



## SHOULD I QUIT MY POSTDOC?

By Sven Hendrix



If you have doubts about whether to stay or leave your postdoc position, quitting your postdoc can be daunting. But it can also be a great opportunity to move forward in your career.

If you are unhappy with your current situation, or if you have a better opportunity elsewhere, carefully analyze your career goals, your personal and financial situation, and the consequences for your well-being and your career.

### Should I Quit My Postdoc? Evaluating Pros and Cons for Career Advancement

Deciding whether or not to quit your postdoc position can be a significant and difficult decision. As a postdoc, you may face various challenges, such as work-life balance and the competitive nature of academia.

It's essential to consider your personal circumstances and long-term career goals when determining if leaving your postdoc position is the right choice for you.

Evaluating how well the current position aligns with your interests, values, and aspirations is essential. Moreover, it is generally common and acceptable for a postdoc to leave before their contract ends, especially if better opportunities arise or personal reasons emerge.



## Emotional Turmoil When Considering Quitting Your Postdoc

If you are considering leaving your postdoc, you may have **multiple reasons that result in emotional turmoil**. Which of the following reasons are true for your situation?

- » I am burnt out.
- » I feel unsupported.
- » I do not make progress.
- » I don't want an academic career.
- » I am not sure which career I want.
- » I am afraid of the financial consequences.
- » I am afraid that I will not find another job.
- » I am afraid to ruin my career when I quit my postdoc too early.
- » I am afraid to ruin my reputation when I take another job mid-postdoc.

**All these are relevant concerns you should evaluate before making any decisions.**

## Evaluating Your Current Situation

### Your Mental Health



Prioritizing your mental health is crucial in any career, including a postdoc position in science.

Pay close attention to how your current job affects your overall well-being.

If you're facing significant stress, anxiety, or other mental health concerns, seek help and seriously consider whether continuing in this role would be beneficial in the long run. Remember that your well-being is more important than any job title or academic achievement.

### Relationship with Principal Investigator and Other Team Members

An essential aspect of your postdoc experience is your relationship with your principal investigator (PI) and other team members. A good relationship with them can significantly impact your professional growth, job satisfaction, and morale during your time in the position.

Assess the level of support and guidance you receive from your PI and whether your interactions with team members are positive or negative. It may be worth reevaluating your position if you're struggling to maintain healthy relationships within your research team.

### The Duration of Your Contract

Lastly, take into consideration the duration of your contract. Being a temporary position, a postdoc often lasts for a fixed period, typically around 2-3 years. Therefore, it's essential to consider the time left on your contract when thinking about whether to leave your current job.

**If you're nearing the end of your contract, it might make more sense to complete it and leverage this experience when applying for future positions.**

Reflect on your current situation and think about how your mental health, relationship with your PI and team members, and the duration of your contract affect your decision to stay or quit your postdoc position. Every individual's experience is unique, so take the time to understand your circumstances before making any major decisions.

## Possible Reasons to Quit



It may be time to consider moving on if you feel burnt out, stagnant, unsupported, micromanaged, or poorly treated.

**It is important to remember that you are not obligated to stay in a postdoc position that is not a good fit for you.**

### ***Burnout***

Feeling burnt out, which often arises from prolonged stress and overwork, can significantly affect your mental and physical well-being.

This burnout can result from various factors, including unrealistic expectations or workloads imposed by your advisor or the lab, inadequate resources, or a lack of work-life balance. If these circumstances can not be discussed and improved, prolonging your postdoc is not an option. You should leave before your well-being is severely impaired.

### ***Bad Relationship With Your Supervisor or Other Team Members***

A difficult relationship with your supervisor or other team members could negatively impact your work and overall well-being.

If you find that your work environment has become toxic and attempts to resolve conflicts have failed, it may be time for you to consider leaving your postdoc.

If you find yourself considering quitting a postdoc for the second time, take some time to reflect on your priorities, aspirations, and personal circumstances. Understanding the reasons behind your dissatisfaction can guide you in making a more informed decision about your future career.



