AAAS/Science Business Office Feature

Postdoc Survey Results

A larger percentage (56%) of former postdocs desired tenure-track academic positions than actually obtained such positions (30%). Similarly, only 16% of former postdocs initially expected to seek nontenure-track research scientist positions, compared with the 25% who ended up in such positions. The “other” types of positions that were cited included nonbench careers such as consulting, technology transfer, and administration.

$40,000, which was an increase of just over 5 percent compared to the 2006 survey. The median salary of foreign postdocs was £27,500 in the UK and €25,200 in continental Europe.

Andrea Ditadi at the University of Padua, Italy, had to live on no salary for several months into his postdoc. “I was not paid for three months. That was a critical situation. You cannot go three months without money,” he says. “I was lucky because I live close to my parents.”

After working in France for three years Ditadi decided to do a postdoc in Italy “to try to stay and do something for my country,” he says. But a year into his postdoc, he is frustrated by not being able to obtain the resources he needs to carry out his research. He has decided to look for postdoctoral positions abroad.

Expectations Versus Reality
Although only 2 percent of survey participants had done a postdoc in industry, many of those who did say this is a good option for anyone thinking about a career in industry and wanting to get a head start (see June 16 career feature at dx.doi.org/10.1126/science.opms.r0800055). Industry can also expose a postdoc to different aspects of doing science, according to Christopher Campion, director of the chemistry department at HF Scientific in Fort Myers, Florida. While working on his Ph.D. in physical organic chemistry at the University of Rhode Island, Campion had the opportunity to do an internship at Lithion, Inc., in Pawcatuck, Connecticut, which then turned into a postdoctoral fellowship. “My experience was different from the typical postdocs that only focus on one entity. I was working on multiple projects. I helped set up a lab, bought instruments, learned about applying for grants,” says Campion. “One of the many good things about my postdoctoral adviser is that there were no taboo subjects. I came out a more diversified and well-rounded scientist.”

The majority of survey respondents (79 percent) held postdoctoral positions in academic institutions—and they expected to get a job in academia. Over half (56 percent) of former postdocs wanted a tenure-track academic position after completing their postdocs, but only 30 percent got one (see graph above). Only 16 percent of former postdocs expected to seek nontenure-track research scientist positions, but 25 percent ended up in such posts. And a significant number of former postdocs (12 percent of respondents) who were expecting to obtain tenure-track positions ended up working in government or the nonprofit research sector, being self-employed, or working with other types of positions. These data should be a wake-up call to grad students and postdocs: having a backup plan is essential in today’s job market.

Anna Davis knows that life can take unusual twists and turns. While doing a postdoc at the University of Washington in Seattle she started her family and wanted to explore different options for working part time. She and several colleagues wrote a grant with her postdoctoral adviser and got funding from the National Science Foundation for six years to produce educational software called NerveWorks, which is now commercially available (www.ecobeaker.com/products-college/NerveWorks).

After her Ph.D. in molecular and environmental toxicology at the University of Wisconsin Lisa Van Pay started a postdoc at Harvard University needing to “publish a lot and quickly.” But she also started doing other things during her postdoctoral years, including working with the public at science and technology museums. When the needed publications did not come through, she applied for a prestigious public policy fellowship at the American Association for the Advancement of Science. In September she will be starting a one-year fellowship in Washington, D.C., with the possibility of a renewal. “I am really pleased at how things turned out, but I could not have predicted it,” says Van Pay.

Former and current postdocs advise graduate students planning their postdocs to do their research on the prospective lab and PI. A literature search is a good start, but it also helps to query colleagues, current and former lab members, and of course the PI. Many survey participants also suggest having a well-laid-out timeline of accomplishments for the postdoctoral years. And while someone might start out wanting a career in academia, it pays to be open to other paths. “You have to continually assess your goals,” says Van Pay. “Often people don’t pay attention, and it could be several years before they realize that things are not going according to plan.”

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