



— NATIONAL —
POSTDOCTORAL
— ASSOCIATION —

15800 Crabbs Branch Way | Rockville, MD 20855
Ph: 301.984.4800

GUIDE TO USING AN INDIVIDUAL DEVELOPMENT PLAN (MY IDP & ME)

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A guide for using an individual development plan (IDP) and other professional development tools in conjunction with the [NPA postdoc career guide, timeline, and mentorship guides](#).

Introduction

The National Postdoctoral Association (NPA) believes that appropriate training of independent scientists requires that individuals not only develop effective skills and knowledge in their field and discipline, but also develop the ability to navigate their time as a postdoc in a way that balances research, professional, and career development. As Rachel Mulheren, Ph.D., former postdoc and member of the NPA Advocacy Committee, [has stated](#):

“Postdoctoral scholars need to develop skills beyond the technical focus of their research. Networking, communication, career planning, teaching, grant writing and other professional development skills can help postdocs get and excel in a job in any area. However, making time in a busy schedule is a challenge, and some postdocs face pressure from their supervisors to engage only on their project during work hours. Others aren’t comfortable asking for time to attend events that occur during the day. But with some strategic planning, postdocs can build in time to cultivate skills that will prepare them for future positions. And PIs and institutions that support postdoc professional development might even discover some benefits for themselves.”

To maximize your postdoctoral training time, you need to be intentional about your career preparation. This is where an individual development plan (IDP) can help. The IDP is **BOTH** a *tool* and a *process*.

Many individuals, including some departments, institutions and organizations have created their own IDPs as a *tool* to support the development of their student’s/trainee’s needs. Many institutional IDPs focus on helping facilitate good communication and working expectations between students/trainees and their supervisors, as well as laying out defined, measurable and attainable goals for the academic, professional, and personal development of the trainee.

However, an IDP can also be considered a self-directed process in which an individual utilizes self-assessment, evaluation and reflection to develop an action plan to achieve their goals, which many organizations will refer to as an “IDP.” Thinking of the IDP as a *process* and not just as a *tool* can help you grow and mature through your postdoctoral experience and enable you to get the most from your training and prepare you for the next stage in your career, regardless of whether you decide to move into academia, industry, government or other sectors of employment.

To develop an effective IDP, you will need to take the time to make an initial assessment of current values (personal and professional), skills/techniques (within and outside of the area of doctoral expertise), and goals for the future. As you grow and mature through your postdoctoral experience you can take these reflections and update and modify your IDP so that it more accurately aligns with changing values and goals, increased professional experiences, knowledge, and skill sets.

The IDP is just one tool that you can use in your process of career preparation. You also need to find out what you like doing and what kinds of careers align with your values. This is about more than just job titles; start perusing job postings paying close attention to the responsibilities of the role, and consider whether they are things you enjoy to begin narrowing down types of

jobs that align with your interests and values. You may also want to [consider which job sector aligns with your values](#) (i.e., academia, for-profit, nonprofit, government), keeping in mind that there are differences within sectors as well.

Also, don't think of an IDP as just an evaluation or assessment of your worth or progress to date, but rather a tool to support you in frank conversations with your PI and career advising mentors. If your institution doesn't have its own version of an IDP, or doesn't include ways to help you reflect on your values and goals, you can use one of the free and publicly available tools online. [MyIDP](#) (life sciences), [ImaginePhD](#) (humanities and social sciences), and [ChemIDP](#) (chemical sciences) are all discipline-specific free IDP tools available online, however, they encourage individuals to adapt their tools to fit their discipline.

Regardless of which tool you use to create your IDP, the important thing to do is to use it as a starting point for productive conversations with yourself and others. Using an IDP will allow you to:

- Identify discussion points for your meetings with your advisor, mentor, PI, and/or others to discuss career goals and solicit guidance;
- Identify areas in which you need to seek out additional mentors to build a network of support;
- Identify areas of interest to target for additional exploration and to conduct informational interviews; and
- Identify areas in which to seek new connections in order to broaden your network, and/or create new connections to build and widen your network.

