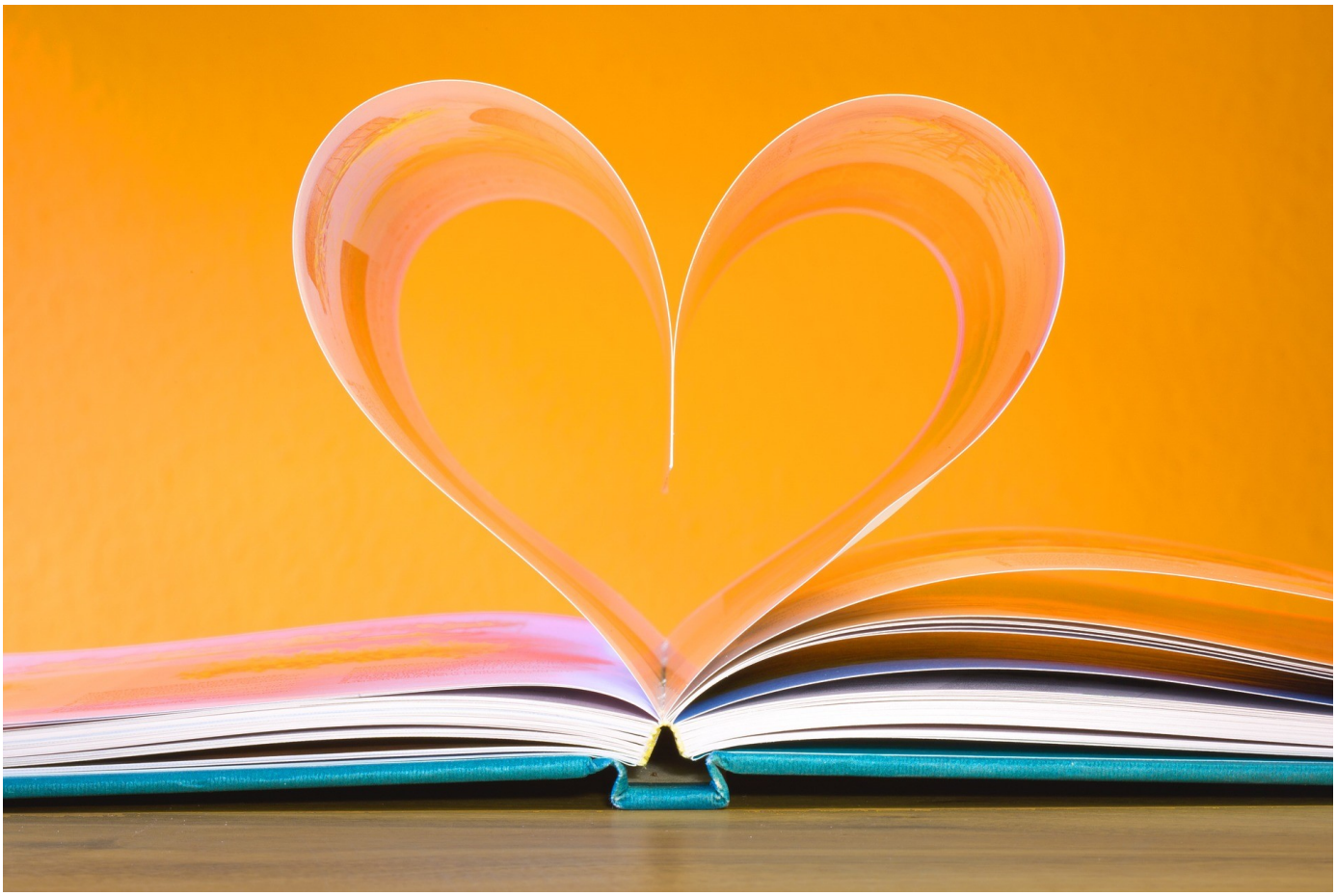
Making the most of your Postdoc

Strategies, advice and tips on how best to spend your postdoc time to enhance your chances of achieving independence in research

Online Resource



IAD INSTITUTE FOR ACADEMIC DEVELOPMENT

THE UNIVERSITY of EDINBURGH

Making the most of your postdoc

About this guide

Why read this?

