

## *Why bother with an Individual Development Plan?*

Social scientists proved long ago that having a well-thought-out set of goals, both short-term and long-term, greatly influenced the progress a person made in any endeavor.

For postdocs this outcome was confirmed by the *Sigma Xi Postdoc Survey* published in 2005.

From the *Executive Summary*: “Plans made by postdocs with their advisors at the outset of their appointments were associated with substantial benefits: postdocs with a written plan submitted papers to peer-reviewed journals at a 23% higher rate, first-authored papers at a 30% higher rate, and grant proposals at a 25% higher rate than those without plans. Postdocs whose plans specified their advisor’s obligations as well as their own reported significantly higher levels of satisfaction and better advisor relations.”

From *Doctors Without Orders: Highlights of the Sigma Xi Postdoc Survey*

“It turns out that a single-standard-deviation difference in our measure of structured oversight or of formal training (roughly equivalent to adding a written plan that covers both postdoc and advisor responsibilities and instituting regular, formal reviews) corresponds to the same difference in satisfaction seen in people with salary differentials of \$20,000.”

“The yardstick for structure used here has more than two dozen different components. Only one is associated with all four measures of success in a statistically significant way: whether the postdoc and his or her advisor put together a plan at the beginning of the appointment. Five more attributes are associated in a statistically significant fashion with all measures but productivity: (1) whether the research plan covered what the advisor would do, (2) whether the postdoc received a letter of appointment or a contract that specified the advisor’s responsibilities, (3) whether the advisor provides the postdoc with formal performance evaluations, (4) whether the postdoc knows of a written policy addressing misconduct and (5) whether the postdoc is able to transfer to a different research group if he or she desires.

Together these six components tell a consistent story. The postdoctoral experience appears to be at its best when the rules of the game are well defined and spelled out in advance. That is, the responsibilities of both the postdoc and the advisor should be clear; there should be checkpoints in the form of performance evaluations so that the postdoc knows how he or she is doing; boundaries of acceptable behavior need to be documented; and an escape route should be available should problems arise.”

Many institutions have seen the wisdom and efficacy of implementing an IDP (Individual Development Plan) for use by postdocs and their mentors. Some institutions have made it mandatory. When you check the postdoctoral program sites of those institutions most well-known for long-term, successful programs, you will always find an “IDP” equivalent element within the training structure.