

WHAT DOES IT MEAN BEING A POSTDOC IN 2012?

Lia Paola Zambetti, PhD

Singapore Immunology Network (SigN), Agency for Science, Technology and Research (A*STAR), Biopolis, Singapore

Abstract

The question is deceptively simple: what does it mean being a postdoc in 2012? When one starts to think, there are many possible answers; describing what a postdoc entails in terms of job requirements or the major changes from the previous positions (ie a PhD) are an important part, for sure. The major challenges and satisfaction of being a professional scientist come to the mind too-for the first time, you are not a student anymore. But what are you really? A full-fledged scientist, a young professional, an aeternal student or a combination of all three? No one can give a definitive reply, or a definition that will suit all postdocs in the world; the article would just like to share some ideas on this topic.

What does it mean being a fresh postdoc in 2012? Taking from my experience, I would say the most evident change from the previous position (ie PhD student) is geographical. To follow my dream project I abandoned UK, where I studied for my PhD, and landed in sunny Singapore. Seeing the faces around me when I go to work every morning, I am no exception; my department is full of young, eager, motivated postdocs coming from Europe. Traditionally, until not so long ago, scientists would have seen many European countries as desirable workplaces and destinations from elsewhere in the world. I do not have official statistics but I would say that now, restriction in fundings and shrinking opportunities means that Europe is exporting researchers at least as much as it is importing them. Perhaps me and my colleagues are the first pioneers of the shift of scientific research from the West to the East, or perhaps we were just lucky to find a good job when many others in our position are struggling. On a practical side, being a postdoc is a lot easier if you learn how to live out of a couple of suitcases rather than a fully furnished house and wardrobe. High mobility coupled to short contracts concur to make the postdoc a flexible creature ready, in most cases, to pack up and move to the other side of the world to follow a project. You realize you are at this stage when you buy your first e-reader, thus sparing yourself the need to move your library every few years.

Apart for the location of the job, what does it mean being a postdoc in terms of work? I would say that the "work" itself, ie planning and doing experiments, has not changed much since the PhD, neither in terms of type nor amount. What has changed, though, and quite dramatically, is the perspective I have now- sometimes it really feels like having entered a different world. As a PhD, I only had my project to think and, eventually, worry about. I tried to study as much as I could on my topic, and in the end I was fairly expert on it, but I had not other subjects to study in the same depth. As a postdoc, this changed completely. Now there is a much broader responsibility than one project alone. As a postdoc, you might be responsible for supervising junior students-a daunting task if you are just out of the PhD yourself. You might be asked to set up, and maintain, collaborations with people from other institutes, or other countries. You could be expected to run one project in the forefront and, perhaps, some other ones on the sidelines, juggling them all together. Almost definitely, you will be expected to know well what each one of your colleagues is doing so you can contribute ideas and suggestions during lab meetings. You are also, for the first time at least in the scientific world, in a "real" job with real responsibilities. During the PhD, you are just a student but, as a postdoc, you are a professional.

Even if the work itself is not so different in practical terms, it is a whole world away in perspective. You learn, for the first time perhaps, that a job is precarious and can be lost easily and quickly – a realization you were quite spared as a PhD, when you were usually protected by your scholarship and, in some cases, by university regulations.

In the end, I would say the main difference between PhD and postdoc is not the science itself but how you do it. You need to have a broader approach as a postdoc, because it is likely you will have more than one thing running at the same moment. You are also much more exposed to the real world (or, at least, as real as academia can be)-it is much more real life than as a PhD student. However, a postdoc life is not full of difficulties alone. Adapting a very famous quote, "with great responsibilities comes a great power" - which, in our case, means a greater freedom when it comes to plan the work and the independence to design our own project, in most cases. This is when you learn how to move as an independent researcher-this, I think, is when you grow up most as a scientist.