Competition for independent funding is fierce. To be competitive requires dedicated time spent on assessing your readiness, planning, actively thinking and taking action that will move you forward in your research career. Becoming independent is like developing a new habit: a new way of viewing yourself and your research; a new way of presenting yourself and using your time. A new habit forms by doing something frequently: little and often. Stop waiting for that elusive block of time when you can really focus on your career, or you may find that another year has whizzed by with very little progress. This guide is designed to give you some ideas to help you form some new habits.

Who it is for:

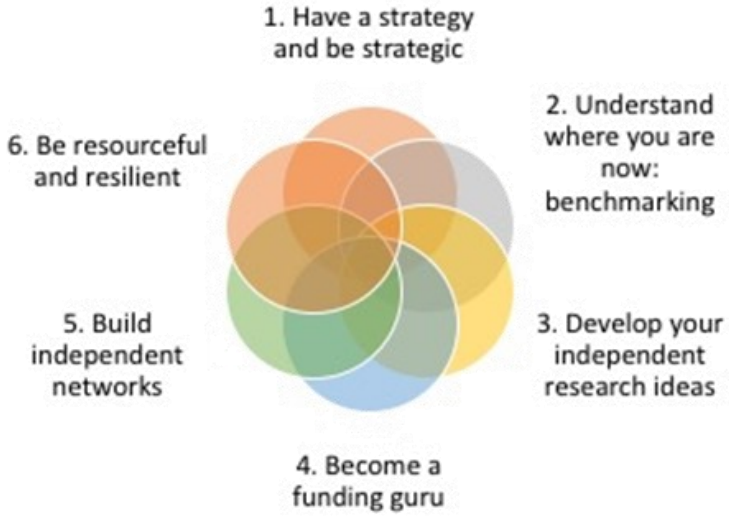
Ideally, this guide is for post-doctoral researchers who:

- have at least a year or two of post-doctoral research experience
- have begun developing their own independent research ideas
- wish to gain independent funding such as a fellowship
- are willing to dedicate some of their own time each week to progress their research career.

What it includes:

18 suggestions for new habits divided across six themes:

Of course, there is overlap between them: making progress in one area will help you to make progress in another. Under each suggestion there are ideas actions or reflection points. To keep things simple, we have just included one or two ideas for each one.



What it does not include:

There are no 'silver bullets' here – no ultimate piece of advice that will make you successful. Becoming independent requires a change in mindset and the creation of new habits. This takes time, and starts with some small actions. This guide includes 18 suggestions – it is not an exhaustive list, but it is a starting point.

How to use it:

Read through and decide which of the activities would make the biggest difference to you at the moment. You will already be doing some of these things, but what would force you to do something new? Don't be overwhelmed by all the suggestions – pick one or two and get going. Set a deadline to have completed some tasks. Use a mentor to review your progress. After a few weeks, try and tackle a few more suggestions to make progress and maintain momentum.

The templates at the end of this guide are also available on our webpages as word documents to allow you to download and edit.

Making the most of your postdoc

1: Have a strategy and be strategic

a. Have a long-term vision…even if it changes

You are aiming to be a research leader of the future, so start behaving and acting like a leader now – it can take practice! Great leaders always have a vision, even though this might change in light of policy changes, new information, experiences, successes, failures, and so on. If you don't have an idea of where you wish to head, then how will you notice opportunities, and how can anyone else help you if they don't know what you want?

Reflect and Review: Think and write about your long-term plans. If you were asked where you want to be in 5 years' time (and you WILL be asked this in a Fellowship interview), what would you say? What would be the outcomes you will have wanted to achieve i.e. the change in the world as a result of you and your research? What would be the outputs i.e. the tangible evidence? Don't just think about yourself: think about the people you will have worked with or supervised, and the academic and societal impact of your research.

b. Scan and navigate the landscape

You are not working in a vacuum: even if you have a fantastic idea and clear plan, there are plenty of things going on in the wider landscape that will influence your chances of success: positively and negatively. Act and think strategically: part of being a strategic leader is understanding the future threats and opportunities that will influence your chance of success, – do you know what they are or could be? One way to find out more is by developing a strategic network (see suggestion 5a), but there are many other things that can help you to scan the horizon more effectively.

