Episode 102: Emma Compton-Daw

# KL: Katie Linder

**ECD:** Emma Compton-Daw

# KL: You’re listening to “Research in Action”: episode one hundred and two.

# [intro music]

# Segment 1:

# KL: Welcome to “Research in Action,” a weekly podcast where you can hear about topics and issues related to research in higher education from experts across a range of disciplines. I’m your host, Dr. Katie Linder, director of research at Oregon State University Ecampus. Along with every episode, we post show notes with links to resources mentioned in the episode, full transcript, and an instructor guide for incorporating the episode into your courses. Check out the shows website at ecampus.oregonstate.edu/podcast to find all of these resources.

On today’s episode, I am joined by Dr. Emma Compton-Daw, the Academic Development Lead for Research at the University of Strathclyde. She supports the professional and career development of postdoctoral researchers, postdocs, and academics at Strathclyde. She is also an expert panel member for the review of the UK’s Concordat to Support the Career Development of Researchers. Before transitioning into this role Emma spent 11 years working as a postdoctoral researcher in the UK and USA.  During this time, she co-chaired the UK Research Staff Association (UKRSA) and a departmental Research Staff Association.

Thanks for joining me, Emma.

**ECD:** Thank you for inviting me!

**KL:** So I’m really excited to talk with you more about the postdoc role and postdoc professional development. This is something we haven’t really talked about yet on this show, and depending on people’s disciplines, they may not really be familiar with what exactly a postdoc is, so let’s start there. What are post docs? How would you define that?

**ECD:** Okay, so, it’s a good question, and it’s sometimes a difficult question because there are many, many definitions of them. Essentially, it is someone who’s finished their doctoral degree, and they’re moving into a period of research where they’re not working independently – they probably have a supervisor—there’s lots of different terms for that as well. In the UK we often say they’re working for a P.I., a private investigator. Essentially, a line manager. They’re not independent researchers yet, but they are doing their main role as research and they’re not a doctoral student.

**KL:** And how long would these roles typically last?

**ECD:** They can be quite variable. Probably the postdoctoral period would be something like three years. In the UK and in Europe, there’s a limit quite often when you start to move in academic positions, of around seven to ten years. So probably three to ten years. Ten is a long time. Three to ten years is about average I would say.

**KL:** So Emma, I come out of the humanities and I feel like postdocs are less prevalent. Just – it’s something I wasn’t really familiar with, it wasn’t something I was encouraged to pursue when I was in graduate school. So I’m wondering if you can speak to whether or not postdocs are more prevalent in certain disciplines, and possibly the different roles that they play depending on disciplinary background.

**ECD:** Yeah. They’re definitely different – there are definitely different numbers in different disciplines. So definitely in STEM projects – Science, technology, engineering, medicine, mathematics, then postdoctoral is the standard way that you would move from graduate school. You do your postdoc and then you get an academic career - It would be very unusual. It happens, but it would be very unusual for someone to move straight from graduate school into that academic position. In the UK we certainly have postdoc roles in all subjects, and generally the funding for them comes from external funders. We have funding councils that fund right across humanities, arts and social sciences and we would see postdocs there, but fewer. And I was actually trying to do some research on this for the states, and couldn’t find any reference to it. I’m assuming you probably have some, but certainly most of the information, and most of the people talking about it is science and biomedical sciences particularly. There’s a lot of work in that. I actually found that you’ve got between 30 and 80 thousand postdocs currently in the U.S.

**KL:** Okay. So I’m curious kind of the overall role that the postdoc plays in an academic career development, because it seems like it’s almost an additional apprenticeship in some disciplines – to learn additional skills. And is the general idea maybe that you don’t have enough time when you’re pursuing your graduate degree to learn what you need to learn in a specialty area and so the postdoc is what allows you to do that?