In addition to this guide, the NPA has also developed [A Postdoc's Guide to Career Development](#), [A Postdoc's Guide to the Postdoc Timeline](#), and [A Postdoc's Guide to Mentorship](#), which can be used in conjunction to help you plan and gain success as you research and plan your professional development and career goals.

Before Starting The IDP

An IDP is most effective when used in conjunction with regular conversations with your career and faculty advisor(s) and/or mentor(s) about your growth and development. In order to have effective conversations, it is important to develop a plan early in your postdoctoral experience to keep yourself on track and to achieve your professional and career goals within the timeframe of your training experience. In [A Postdoc's Guide to the Postdoc Timeline](#), the NPA recommends organizing your timeline around five main components: ***Getting Started, Laying the Groundwork, Moving Full Speed Ahead, Job Search, and Transition Plan***. IDPs may play a slightly different role based on what stage you are in.

To effectively prepare for a career, you first need to know [what kind of career you want](#). Ask yourself these questions: What do I like doing? When am I most satisfied with my work? What do I dislike doing? What are my values? How do they align with my chosen profession? What does the world need me to be? Once you understand yourself and your priorities you can identify the careers that will allow you to do those things, inside or outside of academia. Explore job advertisements to better understand the requirements for the position, and conduct [informational interviews](#) to find out what the job is really like and get advice on what kind of experience will make you competitive for that position. Then, find ways to get that experience during your training. [Informational interviews](#) can be useful for those pursuing non-academic **and** academic careers. For example, before applying for a faculty position at an institution, you might want to reach out to current assistant professors to better understand the work environment, support available, and expectations for new faculty (teaching loads, etc...).

For some postdocs this process of looking outside their lab, community or environment may be challenging due to lack of resources, mentoring, etc. Information about various career paths is not impossible to find but may require you to spend time outside of your “normal business hours” to be able to dig into this information, reach out to your network of former classmates & current contacts, use the internet to explore areas of interest, check out YouTube videos, search for resources on the NPA & other general professional society websites (AAAS). Also, familiarize yourself with professional societies relevant to your field and explore their websites to gain insight into (and take advantage of) career development opportunities specific to your field of study - they can be tremendous resources. Seek access to alumni from your institution or search LinkedIn for others in the areas you want to learn more about, look at their career pathways and highlighted skills to see what makes them good at what they do, and use the connections resource on LinkedIn to find someone to introduce you or reach out directly and never discount the power of Google. There are many ways to explore careers available to you as a doctoral recipient. Make a plan to ensure you are on track to transition in your desired timeframe. Remember, your postdoctoral training should be preparing you for YOUR career – get in the driver's seat and take it where you want!

Getting Started (6-8 Weeks Into Postdoc)

As you start your postdoctoral experience, and begin acclimating to the institutional climate and expectations for your work, not much is happening in terms of your IDP. However, this is a great opportunity to start thinking about your next step(s) by doing some self-reflection, and taking the time to understand your skills, interests and values, both personal and professional.

Knowing yourself and understanding your values is critical to targeting a career that will bring satisfaction and success. Values exist, whether you recognize them or not and making decisions about your career can be much easier when you take the time to recognize and acknowledge your values while making plans and decisions that honor them. For example, if you value family and have a spouse and/or children, but your job requires you to work in the lab 60-70 hour a week, you will probably start to feel internal stress and conflict when you cannot be in two places at one time. Or, if you don't value competition, but work in a highly competitive discipline, are you likely to be satisfied with your job? Understanding your values can aid you in evaluating and navigating these situations. When you know your own values, you can use them to make decisions about how to live your life, and answer questions like these (MindTools, 2017):

- What job should I pursue next?
- Should I start my own business?
- Should I compromise, or be firm with my position?
- Should I follow tradition, or travel down a new path?

