

Maximizing the Postdoc Period: 10 Habits for a Successful Postdoc

By Professor Cathy Drennan

1. Take ownership of your project and try to become known for the work that you are doing. Your project is your baby. There will be loss of sleep and growing pains, but you will have a special bond. You should know more about your project than anyone else.

- Get the help you need. Take full advantage of group meetings, faculty, others in the lab. Being a postdoc doesn't mean that you should know everything.
- Talk about your research whenever possible, so that the community associates your research with you as well as with your PI.

2. Read broadly and learn more about research. As a postdoc, it is time to start the transition to your independent career, and you will need to assume more and more responsibility for your own training and education.

- Read the literature, talk to people, and attend seminars. If you are applying for faculty positions, you will need to write proposals, and thus you will need new ideas. If you are applying for industrial positions, you should spend time learning about different companies.
- Make sure that you are continuing to develop your skill set. For example, take the time to help a labmate do an experiment if it means that you will fill in a hole in your education.

3. Learn how to train people. People with PhDs lead research teams (both in industry and academia). They rarely work in isolation.

- Train UROP students
- Take the time to show others in the group how to do something.
- Take courses in mentoring and teaching (check out TLL's IAP courses)

4. Learn how to write scientific papers, and learn how to give scientific talks. No matter what you do with your life, it is important to know how to do this.

- Take the lead in writing papers based on your research. Critique other people's papers.
- Ask your PI if you can review journal articles under your own name (have your PI suggest you as a reviewer to a journal editor or get permission from the journal for you to review in his/her place). Reviewing papers teaches you how to write. It also established you as an expert.
- Take every opportunity to practice giving talks. Whether applying for industry or academic positions your job seminar is extremely important. Good letters get you an interview, a good talk gets you the job.

5. Cultivate relationships with peers, supervisors, and experts in your field in order to get strong letters of recommendation in the future. Recommendation letters are more important to your future than anything else. Take every opportunity to network with collaborators (send regular progress updates for example), and talk about your research in front of other faculty. Many MIT seminar series invite postdoc speakers (Biophysics, Microbial systems, Biochemistry to name a few). Also speak at joint group meetings or your collaborator's group meeting or Boston area meetings.

6. Learn organizational skills. Learn how to keep a good notebook and good records. Practice time management. Organizational skills will benefit you in any job.

7. Be a good citizen of the lab and the department. Research is about teamwork. Show that you can get along well with others, and help out when the situation calls for it.

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8. *Network.* No matter what you want to do with your life, networking is important. Networking isn't just about getting a good job, it is about positioning yourself to be successful in that job. Identify the scientific community that you want to be in, and get to know that community. If you find that you don't like the community, you will have time to switch gears.

Although some networking opportunities are expensive such as attending national meetings in other cities, others are free and/or cheaper. Free activities include meetings with seminar speakers (ask your PI if you can attend and present at his/her meeting with the speaker); lunches with seminar speakers; and hosting a seminar speaker. Attend free local meetings (MIT hosts many) and present a poster and attend national meetings when they are in Boston. Ask your PI if they know of any speaking opportunities (sometimes a PI will let you give the talk at the meeting).

9. *Learn how to write grants.* Apply for postdoc fellowships (if possible). Help your PI write a grant even if it isn't on the topic of your research. Ask others to see copies of their successful grants (sometimes they will even give you the critiques). Good grant writing is something that can be learned.

10. *Finish papers BEFORE YOU LEAVE your postdoc.* The number of papers you publish is important to your career and once you leave your postdoc, the chances of an unfinished paper getting finished decreases dramatically. FINISH everything!