network

INTERMEDIATE YEAR(S):

- Continually build & expand your skill sets
- Find opportunities to improve & enhance the skillsets you already have
- Seek opportunities to develop new skillsets to make yourself more competitive in the job market of the career you choose
- Expand your network

FINAL YEAR:

- Utilize your professional and personal networks to identify potential opportunities
- Develop a strong set of job search materials
- Work on interviewing and negotiating skills

Please note: Even if you don't start planning until your last year, you can still use this timeline to develop an action plan for seeking your next position.

Suggested Professional Development Timeline

1. Getting Started

Welcome to your postdoc!
Use this time to get accumulated and begin developing relationships



Welcome to your postdoc! Getting started in a postdoctoral position can often be tougher than you think, and it will likely take some time to get adjusted. Use these first few months (**6-8 weeks**) to get acclimated to your new lab, learn the lab culture, and develop your project with your research mentor.

RESEARCH DEVELOPMENT:

- Focus on getting started on your project.
 - Picking up where previous postdoc left off? Assimilate all of the written materials, review, ensure you understand. Don't be afraid to ask questions for clarification.
 - New project? Create your project plan, discuss with your mentor. Gather materials & documentation, organize to form the basis of your later publication.
 - Focus on starting to develop discipline-specific conceptual knowledge (NPA Core Competency #1).
- Learn about responsible conduct of research training (NPA Core Competency #6)
- Learn about professionalism expectations in your lab/department/institution (NPA Core Competency #4).
- Discuss a mentoring compact or plan with your adviser. The University of Wisconsin-Madison has excellent [mentor compact frameworks](#) to follow.

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT (BASIC SKILLS):

- Practice networking skills by introducing yourself to people in your lab/department/institution, learn what their role is to develop your in-house resources

CAREER DEVELOPMENT:

- Begin to learn about career resources available at your institution including postdoc office (PDO), postdoc association (PDA), career center, career development programs and courses, etc.
 - Attending an orientation, if offered, can help you navigate your new campus

Suggested Professional Development Timeline

1. Getting Started

Welcome to your postdoc!
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Now that you've gotten accustomed to your new lab and your project is starting to move forward, it is the time to begin thinking about what kinds of careers you might be most interested in (*months 2-6 in your appointment*).

RESEARCH DEVELOPMENT:

- Develop a research and publication agenda
 - Continue to discuss your progress with your research mentor
- Continue to develop research skills (NPA Core Competency #2) and identify new technical skills that you would like to learn
- Identify potential funding opportunities if you are interested in grant writing

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT (BASIC SKILLS):

- Identify professional/transferable skills you might need to develop for your future career
 - Communications (NPA Core Competency #3)
 - Leadership and management skills (NPA Core Competency #5)
 - Mentoring skills, team dynamics, resiliency skills – these will all help build a successful postdoc experience. The earlier this training begins the better. These skills also translate into good people management skills which are critical to doctorates in the marketplace.
- Determine a plan for how you will develop professional skills
 - Consider joining your postdoc association steering committee
 - Look into internship opportunities, training programs, or courses
 - Think about opportunities for volunteering on your campus, in the community, or with local or national professional/scientific organizations
- Begin an ongoing conversation with your research mentor about your future career goals
 - Consider identifying at least one secondary mentor inside or outside academia

Suggested Professional Development Timeline

1. Getting Started

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CAREER DEVELOPMENT (EARLY CAREER EXPLORATION/NETWORKING):

- Complete "[myIDP](#)," [ImaginePhD](#), and/or [Academic Career Readiness Assessment](#)
- Attend career workshops and seminars
- Think about ways to expand your professional network
 - Create a LinkedIn profile if you don't already have one! LinkedIn is a great way to keep in touch with new connections
 - Check for access to any alumni networks at your institution – they are a great resource to learn about career pathways

Suggested Professional Development Timeline

3. Moving Full Speed Ahead

WOW! You are 6 months into your postdoc
It is time to explore career pathways & narrow your focus



RESEARCH DEVELOPMENT:

- Continue to focus on your research project
 - Apply for funding opportunities
 - Begin preparing publication outlines
- Consider mentoring students in the lab
- Continue to develop NPA Core Competencies #1-6
- Seek out opportunities to present and share your research (seminars, conferences, etc.)