If you want help exploring what some of your values might be, check one of the links below on values exercises.

[What are Your Values? \(Mindtools\)](#)
[My Self Values \(Carnegie Mellon University & Taproot\)](#)

The beginning of your postdoc is the perfect time to identify your expectations and reflect on how they align with your mentor's expectations. You may also want to consider beginning career conversations with your team of mentors.

The important thing to remember, during the first six months to a year, is that you should spend time understanding what inspires you in the field you have chosen. For instance, in science, is it the hands on benchwork, the process of discovery itself that drives your days or maybe you prefer the communication of science and would love to travel while having scientific conversations or sharing/highlighting the new and novel science with others. You may thrive on visualizing the big picture and overseeing a lab/team or department to ensure the work flows well or you may prefer designing the projects, planning experiments and securing funding to support your ideas. Be aware of your workdays, note the days when time flies by and you could keep doing what you are doing forever and note what you are doing on the days that feel like they will never end. What are the tasks you look forward to getting involved in and which make you want to stay home in bed? This is where you begin to understand yourself and what drives you in your chosen field.

Below are a few resources to begin your journey. Also, don't forget to explore what is available at your institution such as postdoc orientation and career/professional development events as well as those online.

Career exploration tools:

- Values assessment ([Mindtools](#))
- Online IDP tools (e.g., [ImaginePhD](#), [myIDP](#))

- Personality assessments (e.g., [Strengths Finder](#), [Myers Briggs Type Indicator](#), [DiSC Assessment](#)) There are online versions of these tests, but the best practice is to take one and discuss your results with someone certified to administer the test and review the results.
- Journaling likes and dislikes, and whether activities are energizing or draining ([Designing Your Life](#) book - [Energy Engagement Worksheet and Good Time Journal Activity Log](#))
- Online job simulations ([InterSECT job simulations](#))
- [Shadowing](#) (exploratory)
- Internships (exploratory)
- Participating with postdoc organizations (e.g., postdoctoral association (PDA) at your institution, industry-focused groups, [NPA committees](#))

After identifying your values and interests, ensure that you are gaining relevant experience. This also requires that you continue to pay attention to whether you really like what you're learning and doing. For example, if you learn that you don't like writing grants but like teaching, then you may want to re-evaluate whether to pursue a tenure-track faculty position at a research-intensive university (where getting funding is more important) and instead focus on enhancing your teaching skills and looking at what it would take to apply for a job at a small liberal arts institution, where the focus is on teaching.

Laying The Groundwork (2-6 Months Into Postdoc)

Whether you are using one of the freely available IDP tools online or one that your institution provides, this is a good time to go through a first pass with your IDP and begin gathering information and determining what skills you need to develop or enhance to make you the best (and most marketable) version of yourself.

A good place to start is by checking out the [NPA Core Competencies](#) which serve as an excellent guide for determining some of the general skills you should be developing during your postdoc. In addition, look for other resources or information that provide insight into the skills and competencies you might seek (depending on what career path(s) you are intending to pursue). For example, if you are considering academia, this is the perfect time to review the [ACRA Framework from UCSF](#). The goal of the ACRA Framework tool is to provide graduate students and postdocs with the information they need to explore, plan for and apply to faculty positions at different types of institutions, regardless of their understanding of the intricacies of the U.S. education system. The [NPA Core Competencies](#) and [ACRA Framework](#) are both designed to help you begin to assess skills & determine those to include in your IDP.

Regardless of which tools or frameworks you decide to use, during this time period, the important things to remember are:

- Identify what you intend to gain from your postdoc.
- Create a list of topics, skills, and professional opportunities you should pursue.
- Determine a realistic total length of time for your postdoc.
- Determine your learning goals for your postdoc and try to locate any additional resources on your campus that might be able to help you reach your goals (e.g. center for teaching & learning, postdoc office, or career center).

