Postdoc Careers in the spotlight: A bottom-up approach to improve support for Austrian Postdocs

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Who is a postdoc?

A postdoctoral scholar ("postdoc") is an individual holding a doctoral degree who is engaged in a temporary period of mentored research and/or scholarly training for the purpose of acquiring the professional skills needed to pursue a career path of his or her choosing.

Definition of a postdoc by National Postdoc Association of US.
The PhD Pile-Up
(data from US)

Schillebeeckx et al. 2013
Where do PhDs/Postdocs end up?
(data from UK)
How academic research is done?

Postdocs are core component of workforce and data output

experimental tasks, grant, paper and report writing, supervision, reviewing, teaching, administrative tasks...
The Austrian postdoc
Survey taken by Viennese postdocs

Career Stability

50% of postdocs are forced to leave academia
30% leaves voluntarily
19% thinks can get a job outside academia

Gender bias:
Female postdocs are less confident in their career options (esp. non-academic)
More females have been unemployed and for longer when compared to males

Social aspect

Limited mobility due to social background (age, marital status, parenting)

Gender bias:
Work/life balance is not supported sufficiently for women postdocs (marital status, kids)
Students are encouraged/discouraged in their lab or department (data from US)
There must be a better way...
What Do Postdocs Need?

- To talk more openly about careers

- Trainings and workshops help, but what we really need is
  - Time and (a little bit) more freedom in the middle and towards the end of postdoc lives to prepare for career transitions
  - Professional support and individual feedback on our individual strengths and weaknesses
  - Input and guidance from outside the academic system to guide career decisions
Our project

• Get a clearer picture on the different roles and problems of postdocs across disciplines

• Collect and formulate the needs and requirements of postdocs when it comes to career transitions

• Identify best practices for postdoc training & career development support

• Career coaching to improve postdoc career confidence
Our Approach

• Desk Research & Focus Group discussions involving postdocs from different disciplines – defining the postdoc for Austria, working conditions, existing career support structures

• Postdoc Forum Event – Postdocs from Austria discuss challenges, success stories & ideas for new solutions

• Career Coaching Program – Evaluating the effectiveness of structured reflection and career coaching and advice on postdoc outcomes.
What we have learned

• Speak Up - Bottom-up approaches by postdocs who know the situation are the most powerful.

• Be bold & work with proactive people who can help you communicate and organise your ideas.

• Be Persistent
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“...runs in our family. My father and grandfather are also working as postdocs.”