FOR HOW LONG SHOULD I BE A POSTDOC?

By Sven Hendrix

Young researchers often ask: what is the ideal length of a postdoc? There are many different answers which depend on the field, the country, the university, the supervisor and funding institutions. To get good advice on the best length you should strategically investigate your field. Get some ideas here.

Should I do a postdoc anyway?

Many young scientists start a postdoc because they have no clue what they should do with their PhD. Some may think that a postdoc is **a nice way of extending the student lifestyle for a few years.** Others may consider it as an **important additional training to qualify for industry positions.** The numbers differ slightly per country and field but – as a rule of thumb – only 10% of all postdocs continue an academic career and only half of those become a professor. Read more here: Should I become a professor? Success rate 3 % ! Thus, about 90% of all postdocs leave academia and find well-paid jobs *outside* academia. In life sciences the value of a PhD degree is seldom debated. PhD candidates are often preferred over candidates with only a master degree because they are technically and intellectually better qualified for industry jobs. **Whether a postdoc adds sufficient additional value for an industry position** (more technical skills, more people skills) or not seems to be **heavily debated**. Thus, if you heavily consider an industry career anyway, talk to at least 3-5 persons to give you advice whether a postdoc is really useful.

In contrast, if you consider a career as a professor a postdoc period is a necessary stepping-stone. **In most faculties to become a professor you are obliged to have a few years of postdoc experience – ideally abroad.**

What is the shortest period possible?

Depending on your career goals (industry, academia, public sector…) you may consider to either skip the postdoc and immediately start an industry job or you may accept **a postdoc position for 1 year.** Unfortunately, a 1-year postdoc **may not really serve you.** It is not easy to produce good results (publications, grant proposals, patents…) within such a short period. In addition, if you are going abroad you need considerable time to adapt to the new environment. Read more here: 9 reasons not to go abroad – and how to handle them! Shorter periods than one year will not be considered as a real postdoc experience. However, I know a few cases of colleagues who involuntarily had to finish their postdocs early and found great industry positions. Anyway, if your intention is to limit your postdoc period as much as possible it might be better *not* to do a postdoc and apply directly for industry or public sector positions.

What is a reasonable time for a postdoc?

Most positions are two to three years and some can be extended. A non-representative survey among my colleagues lead to a clear answer – **a good postdoc period takes 2 to 4 years**. In such a period you have enough time to develop at least one major project, publish at least one major paper at the end and make broader experiences with supervising PhD students, bachelor and master students and technicians. You can use this time to develop and demonstrate scientific independence and leadership skills to become a more attractive candidate for professor positions. In my humble opinion doing your postdoc abroad for 2 years is the minimum to broaden your horizon, learn the language sufficiently and dive deep into the culture of another country. Read more here: Do I really have to work abroad as a scientist?

What is the longest acceptable period for a postdoc period?

There also seems to be a clear answer what the maximum time is. **It is not advised to stay a postdoc for more than 5-6 years after the doctorate.** My colleague John Creemers summarized it as follows: "Being a long-term postdoc, permadoc if you like, is almost always bad news. It comes at professional costs (temporary contracts, no long-term career perspective, no career progression), financial costs (poor pension plan, no group insurance plan), and persona costs (effect on emotional well-being/frustration, family

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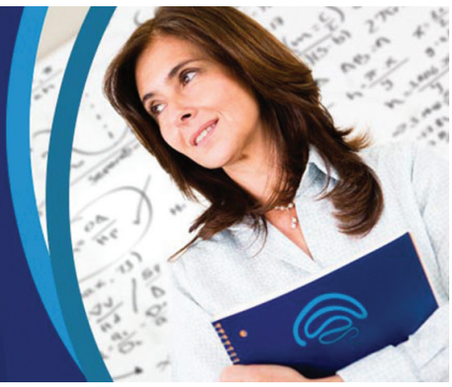


planning, settling down). Thus, there are multiple arguments not to become a long-term postdoc. Read more here: Should I become a long-term postdoc?

How many postdocs should I do?

Based on the rule of thumb that you should limit your postdoc period to 5-6 years maximum it is advisable to go for one or two postdocs, thus, **for example two postdocs of 2-3 years or a longer one for 4-5 years**. If you start your third postdoc people may start to question whether you are really "faculty material". If your CV looks promising you may start applying for faculty positions at the end of your first postdoc. There are a number of criteria that help you to determine whether your CV is promising or not – read more here: How to become a professor and Am I doing enough for my scientific career?

Disclaimer

Just a caveat: these are very general considerations and my experience is limited to life sciences. Thus, ask at least 3-5 competent persons for advice whether these rules apply in your field.

Links

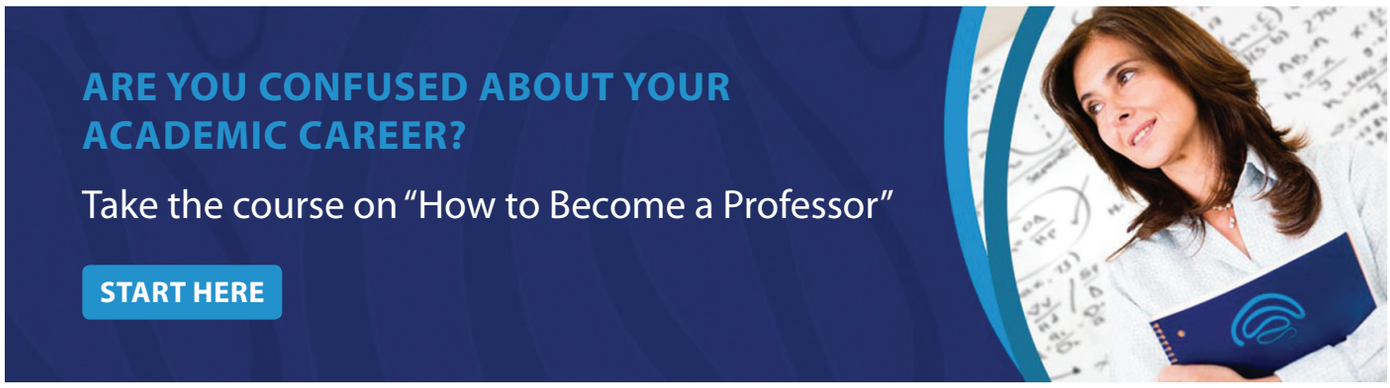
Here are some links which may be useful:

A short general intro to "What is a postdoc":

https://academicpositions.com/career-advice/what-is-a-postdoc

Find here a similar analysis with the perspective of a physicist:

https://expbook.wordpress.com/2009/11/22/how-long-should-a-postdoc-last/

And a strong plea for *not* applying for postdoc positions but industry positions:

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