### ***Lack of Mentoring and Support***

Mentoring and support can be crucial for postdocs, as they help you develop your skills and grow both personally and professionally. If your institution or the principal investigators are not providing the help you need, you may feel stagnant or unable to achieve your full potential. In such a situation, quitting your postdoc may be necessary to pursue better future career opportunities.

A postdoctoral position should ideally provide an environment where you can learn, grow, and thrive in your research endeavors. In my personal opinion, **a supportive environment produces better results than an environment of extensive pressure.**

## Micromanagement

Micromanagement will stifle your autonomy and creativity, making it challenging to conduct research effectively. If you constantly find yourself under close scrutiny, with limited room for independent decision-making, your capacity to explore new ideas will be limited. In such cases, seeking a different postdoctoral opportunity with a more trusting and empowering advisor might be the solution.

## You are Unable to Make Progress on Your Research



If you are treated well but have been in your postdoc for more than two years and are still struggling to get your research off the ground, it might be a good idea to finish your postdoc time and to consider a different research area or career path.

You should not stay a postdoc for too long because, after a while, you may get stuck and struggle to become a group leader or a professor. In my very personal opinion, it is often not a good idea to [become a long-term postdoc](#).

Consider carefully [how long you should stay a postdoc](#). Otherwise, you might lose a couple of years without an acceptable return on time and energy.

## Limited Academic Job Market

The academic job market is notoriously competitive, with [only a small percentage of PhDs able to secure tenure-track faculty positions](#). Given the limited number of tenure-track positions available, you may opt for transitioning into a non-academic position that could better align with your long-term goals and skills.

## Career Opportunities Outside Academia

80-95% of PhD graduates (depending on the field) end up pursuing non-academic careers. As an academic postdoc, you have valuable skills that can be applied to many industries outside the academic realm. Leaving your postdoc job to pursue a career in sectors like private research, consulting, or entrepreneurship could expose you to new challenges and opportunities.

## Medical Leave

If you are facing a medical issue or dealing with a health condition that is impacting your ability to perform well in your postdoc, you may need to take medical leave.

In some cases, leaving your postdoc might be the best decision for your health and well-being. However, it's important to communicate your concerns with your supervisor and explore options for a leave of absence or other accommodations before making a final decision.

## Are You Just in a Bad Phase?

**However, ensure that your feelings are not just a dip in your motivation.**

In another article, I have described the [five typical emotional phases you will experience in every research project](#). You start with naïve enthusiasm, become competent and disillusioned, want to give up, recover, and finally, round up and exit.

You may suddenly realize that **you have not generated enough data** to finish your project in



time, many experiments have failed, and only a fraction of your data can be published. **You may start to question the entire project and yourself.**

Before quitting your postdoc position, ensure you are not just in “the Dip.”

If you are sure that it is not “just a phase,” you should carefully evaluate your career goals:

## What are Your Career Goals?

If you question your current career situation, make a clear career decision. If you keep all doors open, you are making a mistake. If you do not commit to specific career goals, you become ineffective and disoriented. Read more here: [I have no idea where I will be in two years.](#)

You may also carefully consider whether you are looking for a part-time or full-time job. A part-time job is often not realistic for a researcher. Still, it might be an attractive option in academic administration (teaching, doctoral schools, business development, etc.).

**When you finally decide which career path you will pursue, as soon as you decide, suddenly, all other decisions are easy.**

## What are Other Career Options for a Postdoc?

Many postdocs are stuck in the mindset that they must pursue an academic career. However, **only about 3% of all PhD students and only 10% of all postdocs become professors** and professorships continue to decline. Thus, more than 90-97% of all scientists find a job outside academia!

**You are not obliged to pursue an academic career.**

**You are not obliged to stay in academia.**

Postdocs can lead to careers in industry, government, journalism, and non-profit organizations. Thus, make a clear career decision now - and do not leave all doors open.

