

I Did Not Become a PI – Now What?

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My dream was to become a principle investigator (PI) one day. I would run my own laboratory and projects. This would allow me to drive my own research and become a renowned expert in my field. I followed the usual route of a postdoctoral position as a stepping stone to a tenure-track academic position. But after three postdocs and many years of doing what I thought would further my career, I still have not become a PI. Besides being disappointed, I am now uncertain about my future.

Looking back, I [never stopped to evaluate](#) and plan the road to becoming a PI. Where did I go wrong? To answer this question, I attended career seminars and spoke to as many PIs as possible. I discovered that I am not alone. Many researchers move from postdoc to postdoc and struggle to get tenureship. This is not because we are not good at our jobs, but because it is a highly competitive environment. Below I share what I

should have done to secure tenureship.

The Usual Advice

As expected, I got the usual advice, which I was following anyway. The typical advice any postdoc is given to secure tenureship is to:

1. **Network.** Speak to as many people in your field as possible and [accordingly collaborate](#).
2. **Publish.** Work hard, perform experiments, get data and publish!

Advice I Wish I Had Known

After speaking to PIs and researching [things to do to become a PI](#), I realized that hard work, publications, conference presentations and helping students is not enough. Besides these, you need to act like a PI from the start. I was a good researcher, in fact, I kept my PI informed of my progress and challenges. I spent many hours at the bench and got data. However, I never stepped out of my comfort zone. In a way, I acted like a research assistant rather than a leader. I'm not suggesting you step into a new lab and take over from the start. I am, however, advising you to take charge of your project (and career) in the following ways:

1. **Make your project work:** As scientists, we naturally need proof – and lots of it – to confirm our hypotheses. [Critically analyse your data](#), but don't be too obsessive about it. If the data suggests a certain answer and you have the stats to back it up, then publish it.
2. **Gain independence:** Do not be a research assistant to your PI. Take initiative. Ask questions – not just the ones you were given – and try to answer them without first asking your PI. Obviously, this is only relevant if you have the necessary consumables and equipment. The point is, there is no need to ask your PI's assistance every step of the way. A PI needs to be able to manage a project without constant help from a mentor.
3. **Be a PI:** Develop a relationship with your PI as a future colleague rather than a supervisor.
4. **Trust yourself:** Your PI is not always right. Trust your instincts about the direction of a project.
5. **Time management:** Keep to deadlines. Funders want their reports and publications on time and extensions are not always possible or financially viable.
6. **Think ahead:** Plan your future. When [you start your postdoc](#), think about what you will do afterwards and what steps you need to take to get there.
7. **Publish:** To publish your work means your project is finished and the time and money spent on it was productive.
8. **Failure is not always bad:** As scientists, we know about experiments not working. One of our strengths is our persistence. Often, our failure leads us in a different, however, more beneficial direction. This could be true for our career path too.

What to Do Now?

After wallowing in disappointment for a day, I have decided to move on. My options are to try again or to look at other career options that will suit my love for research. Whether I get another chance or not, I will approach future jobs with the guidance given above. I now have a plan which includes looking for a postdoc, simultaneously investigating alternative career options and a list of possible skills to gain that are required for either path. What would you suggest to someone in my position? Let us know in the comments section below.

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