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT:

- Begin reading job advertisements for positions you are interested in
 - Make note of the skill sets they are looking for and seek opportunities to gain or enhance these skill sets in yourself
- Look at past experiences to see if you can identify applicable transferable skills
- Implement your plan for developing professional skills by joining your PDA, taking advantage of opportunities on your campus, etc.
- Revisit your IDP

CAREER DEVELOPMENT (CAREER PATH EXPLORATION AND SELECTION/NETWORKING):

- Continue to explore career pathways through networking, informational interviews and reading
- Identify industries/companies that you might be interested in and potential people to ask for informational interviews
- Explore potential careers through job simulations or through part-time internship opportunities
- Try out potential careers using the [InterSECT](#) Job Simulations tool
- Visit your campus career center and meet with a career advisor

Suggested Professional Development Timeline

Are you starting to think about wrapping up your postdoc and moving to the first step in your career pathway? Now (**1 year prior to expected appointment end date**) is the time to begin focusing on making the transition and getting your job search materials in order. Job searching can take longer than you may anticipate, and this final year will go faster than you think! Be prepared. Getting a job is a full-time job in itself!

RESEARCH DEVELOPMENT:

- Develop timelines for wrapping-up current research projects and discuss your plans with your advisor
- Prepare research projects for publication
- Continue presenting and sharing your research

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT:

- Evaluate your skills (the things you're good at), your interests (the things you like to do), and your values (the attributes you would like to incorporate into your future career, including things like motivations, pay/benefits/titles, work environment, location/commute, etc.)
- Evaluate professional skills and experience gaps and continue to work to develop those skills

Suggested Professional Development Timeline

CAREER DEVELOPMENT:

- Explore job postings and develop a job search strategy (e.g. set up job alerts)
 - Develop job search materials
 - Begin to research different types of interviews, interview styles and best practices for interviewing
 - Begin to build your personal/professional story
 - Prepare your CV/resume and cover letters (note: you WILL need a different CV/resume and cover letter tailored to each and every job you apply for)
 - Develop your research statement and chalk talk skills if you will likely be interviewing in academia
 - Make sure your LinkedIn profile is up-to-date
 - Visit your campus career center and meet with a career advisor to review your materials
- Begin to reach out to your network to find potential opportunities (note: Think outside of the box! Reach out to your professional network, your personal network, institution alumni, professional association members, etc. You have more connections than you think!)
 - If you haven't yet conducted any informational interviews, now is the time to start!

Suggested Professional Development Timeline

5. Transition Planning

You are 3 - 6 months from the end of your appointment
Finish your projects, and focus on landing your next job!



RESEARCH DEVELOPMENT:

- Wrap-up projects and determine plan with your advisor for handing-off projects still underway
 - Finalize publication drafts and determine who will be in charge of managing unpublished manuscripts after you leave the lab
 - Update and organize your records, electronic files, and lab notebooks
 - Prepare written instructions (complete protocols, inventory and location of supplies, current project status, etc.), and leave things the way you would like to see them if you were taking over the project

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT:

- Continue to seek out professional development opportunities and work on enhancing skills—professional development doesn't stop once you enter a new position!

CAREER DEVELOPMENT:

- Actively search for job postings and apply for positions using tailored job materials
 - Continue to let your network know that you're looking for opportunities, ask them to forward your resume
 - Prepare for interviews
 - Consider job negotiation strategies and merits of job offers you receive
- Remember – it is not just about the \$\$\$\$. Culture, responsibilities, career ladders, individual needs for work/life balance, family responsibilities all will play into your final decision.
- Accept new position!

BEST OF LUCK FROM THE NPA!!



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