## Are you Ready for the Next Step in Your Career?

If you want to pursue a career in academia, you can strategically **qualify yourself to become an academic professor** or a group leader. A highly productive postdoc period is nearly always necessary for a research career. It will help you develop your research skills, publish excellent papers, and build your scientific independence.

**A postdoc is probably a waste of time if you want to pursue a career in the social, policy, or industry sector.** In my experience, **academic supervisors can not train you for the non-academic job market.**

Thus, if you want a non-academic career anyway, take your career into your own hands. Finish your projects efficiently and find a job in your preferred sector (social, policy, journalism, education, industry, etc.).

## Do I Have the Necessary Skills and Experience for Other Jobs?

Your postdoctoral training provides valuable experiences, but they may not be enough to qualify for your dream job. It is important to take stock of your skills and experience and identify

any areas where you may need to develop additional skills or knowledge. Read more here: [The 8 best tips to find your dream job in science.](#)

## Alternative Options

As a PhD student considering whether to quit your postdoc, it's essential to weigh your options carefully. In the following section, we will explore alternative options that can help advance your career.

### *You Have Another Postdoc Position*

If you're not satisfied with your current postdoc position, you may want to explore other postdoctoral positions in different labs or academic institutions. This allows you to broaden your research experience, apply your technical skills in various projects, and acquire new skills in different research settings.

Furthermore, joining a more fitting postdoc position can rekindle your passion for academia and help you maintain strong connections in the field.

### *You Get a Permanent Position or Become a Professor*

If you can make a successful career move, your supervisor may be unhappy, but they will understand. If you get a permanent position, a group leader position, or tenure track job, there is no doubt that you will move on. On the contrary, staying a postdoc under these conditions would be considered dumb by nearly everybody and would hurt your reputation.

### *You Leave Academia for an Industry Job*

Considering an industry position offers a different work environment and career trajectory. In industry, you can still work on research, but the focus is often on implementing new technologies and products practically.

Your technical skills and academic background can be valuable assets in the private sector, such as biotechnology, pharmaceuticals, or data analysis. Additionally, industry jobs typically offer higher salaries, more stable employment, and a faster career progression than academic positions.

- 1. Learn new skills:** In the industry, you can acquire new technical and transferable skills to aid your professional development.
- 2. Collaborate with diverse teams:** Working with professionals from various backgrounds can enrich your experience and expand your network.
- 3. Focus on applied research:** Industry positions often emphasize developing practical solutions to global challenges.

### *You Find a Non-Academic Position*

Aside from academia and industry, there are other non-academic positions that could suit your qualifications and interests. Options include government jobs, non-profit organizations, and science communication roles. Such positions allow you to leverage your technical skills and research experience while contributing to the broader societal impact of science.

- » **Government jobs:** Positions within government agencies could range from science policy advisor to research scientist, where you can contribute to policy-making and regulatory processes that shape the scientific landscape.
- » **Non-profit organizations:** Joining a non-profit that aligns with your research area or interests can be an excellent way to put your skills to use in a mission-driven environment.
- » **Science communication:** Sharing your expertise as a science writer, journalist, or public speaker can help bridge the gap between the scientific community and the public, fostering a wider understanding and appreciation of science.

In conclusion, it is essential to consider your career goals and personal values when deciding whether to quit your postdoc. By exploring

alternative options, you can choose the path that best aligns with your aspirations and strengths.

## Consider the Right Timing

When considering whether to quit your postdoc, timing is an essential factor to take into account. Many critical moments in your postdoc experience could influence your decision, such as the first year, end date, second year, and last day.

During the **first year** of your postdoc, it's natural to face challenges as you adapt to the new environment and responsibilities. Before making any decisions, carefully assess whether you face issues stemming from the inherent difficulties of the first year or more persistent problems that may not improve with time.

As you near the **end date of your contract**, reflect on the progress you've made and the opportunities that lie ahead. The right time for you to leave the position could depend on the likelihood of obtaining a new post or collaboration based on your accomplishments thus far.

