

naturejobs

**JOBS OF
THE WEEK**

Last month's annual meeting of the US National Postdoctoral Association (NPA) in Boston saw a lively debate over the role and purpose that might be served by a set of core competencies for postdocs. The discussion questioned, for example, whether such competencies should be tantamount to regulations, as is seen in medicine and law.

As part of a first draft, an NPA study group identified six possible competencies that might define a postdoc: scientific knowledge, research skills, communication skills, professionalism, leadership and management skills, and responsible conduct of research. Not surprisingly, some in the audience bristled at the prospect of mandatory competencies, arguing that, unlike in medicine or law, there's no central body that accredits researchers, nor should there be. Others noted that most US graduate schools already encourage or require these principles, making them redundant.

But such competencies could be a ready barometer for industrial employers, and might round off the skill sets of the growing number of postdocs heading into 'non-traditional' careers. For postdocs from overseas working in the United States, with their varied graduate-school backgrounds and training, the competencies might also help even out their skill sets. And some at the meeting welcomed the idea of principles that might offer an alternative to publication count as a way of measuring success. One commentator, however, cautioned that faculty members would need to see the competencies as part of the training experience, rather than as just additional paperwork.

Strongly regulated competencies are a bad idea, especially given the multitude of career paths postdocs can take. But just having an endorsed set of carefully crafted core competencies could further distinguish and define the postdoc's role and importance, help individual postdocs to identify training areas in need of improvement, and smooth the transition to the ideal post-postdoc professional experience.

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