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## Postdocs, mentor thyself

I thought I was on pretty firm ground when I addressed postdocs at the Salk Institute in San Diego, California, about what young scientists should expect from their principal investigator (PI). The minimum standard, I said, would be someone who trains postdocs and graduate students in scientific skills such as lab techniques, experimental design and data analysis. A conscientious PI would help postdocs advance their scientific careers by developing their non-scientific skills such as grant-writing and lab management. And an exemplary PI would be sympathetic to their off-the-bench goals — even offering to write a letter of reference for them if they are seeking a non-scientific industrial job. Some members of the postdoc association present chuckled at the first, laughed at the second and were practically in hysterics by the third. That would have been edifying if I had intended the round-table discussion of postdoc issues and concerns to be a comedy workshop.

The laughter was discouraging, because it signalled what I've heard all too often at similar settings — that postdocs are considered by many PIs to be just 'an extra pair of hands'. But many of the fellows at the meeting had at least a partial solution to their PIs being less than hands-on in terms of training. They offer to help train their postdoc peers.

Having a formal postdoc organization can help fellows gain non-scientific skills and key career tips. For example, one fellow at the round table was wondering how to get started in regulatory affairs, and a colleague suggested a fellowship with the US Food and Drug Administration. *Naturejobs* has also offered a look into alternative career pathways. And, starting this issue, we are launching a monthly series on how to acquire important non-scientific skills, beginning with presentations (see page 416). This series aims to provide ways to let postdocs help each other and themselves gain these skills — because being unprepared is no laughing matter.

**Paul Smaglik**  
*Naturejobs* editor



## Contents

### POSTDOCS AND STUDENTS

The fine art of giving a talk p416

### CAREER VIEW

#### Scientists and Societies

Community outreach

#### Graduate Journal

Writer's block

#### Movers

Barry Dickson p418

### WWW.NATUREJOBS.COM

Career centre

Information on the scientific job market

FOCUS

SPOTLIGHT

RECRUITMENT

ANNOUNCEMENTS

EVENTS