- Begin to fill out the components of the [NPA timeline](#) and develop a schedule that aids you in accomplishing your objectives within the time frame of your postdoc while still maintaining your research goals.
- Share your timelines and reflections with your mentor. Ask for feedback to ensure expectations are aligned.
- Explore career pathways and job ads for career paths of interest.

Moving Full Speed Ahead (3 Months - 1 Year Before Completing Your Postdoc)

Moving full speed ahead tends to be the longest and most flexible, with respect to duration, since it spans from six months to one year (or less) before you leave your postdoc. This is where the bulk of the work associated with your IDP will be. This is also the time your research will be at its peak, so time management skill will be critical to successful progress during this period.

During this timeframe, you want to make sure to revisit your IDP annually (at a minimum) to assess whether your goals have changed and continue to expand your career exploration. Revisit the list of topics you created originally and ask yourself:

- Do they still apply?
- Do you need to change when they are scheduled?
- Do you need to revise the list?

If not, refine and modify your IDP to align with your current needs and career objectives. This may include setting up different learning goals and identifying additional resources. Also, check these components against the [NPA timeline](#) and evaluate your established schedule for accuracy – move items around if they need to be moved. Also, one important question to ask yourself is: ***are you still on track for completing your postdoc within the time frame you intended?*** If not, who needs to be notified and what changes do you need to make? This time period is also a good time to ***schedule conversations with your career center or career advisors as well.***

After reflecting on your progress and identifying a plan for moving forward, share your new goals with your advisor & other mentors. Is there anything they could help with? Are there any connections they could make for you? Also, continue to explore career pathways and job ads for career paths of interest. Remember: even if you are not actively applying to jobs, you are still looking for the skills and experience that employers are seeking within your target employment sector and pursuing opportunities to align yourself with those qualifications. This is the time to make sure you are developing those skills and preparing for one of those jobs in the future. Continuously window shop for jobs to familiarize yourself with the job market, understand employment trends and identify whether requirements for the positions you are interested in are (also) changing. Additionally, like we say in the [Guide to Career Development](#), “continue to build your network of contacts.”

An Important Note About This Timeframe. This process should be revisited annually at a minimum and escalate to every six months as you get closer to the anticipated end of your postdoc; however, much of the timing will depend on the anticipated length of your postdoc.

Schedule an appointment on your calendar to revisit your IDP, and set time aside to ensure you have an opportunity to spend the appropriate amount of time on it – don't rush it! Also remember, you do not have to do this all by yourself. Schedule conversations with your primary and secondary mentors. Additional information on how to do this can be found in the resource section of this guide.

Job Search (1 Year Prior to Expected End of Postdoc Position)

It is entirely likely this phase will overlap with the previous phase. Continue to build your knowledge base, skills, and resources. If you have not done so already, create a document that includes relevant life/professional experiences that may support a qualification you need for a position. For instance, if you were promoted to a role with more responsibilities while working at McDonald's in high school, you likely demonstrated leadership skills that were recognized by your manager. Or, maybe you spent significant time playing team sports in school: this likely led to the development of skills that demonstrate the ability to successfully work with a team and build team dynamics within a group.

Once this document is created you can easily incorporate relevant text in a cover letter or directly into an application, resume or personal statement.

Transition Plan (3-6 Months Prior to Beginning Your Career)

This version of your IDP is done, but you should continue to revise and maintain an IDP throughout your career. Don't neglect to continue the practice of self-assessment to gain the additional skills and experience needed to excel in your new career!

Best of Luck!

Resources

Want to learn more about IDPs? Provided below are examples of institutions and/or organizations with IDPs. Please note that this is not an exhaustive list. There are a number of IDP templates available online and you are encouraged to explore.