In the **second year** of your postdoc, you likely have a clearer understanding of your strengths, weaknesses, and career goals. At this point, you should evaluate whether your postdoc aligns with these goals and whether continuing or pursuing other opportunities is worthwhile.

Regarding your **last day**, ensure that you're considerate of both your commitments and the

commitments of your colleagues. Provide ample notice and discuss your departure with your mentor and colleagues, outlining a transition plan for your responsibilities.

When determining the **right time** to leave your position, consider your personal circumstances, growth, and future prospects. Maintaining a professional tone while discussing your decision with your mentor and colleagues is crucial.

## Am I Financially Ready to Leave My Postdoc?

Postdoctoral scholars are typically paid less than other professionals with similar levels of education and experience. Having a financial plan before leaving your postdoc is vital, especially if you are unsure of your next job. If possible, only quit after you have secured your next appointment.

When considering whether to quit your postdoc, it's essential to weigh the financial aspects. As a postdoc, you might be earning a modest salary, and leaving this position could impact your ability to manage student loans, retirement benefits, and health care.

One primary concern for many postdocs is managing student loans. If you decide to quit your postdoc, you may need to create a strategy for repaying your loans, especially if you plan to take a break before finding another job.

You may consider deferring your loans temporarily or exploring other repayment options. Research

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the repayment options available and consult a financial advisor to understand what's best for your situation.

Health care is another critical aspect when considering leaving your postdoc position. If you're currently receiving health insurance through your postdoc, quitting may require finding alternative coverage through a new job or individual insurance.

It's essential to research your options—including the cost of premiums, deductibles, and out-of-pocket expenses—to prevent gaps in coverage and ensure you can afford the insurance you need.

In summary, the financial aspects of quitting your postdoc position are essential in your decision-making process. Remember to thoroughly evaluate the impacts on your student loans, retirement benefits, and health care, and consult with a financial advisor to ensure you're making the best decision for your economic well-being.

## Making the Decision

When deciding whether to quit your postdoc, taking a step back and evaluating your current situation and long-term career goals is crucial. As a starting point, create a pros and cons list that outlines the benefits and drawbacks of staying in your postdoc position. This exercise will help you gain a balanced perspective and identify the key factors that matter the most in your decision-making process.

Before making your final decision, consider your career goals and how they align with your postdoc position. Reflect on questions such as: Are you getting the mentorship and support needed to advance in your field? Is the current research project propelling you toward your desired career path? It might be time to rethink your position if you find a misalignment between your postdoc role and your aspirations.

During this period of reflection, it may be helpful to have open conversations with your colleagues, mentors, or even former postdocs

who have faced similar decisions. Their insights and experiences can provide valuable guidance in understanding the potential implications of quitting your postdoc. Moreover, they might offer alternative solutions or opportunities you haven't considered.

Ensure you weigh the risks associated with leaving your postdoc, such as financial security, potential gaps in your resume, and the impact on your professional network. Reassess and evaluate your options carefully, and give yourself ample time to research and explore other opportunities. This includes investigating job openings, networking with colleagues in your field, and clearly understanding the skills and qualifications required for your future career pursuits.

Throughout this decision-making process, maintain a professional tone when discussing your situation with others. Being transparent and respectful can minimize the negative impact of your decision on your relationships with colleagues and supervisors.

In conclusion, deciding to quit your postdoc is a personal and subjective matter. The final decision should be based on a thorough analysis of your career goals, the pros and cons of leaving your position, and the risks involved. Remember to approach the situation professionally and seek guidance from others who have faced similar dilemmas.

## Preparing for a Smooth Transition

### Planning and Networking

As a grad student, planning for the future and starting networking early in your postdoc journey is essential. Identify your dream job and set realistic goals to achieve it. Maintain an active academic presence by attending conferences, collaborating, and presenting your academic work. This will make your job search more efficient, as you'll develop a strong network of contacts who could offer you a new position or provide helpful advice.