Reflect and Review: Try undertaking a 'SWOT' or 'PESTLE' analysis for the next 3-5 years. Thinking about your plans, skills and research ideas. Think about the potential Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats (SWOT) that will be significant in the next few years. Alternatively, can you think of the Political, Economic, Societal, Technological, Legal or Environmental (PESTLE) factors that will affect your plans positively or negatively? How can you amend your plans to make the best of these? Further information on these techniques can be found from a simple search on the mindtools website.

Take Action: Read strategic documents that affect decision making and policies in research and higher education – understand what will influence research in the future. A starting point is the Imperial College guide for Fellows on understanding the research context.

c. Act and think strategically

Do others see you as a future research leader? Or do they see you as a capable postdoctoral researcher? Start practicing behaving as a research leader: it may create opportunities, and it will enable you to tell a more convincing story at interview. What does this look like?

Take Action: Hang out in different places to help you see the world from a new perspective: attend a university council meeting, go to funding briefings, become a representative on a research committee or research staff society, get active in a learned society, organise your department seminars. All of these things will expose you to different conversations and possible new information and collaborations that could help you. It will also enable you to view research leaders in action and become known as a keen contributor to the academic community. This is who funders want to support.

Have different conversations: be the person that offers solutions, new ideas, networks, connections and opportunities in informal, department or research group meetings, rather than problems and complaints.

Making the most of your postdoc

2: Understand where you are now: benchmarking

a. Use your research skills…to research others

You have research skills, so put them to use by researching other successful researchers. Find out who has won a fellowship or significant funding and research their back-catalogue. What is their publication record? Did they move institutions? Is there evidence of collaboration? Where are they speaking and presenting their work? Are they involved in any groups or committees? What is their experience of supervision? What other funding have they brought in? Much of this may be found out from their online profiles such as Research Gate. Or you could ask them (or someone who knows them) directly. If they have already won funding (and not competing with you) they may be happy to talk to you about it. Get a good idea of what they have been doing before getting their fellowship. Ask yourself honestly how your evidence measures up against this benchmark.

Take action: A starting point might be websites like Gateway to Research, which is a searchable database of UKRI funded research: you can filter to look specifically at fellowships. Also ask reviewers on fellowship panels what they see in successful applicants. Find and make contact with recent award winners in your College. Take them for a coffee and ask them about the evidence they presented to the funders.

b. Understand what is expected of you

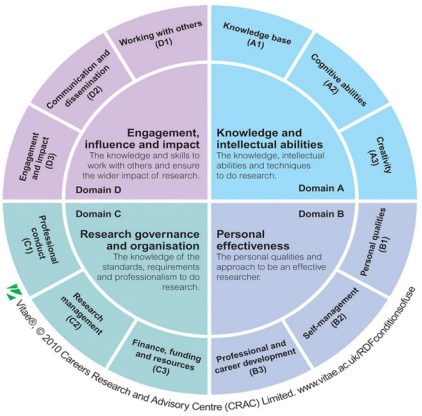
Funders don't hide what they expect to see in you as a successful independent researcher. If you are applying for a fellowship then it is not just your research being assessed, it is also you and your leadership qualities. The MRC Skills needed to win support and UKRI Fellowship assessment Criteria provide just two examples of funder's requirements of Fellows. Make sure you completely understand what each of the criteria look like – what would be the behaviours, attributes, skills and knowledge that would provide evidence?

Reflect and Review: Work your way through the different skills in the funder's criteria list – start to collate your evidence for each one. Look for gaps and make a plan for how you will gain the skills or experience. For the skills you have evidence for, get feedback from a mentor or senior colleague on the quantity and quality of your evidence.

Take action: Many of the managers at funding bodies are very happy for you to call them with questions about schemes and to explain eligibility criteria – why not give them a call and try to find out what a successful candidate looks like? They may even have metrics for recent award winners e.g. average number of first author papers.

c. Plot where you are in the 'normal distribution'

After you have taken action on suggestions 2a and 2b (above), start to plot out where you are in the 'normal distribution' of researchers. Where does your evidence against a particular criterion or skill-set place you on the normal distribution? Fellowships are highly competitive (success rates are often below 10%), so you must be clear about what the top 10% looks like: what is the evidence required in an application, and how do you measure up against this.



