UC SANTA BARBARA

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Academia from Home

As the uncertainty around reopening college and university campuses this fall continues, those who work, study, teach and conduct research are navigating the uncertain terrain of the “new normal.” They are balancing physical distancing and other COVID-19 prevention practices with productivity, creating home workspaces and mastering communications and teamwork across time and space.

Turns out, there’s a group of people for whom these challenges are not new. Postdoctoral researchers — people in the critical phase between graduate school and permanent academic positions — are part of a small but growing cohort that has been turning to remote work to meet the challenges of their young careers. Often called upon to relocate multiple times for short-term, full-time appointments, postdocs and their families have to endure heightened financial costs, sacrificed career opportunities and separations from their support communities.

But with the right practices and perspectives, remote work can level the playing field, especially for those in underrepresented groups, according to Kurt Ingeman, a postdoctoral researcher in UC Santa Barbara’s Department of Ecology, Evolution and Marine Biology. And, like it or not, with COVID-19 factoring into virtually every decision we now make, he noted, it’s an idea whose time has come.

“We started this project in the pre-pandemic times but it seems more relevant than ever as academics are forced to embrace work-from-home,” said Ingeman, who makes the case for embracing remote postdoctoral work in the journal PLOS Computational Biology. Family and financial considerations drove his own decision to

design a remote position; many early-career researchers face the same concerns, he said.

It takes a shift in perspective to overcome resistance to having remote research teammates. Principal investigators often don't perceive the remote postdoc as a fully functional member of the lab and worry about the loss of spontaneous informal actions, and interactions, that can generate new ideas, Ingeman said.

"These are totally valid concerns," he said. "We suggest (in the paper) ways to use digital tools to fully integrate remote postdocs into lab activities, like mentoring graduate students or coding and writing together. These same spaces are valuable for virtual coffee chats and other informal interactions."

Communication enabled by technology is in fact foundational to a good remote postdoc experience, according to Ingeman and co-authors, who advocate for investment in and use of reliable videoconferencing tools that can help create rapport between team members, and the creation of digital spaces to share documents and files. Transparency and early expectation setting are keys to a good start. In situations where proximity would have naturally led to interaction, the researchers recommend having a robust communications plan. Additionally, postdocs would benefit from establishing academic connections within their local community to combat isolation.

There are benefits to reap from such arrangements and practices, the researchers continued. For the postdoc, it could mean less stress and hardship, and more focus on work. For the team, it could mean a wider network overall.

"For me, remote postdoc work was a real bridge to becoming an independent researcher," said Ingeman, who "struggled with isolation early on," but has since gained a local academic community, resulting in productive new research collaborations.

Additionally, opening the postdoc pool to remote researchers can result in a more diverse set of applicants.

"The burdens of relocating for a temporary postdoc position often fall hardest on members of underrepresented groups," Ingeman added. "So the idea of supporting remote work really stand out to me as an equity issue."

Of course, not all postdoc positions can be remote; lab and field work still require a presence. But as social distancing protocols and pandemic safety measures are forcing research teams to minimize in-person contact or undergo quarantine at a moment’s notice, developing remote research skills may well become a valuable part of any early-career researcher’s toolkit.

“Even labs and research groups that are returning to campus in a limited way may face periodic campus closures, so it makes sense to integrate remote tools now,” Ingeman said. “Our suggestions for remote postdocs are absolutely applicable to other lab members working from home during closures.”

About UC Santa Barbara

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