Don't be afraid to consult with your PI or other mentors in your field about your career aspirations. They can provide valuable guidance on what to pursue next and may even have connections to new opportunities. When you secure a new position, have a precise start date and communicate your intentions honestly with your current PI. This will help ensure a smooth transition for you and your colleagues.

### ***Ensuring a Great Recommendation***

A critical factor in moving on from a postdoc position is getting an excellent recommendation from your current PI or mentor. This will significantly boost your CV and job applications. To earn this, show dedication to your research, take initiative, and demonstrate enthusiasm in your academic life.

In the months leading up to your exit, focus on tying up loose ends and preparing your research for a smooth handover to the next person or team. Doing so makes it easier for your PI and colleagues to continue the work you started. This will leave a lasting positive impression and increase the likelihood of receiving glowing recommendations for your efforts.

Remember, when you decide it's time to move on from your postdoc position, approaches like effective planning, expanding networking, and ensuring a solid recommendation can significantly ease and streamline the transition process.

### **Additional Resources and Support**

If the conditions are terrible, you may leave without a new job. Under these circumstances, seek support early. **Contact your institution's human resources department or the institution's ombudsperson.** An ombudsperson is an independent and impartial official who acts as a mediator to help resolve conflicts, address grievances, and ensure fair treatment within the institution.

**However, be aware that HR representatives often tend to protect their institution.** This

may also be true for ombudspersons. Ask your colleagues whether they are trustworthy.

A valuable resource in the United States is the [National Science Foundation \(NSF\)](#). The NSF offers a plethora of funding and grant opportunities that may be crucial to your career growth. Securing a grant can make your CV stand out and potentially open doors for faculty positions or alternative career paths in academia.

In conclusion, your decision to quit or continue with your postdoc position should involve thorough research, consideration of available resources, and discussions with key stakeholders. Always prioritize your well-being and professional growth, opting for paths that align with your long-term goals.

### **Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ)**

#### ***When should I start thinking about quitting my postdoc?***

It is never too early to start thinking about your career goals and planning your next steps. However, giving yourself enough time to find a new job and make a smooth transition is essential.

#### ***How do I have a conversation with my PI about quitting my postdoc?***

Being honest and direct with your PI about your decision to leave is essential. Explain your reasons for leaving and be prepared to answer any questions they may have. If you go for 'technical' or career reasons, it is also important to thank your PI for the opportunity to work with them and wish them well.

#### ***How do I talk to my family and friends about quitting my postdoc?***

When talking to your family and friends about quitting your postdoc, be honest about your reasons for leaving and your plans for the future.

Ensure that you have made the decision carefully and are confident in your next steps.

### ***How do I deal with the bad reputation of quitting a postdoc?***

Quitting in the middle of your postdoc does not necessarily lead to a bad reputation. In fact, it is becoming more and more common for postdocs to leave their positions early for various reasons. If you have good reasons to leave before the end and can articulate them well, you should be able to find a new job without any problems.

### ***How do I explain to a new employer quitting my current postdoc?***

When interviewing for new jobs, be prepared to answer questions about why you left your postdoc early. Have a good narrative and be as honest as possible about your reasons for leaving, but never talk bad about your previous supervisor or employer. Be positive and focus on your accomplishments and what you learned from your experience.

## **Acknowledgments**

I have used AI systems, including Grammarly, Google Bard, and ChatGPT, to enhance the English and comprehensiveness of this article. This post may contain affiliate links, meaning I get a small commission if you decide to purchase through my link. Thus, you support smartsciencecareer at no cost to you!

## **Recommended Reading**

The following articles may also interest you:

- » For how long should I be a postdoc?
- » The emotional phases of your research project and “the dip”
- » I have no idea where I will be in two years
- » Why professors do not train you for the non-academic job market – and how to handle it!
- » Scientific independence – how to develop and demonstrate it?
- » How to choose the best postdoc position?
- » Should I admit that I want to become a professor?
- » Should I become a long-term postdoc?
- » Do postdocs need leadership skills?

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