Reflect and Review: A tool that can help you is the Researcher Development Framework – it provides examples of the evidence that you might use to show you have developed a particular research skill, and it differentiates between career stages e.g. phase 1 is equivalent to a doctoral student, whilst phase 5 is equivalent to world leading, eminent researchers. Work out where you are on this scale and aim to gather experience and evidence to move you as near to phase 5 as possible. The IAD have mapped all their workshops to the RDF, so you can see what workshops you can take to develop a particular skill.

Making the most of your postdoc

3: Develop your independent research ideas

a. Little and often: develop your ideas and keep them current

You may well have plenty of ideas for your own independent research. These need plenty of time and thinking to develop. Don't wait for a call before you actively develop and write about your ideas. Talking to others and writing about your research helps you to develop it and view it in different ways. Don't leave this important development time to the last minute. Think of your emerging research ideas like you would a CV: keep them updated frequently with new ideas and achievements. That way, your ideas are always at the forefront of your mind, so you will start to notice opportunities to make connections or have conversations with colleagues about them on a regular basis.

Take action: Start a generic research proposal with your new ideas (*template at the end of this guide and on our webpages*). Commit to half an hour each week to keep it developing and growing. Find as many opportunities as possible to discuss it with colleagues and potential collaborators (unless it is commercially sensitive of course). Keep it hand at conferences to discuss with potential funders or collaborators.

b. Know your 'niche'

If you are applying for funding for independent research, you need to be sure that it is a unique area of the research landscape, that you clearly understand who your competitors are, and how your research can be sustained over the next 5 to 10 years. You are almost guaranteed questions at fellowship interview about each of these things.

Reflect and Review: Spend some time mapping out the following elements that will help you to articulate your research niche:

- **The 'resources' that will sustain your research ideas** – what will you need in order to keep your research going for the next 5-10 years? Where will the research questions and challenges come from? Who or what will be funding you? What facilities, data, people and places will you need?
- **Your specific skillset, knowledge and experience** – what is unique about you that means that you are the best person to address these research challenges?
- **The 'Others'** – your competitors and collaborators - who else occupies a similar area of the research landscape to you? What is it about you and your research that makes you more competitive? Who should you collaborate with in order to occupy more resources in the landscape?

Making the most of your postdoc

3: Develop your independent research ideas

c. Develop a 'brand'

The idea of branding or having a marketing strategy might not sit comfortably with many researchers. However, it is important to be known for something and for that to be the thing you are best at. It must be current, up-to-date and reflect what you want to be involved with in the future, not just what you have done (for other people) in the past. In his blog on Creating a research brand, Jeffrey MacDonnell's says that "By crafting a research brand, you make it clear to others how they should define you, and you help them remember who you are and what you do". It will also help fellowship reviewers to understand and distinguish your purpose or mission.

Reflect and review: If you submit a paper for publishing, you allocate keywords to it (this is branding) to help readers to find it and to know if they want to read it. Ask yourself:

- What would be your keywords?
- What do others need to know about you and your research to want to engage or work with you?
- What might your current colleagues say your key words are? Would they have an inaccurate or out-of-date view?

Take Action: Try writing or talking about your own research brand and articulating your key words. Use them clearly in your papers, articles, presentations, blogs, online profile and when networking. Create a consistent message about who you are, what you offer, and what you are interested in.

Making the most of your postdoc

4: Become a funding guru

a. Know what's out there, and what's coming

Be in the know about who funds what, the eligibility criteria, the expectations and trends in funding. It helps to be in tune with the frequency and timing of different calls, and the lead-in time from announcement to deadline. This will help you to be as agile as possible in the future so that you don't miss out on relevant calls, and so that you know when you are developing ideas which funder might be most relevant. You may not yet be eligible or ready with an idea right now but keeping an eye on trends will enable you to be knowledgeable about where to find funding if you happen to have a great idea. It will impress both potential Heads of Department and collaborators if you are knowledgeable about future funding opportunities.

