

naturejobs

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Why do postdocs in many countries have such a hard time working to improve their lot? The answer lies, in part, with the nature of the postdoctoral experience. Unlike graduate students, who are increasingly forming unions (see *Nature* **451**, 861; 2008), the two-year duration of most postdoc positions is often not enough time to seriously engage with issues such as salary, stipends and working conditions. It's hard for postdocs to invest time in a venture that will gain them few benefits, and will distract from their main objectives: conducting and publishing research and landing a job in what continues to be a very competitive landscape. Two years is also little time to drill through the dense red tape of universities and governments.

Yet, as detailed in an article on page 426, some postdoctoral associations are showing signs of progress, however modest. Perhaps the greatest success story has been the US National Postdoctoral Association (NPA). Started five years ago, the NPA has shown what can be done given ample outreach and good seed funding from prominent backers such as the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation in New York. At the NPA's annual meeting held in April in Boston, Massachusetts, the Sloan Foundation's Michael Teitelbaum recalled how he was initially not sure whether the association would make it, given the challenges of attracting a dedicated membership to an untested model. He has been pleasantly surprised, he says, at how much it has grown and the degree to which it is now self-sustaining. Walter Schaffer, a senior scientific adviser for extramural research at the National Institutes of Health (NIH), says that the NPA hasn't yet generated major changes in policy, but it has garnered a voice that makes postdocs feel less disenfranchised.

The NPA might have the ear of important institutions such as the NIH, but like many unions, it still faces frustrating bureaucratic roadblocks. Nevertheless, the NPA, and hence the US postdoc, has a voice that should remain strong and consistent for the foreseeable future. It is to be hoped that other nations, and other nations' postdocs, can follow its example.

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