Academia/Research

- [Florida State University](#)
- [Oregon State University](#)
- [Stanford University](#)
- [University of California San Francisco](#)
- [University of South Carolina](#)
- [University of Wisconsin - Madison](#)

Associations

- [American Psychological Association](#)

Government

- [FedCareerInfo.com](#)
- [New Hampshire Division of Personnel](#)
- [U.S. Office of Personnel Management \(OPM\)](#)
- [U.S. Department of Defense](#)
- [National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences](#)
- [National Science Foundation Graduate Research Fellowship Program](#)

Other

- [The balance careers: The Individual Development Plan: The Employee's Viewpoint](#)
- [Inside Higher ED: Finding a Workplace Where You Fit](#)

A Conversation Guide for How to Use the IDP to Open Discussions With Your Mentor (or Others)

Conversations with your Mentor

Many postdocs believe one of the scariest conversations to have with a mentor or PI is about their career, especially if someone is choosing not to pursue an academic career. Depending on your field, there may be expectations that you follow in your mentor's path, but you will never know unless you actually have a conversation with them. Regardless of which path you decide to take, this guide is meant to help you once you have decided to take charge of your career and have a conversation with your advisor.

Requesting a Meeting

First, make an appointment requesting 30 minutes of your mentor's time. Make sure you let them know the goal of this meeting is to discuss talking about professional development opportunities. You might want to send an email request with an opening paragraph like this :

"I would like to meet with you to discuss some career goals I was thinking about for this coming year and to further explore some possible growth opportunities within the [lab/department/project/etc.] During this meeting I would like to propose that we take some time to talk about our respective expectations for the projects I'm working on and have the opportunity to get clarification on how they relate to my career development and maybe even talk about other opportunities to develop additional skills that would help me improve professionally and advance the work projects I am working on."

Or you could also start with something like this:

"I am currently considering _____, _____ or _____ as potential career paths and have been reviewing job ads for these areas. I would like to set a 30-minute meeting to discuss how I might find opportunities to develop some of the skills required for these positions through the work I am doing. I have attached a synopsis of my thoughts so far to ensure I don't take too much of your time."

Once you have a meeting set up, prior to the meeting, take some time to organize your thoughts and questions to make the most efficient use of your meeting time. You might consider sending your mentor a synopsis of your thoughts, so the mentor has time to consider your needs and locate suggestions to assist you in your process.

During the Meeting

Once your meeting starts, you might want to begin the conversation with something like this:

1. *Thank you for taking the time to chat with me. I've been thinking about pathways that interest me and am exploring _____ &/or _____ as career options. There appear to be some skills (techniques/specialized knowledge) I should develop to be prepared to succeed in this career. I would like your opinion on this and other suggestions I need to consider. I would also appreciate suggestions for resources I might be able to utilize to help me gain these skills.*
2. *I am currently considering _____, _____ or _____ as potential career paths and have been reviewing job ads for these areas. Do you know of other individuals who have moved into similar positions and how they've been able to relate the work they are doing here to those positions? Are there other individuals or resources you know of that I should connect with?*

Make sure to discuss in depth the expectations from the present and planned projects and how they relate to what you want to do in the future. If your advisor/mentor's expectations differ from yours, communicate this information. Part of the goal of this meeting is to talk about what kinds of skills/opportunities you are looking for and how they can be incorporated into the work you are currently doing. Try to draft a process for continued communication or seek suggestions on how your mentor/PI plans on keeping track of the tasks and deadlines assigned to you and how you can include professional development into those assignments. Ask your manager on how the feedback system would work – on the task accountability and continued professional development discussions going forward.

Try to use [good communication skills](#) during this discussion and be a good listener.

Post Meeting Actions

After the meeting, make sure to document what you discuss in your meeting and prepare a concise outline and send it to your mentor/PI to make sure you are both on the same page about what you talked about. Document the goals you both agreed upon; set and make sure to include tasks or projects that you both agreed you would continue to work on but also add any new ones and when you agreed you start those as well. Do not hesitate to follow-up a few days or a week later to find out if there have been any changes in responsibilities or understanding.

Don't let this be the only meeting you have with your advisor; these discussions should not be just once-a-year discussions. Make sure to request time throughout the year, for example mid-year and/or end-of-year (or even quarterly).