Take action: Sign up for a "Research Professional" account to get alerts about funding calls in to your inbox on a regular basis. Get in the habit of regularly looking through to familiarise yourself with what is happening out there in the funding landscape. You can learn more about how to access the service via the Edinburgh Research Office.

Take action: Follow funders (and your Edinburgh Research Office) on social media and look at their websites regularly for updates. You may not like using Twitter, but if you only use it for this purpose, then it is well worth it. Funders may promote new calls on Twitter before using other channels. They will also share other information and opportunities such as calls for research sandpits or consultations. Be the first to find out about these opportunities and use twitter to gradually learn what funders are saying and doing.

b. Bring in funding, however little

If you haven't already: start to apply for pots of money, however small they are. You are more likely to meet eligibility criteria for small (e.g. travel) grants and winning even a modest amount shows that you have persuaded a funder that you are worth investing in. Any funding income is better than none, and you have to start somewhere. Small grants are the start of the learning curve: the stepping stones to larger grants, and a low-risk way in which to develop your proposal writing skills.

Take action: Start locally: are there any awards available within the institution for professional development, travel or visits. The IAD Action Fund is available for staff to apply for funding on a monthly or yearly basis. Use Research Professional to find small grants for a range of activities. As a starting point, the Open University have a list of small grant options.

c. Peer review

One of the most useful things you can do to understand how funding decisions are made is to put yourself in the position of a reviewer or panel member. You quickly begin to understand what makes a compelling argument, and the evidence that you must look for to assess whether a candidate has leadership potential.

Take action: Volunteer to be an internal peer reviewer for funding proposals being prepared within your College or School. Ask your head of research whether there is a process you can be involved with. If there isn't a formal scheme in your College, then simply offer to read through proposals that your colleagues are writing.

Take Action: Arrange a mock panel activity for colleagues in your School or College – each of you can put in a draft or mock application for a fellowship and you can peer review and interview each other. You may even be able to call on colleagues that have panel review experience, or members of your Research Support team to sit on a mock panel. Some schools will already have open mock panel sessions for potential proposals. These are often good to go along to see what is expected.

Take Action: Ask colleagues who sit on review panels for insider knowledge: what are the common questions asked of funding or fellowship applicants? What impresses them? How do candidates let themselves down? Gather your intelligence so that you can be prepared and practice presenting your evidence in writing and in person.

Making the most of your postdoc

5: Build independent networks

a. Build your 'strategic' network

Your network of contacts, colleagues and collaborators are a valuable resource that you should manage, review and keep up to date. A "strategic network" will help you to see the world in a different way, take new perspectives on your research ideas, understand how you are viewed, and enable you to hear about policies, funding, or opportunities that you might not hear about by yourself…and that might enable you to develop your independence.

Reflect and Review: How healthy is your strategic network? Do you have a network of people who:

- Have an up-to-date view of what you want to do in the future? (or do they just know what you have done in the past). If they don't know your future plans, they cannot send opportunities your way.
- Have nothing to do with your current PI or line manager? i.e. they know you independently
- Have a different view of the world to you? E.g. a different country, a sector, discipline area, level of experience or seniority?
- Know about what is happening politically e.g. funders, government policy, industrial strategies, HE policy that will influence the landscape you are navigating
- Are potential 'problem holders' i.e. they have a research challenge that you could address e.g. businesses, organisations, charities…whatever is relevant to your expertise and discipline area.

Take action: Map out your 'circle of influence' – name the people you have in different strategic areas. Highlight the areas that lack any strong contacts. Think of a way to make contact (introductions, social media, conferences). For the areas where you do have contacts: do they have an out-of-date view of what you want to do in the future? If so, make a commitment to connect with them soon, arrange a coffee or have an email conversation to keep them up to date.

b. Get a mentor

A mentor is someone more experienced than you who can offer you advice, feedback, opportunities, connections and time to reflect and plan. A mentor could be formal (allocated to you via a mentoring scheme) or informal (someone whose approach, achievements or opinion you admire, and you have approached them to mentor you). Either way, they are a valuable resource to you in enabling to you to define and navigate your own unique career path. The value of mentoring cannot be overstated: it is probably one of the most useful and important things you can do.

Reflect and Review: Find out more about mentoring (why, what and how) in Edinburgh's Mentoring Connection programme and Imperial College's Mentoring Guide for Fellows

Take action: Approach a possible mentor, ask them to mentor you and start meeting. Or join a local school mentoring scheme, or the University wide scheme Mentoring Connections.

Making the most of your postdoc

5: Build independent networks

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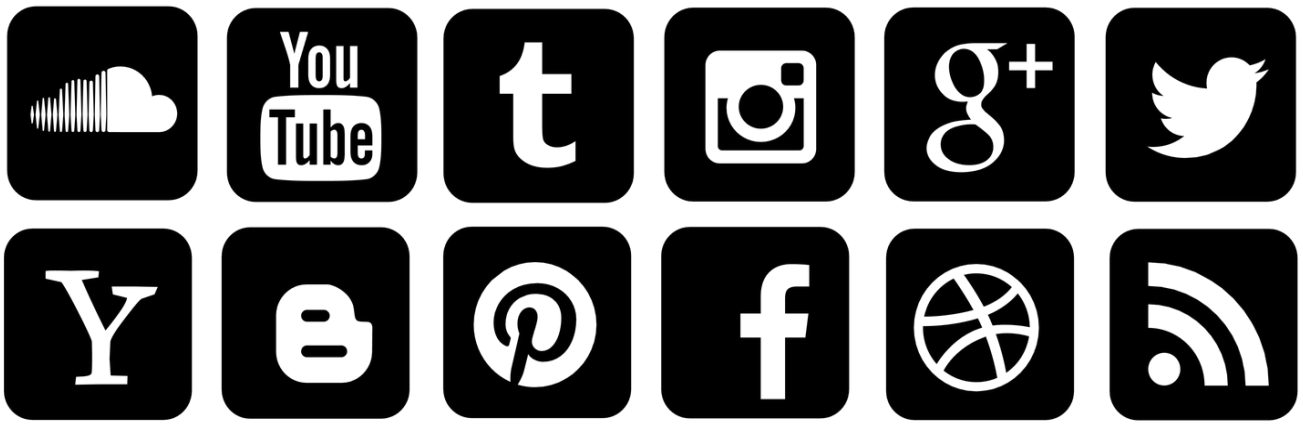
c. Develop your online profile

You may or may not be a fan of social media, but the fact is that many people use it to find information about you, or to find people with specific expertise. Not using it may mean that you miss out on certain opportunities. Developing an online profile will take some time but can pay off hugely. At the very least, have an online profile using a tool such a ResearchGate, a blog or WordPress website **that is up to date** and gives an idea of your interests and future plans e.g. an invitation for people to get in touch if they are interested in discussing a particular challenge, technique or idea.

Take action: Determine the most appropriate tools for you, and commit to a small amount of time each week to build your presence and profile.

Read the university's guidelines for social media or attend IAD's Social Media workshop to get some ideas.



Making the most of your postdoc

6: Be resourceful and resilient

a. Positive Mental Attitude

Pursuing a research career is rewarding and we all know it can also be challenging. If you want to be successful in research you can't (and shouldn't) completely avoid challenges and rejections, so you need to have a strategy to expect, deal with and even rejoice in the failures and challenges. The most resilient researchers see failures and rejections as a crucial part of the development of themselves and their research.

Reflect and review: think of the last three times something went wrong or you had a rejection. If you were to think of reasons why you were pleased that those failures happened, what would those reasons be? What do you know or have now, because of those rejections? Remember that it happens to the best of us, as described in this excellent blog about Failure, written by Dr Sara Shinton in IAD.

Take action: Design a personal strategy, routine or ritual for how you will deal with the inevitable failures, rejections and mistakes that are part of doing academic research. Ask others how they deal with them. For example, speaking to an impartial and constructive colleague, freewriting or blogging about it, going for a run to reflect, writing a list of good things that came from the failure.

b. Review your time management strategy

Nobody is perfect when it comes to time management and we all slip in to bad habits. Over time we find ourselves feeling less and less efficient, getting drawn more and more in to endless emails and "other people's problems". Meanwhile, the important career-defining work that makes us feel worthwhile and purposeful goes to the bottom of the urgency list. We start to feel guilty and resentful that weeks have gone by and we "still haven't got around to […insert important task here]". There are many tips out there on how to manage your time more effectively.

Reflect and Review: Use the Eisenhower matrix to take stock of where your time is going and categorise your workload. Do the important and non-urgent stuff first.

Take action: Ring-fence a time each week when you prioritise important and career defining work. Arrange to work from home (or somewhere distraction-free) during this time, or make sure everyone knows that you are unavailable for anything other than a genuine emergency during that time. Even in a time slot of 45-60 minutes a week you can start to make genuine progress on some tasks (i.e. the ones suggested in this guide!). You could try the Pomodoro productivity technique to maximise your efficiency. Using a dedicated short block of time will help you to feel more in control and most of your colleagues won't even notice that you are temporarily unavailable.

c. Make time to think

As a researcher you trade on the currency of your ideas. Your great ideas and problem-solving abilities are what make you competitive and creative in your research. They are also what enable you to be resilient in the face of challenges. But where does this great thinking happen for you and those you work with or lead? Where do you have your best ideas? Where and when do you have the capacity to creatively problem solve? Probably not at your desk in your usual working environment. It's likely to be when you are with other people, taking exercise, at a conference, at home, doing something entirely different, or during quiet time journaling or relaxing. It might not feel like work, but it is essential in order for you to do good work and maintain resilience.

Reflect and Review: Notice when, where, how and with whom you have your best ideas. Is there a pattern to this? What helps you to be at your most creative and resourceful? Try free-writing, journaling or taking physical exercise to help you reflect.

Take action: It might not feel like work, but it is…so schedule (and protect in your diary) quality thinking time to your daily and weekly routine. You will find that if you make time for this, you may find that your efficiency and resilience increase as well.

Take action: Start a peer problem solving session where you take it in turns to have your peers collectively problem solving a research challenge.

Making the most of your postdoc

Take Action

Which of the suggestions in this guide will you take action on?

	What will you do?	When will you do it?	How will you ensure it will happen?
1: Have a strategy and be strategic			
Have a long-term vision…even if it changes			
Scan and navigate the landscape			
Act and think strategically			
2: Know where you are now: benchmarking			
Use your research skills…to research others			
Understand what is expected of you			
Plot where you are in the 'normal distribution'			
4: Develop your independent research ideas			
Little and often: develop your ideas and keep them current			
Know your niche			
Develop a 'brand'			
3: Become a funding guru			
Know what's out there, and what's coming			
Bring in funding – however little			
Peer review			
5: Build independent networks			
Build your 'strategic' network			
Develop your online profile			
Get a mentor			
6: Be resourceful and resilient			
Positive Mental Attitude			
Review your time management strategy			
Make time to think			

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Making the most of your postdoc

Generic Research Proposal Template *(referred to in Section 3a)*

General Title/Topic of Project	
Lead	
Collaborator(s)	
Intended funder(s) / amount (£/$)	
Key message of proposal *(Main message - In 10-20 words, outline what you would want the funder to remember, having read this proposal)*	
What is known? *(Brief literature refs. What work, if any, are you building on? What work, if any, are you challenging? Has any of this been funded by your target funder?)*	
The gap in knowledge *(What has not been addressed?* *Urgency/quantify the problem: why now and why you?)*	
Aim *(Key aim, summary statement)*	
Research question(s)	
Design *(Very brief statement of design and any key methods)*	
Data *(Key data being used/to be gathered)*	
Timeline/project plan *(Key milestones and timelines)*	
Stakeholders and beneficiaries *(Who will benefit from (or contribute to) the research (process and outputs) - how, why and when?)*	
Outputs and dissemination *(Tangible outputs e.g. toolkits, advice, products, patents, papers, events, people trained etc.)*	
Outcomes and Impact *(What will be the change in the real world? Impact on people, places etc., how will you know that you have achieved the outcome? How will you measure it?)*	

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This resource was created by Dr Tracey Stead (http://www.traceystead.co.uk/)

Tracey is a trainer, facilitator and certified professional coach, with over 20 years of experience that spans academia and research, public and private sector.

Tracey has established a successful training and development consultancy working across the UK and internationally. She specialises in leadership coaching, training and development with researchers and facilitating collaborative events with researchers, stakeholders and funders.