**ECD:** Yeah. I think that’s part of it! I think – Um if you look back, certainly if you look back in the UK maybe 30 or 40 years ago, there weren’t as many postdocs. My Ph.D. supervisor - my graduate school supervisor certainly went straight from a Ph.D. into an academic position, whereas nowadays you would be expected to be having more time to increase your publications, to probably be showing that you can bring in your own funding to some extent – maybe in travel grants or small bits of money. I think it’s driven largely by the number of academic positons hasn’t changed, but the number of Ph.D.’s at the bottom has. So we’ve got this huge increase in Ph.D. and graduate students coming out, and the number of academic positions aren’t really changing so much, so – and there’s more and more research funding, and that research funding is going – the same number of academics and it’s kind of broadening out into that postdoctoral time. But certainly is um – is quite interesting, because sometimes they’ll be described as a training period and sometimes they won’t, and this is where it comes that there’s no standard definition, the names are very different, um and – so yeah. Sometimes it will be very specifically the idea is to train you, and other times it will be more that you’re doing the research under that academic investigator. But generally they’re fixed term positons so they have a definitely time period. It’s not a permanent role. In general, it’s not a career. Eventually you would get to a point where people would be looking at you and saying “Why aren’t you moving on up?” Or in the UK you’ll hit the top pf the salary scale and people will say, “We can’t actually afford to pay you.” Um so it’s kind of that middle period where you’re developing your independence – although that also can be quite difficult, because you’re probably working for someone else, so you’re really trying to prove yourself as an independent researcher so that you can go to a funder to give you the money, or to an institution to really say, “here I am, capable of doing this researcher. Please give me the position.”

**KL:** So some of the things you’re describing, this sounds like a pretty precarious role, because it’s a short term role, you’re not necessarily on your own, so I would imagine that you don’t have a ton of control over what it is you’re doing if you’re working ins someone else’s lab or working under a different researcher. Can you speak a little bit to that? I mean – maybe what are some of the pros and cons of being in a postdoc positon when it is a little bit more precarious?

**ECD:** Yeah. Precarious is exactly the right word, and it’s a word that’s being used a lot in relation to these fixed terms positions more recently. Um, some of it is – for some subjects, you just have to do it. And it’s going to depend on who your supervisor is – is to how that works. You have some supervisors who completely see it as a training position, you’re there to do your work in their group. But actually it’s about finding your niche, and your independence with in that. You’ll have other people that are perhaps aren’t so supportive, and that’s something for people going into a postdoc position to really – I would always advice getting as much information about the person you’re going to work for as possible, and you might think, “where do those people go?” Certainly you have some groups where, many people from that group go into an academic position afterwards, and you have other groups where they don’t at all. So that can give you a good indication as to how well you can get that mentorship from your supervisor. In relation to the pros and cons – as I said before, in some places you just have to do a postdoc position, but it does give you that time to actually really focus on research - It’s a lot of academics that will say it’s a really special time, because you get to do research and not the administration and all of those other things that pull your time away. You’re probably not teaching, or you might be doing some teaching but not so much. You can start to really form your own niche. As you say, there’s also that tension between doing your research, and the academic’s research, and that can be difficult. The other benefit, of course, is that you can tap into their network. So if you’re working for someone who’s very well networked, and they see this as a mentorship role, then they’ll be out there helping you to meet other people, and you’ll be going to conferences with them, and perhaps if you apply to speak at a conference they’ll say, “Oh. You work in there [*indiscernible*]”. We know we’re going to get good research from you and a good presentation from you.” So, I think it – the pros and cons come down to the person you would be working for, and the institution you work for as well. How much support is coming from there to balance that out for you?

**KL:** Mhm. I’m wondering if you can speak to how to kind of best prepare yourself to be in a successful postdoc role. You’ve mentioned researching the person that you’re going to be tied to, but are there particular things that people can do to kind of get themselves in a position to be in a strong position as they’re applying for these postdoc positions?

**ECD:** Mhm. Yeah! If you’re thinking about applying for a postdoc position, I think – as most things in the world come down to do your research and networking with people. So finding out about what different options there are, Um doing your research as well as possible, getting out there and presenting at conferences if you can – if your graduate school supervisor is letting you present and do those things. Again, finding out what the good groups to work for are. Really the same types of things you would be looking for in that next position. Are you a safe pair of hands to be doing research? Are you capable of being independent? Are you driving your project forward? Is it really your own project or are you being dragged through it? Um – all of those things. Getting out there and meeting people. Certainly you hear about people finding their positons at conferences – and quite often if someone’s got a postdoc position they’re advertising, they’re quite – they’re looking for someone good. So if you’re at a conference and you’re presenting a poster, or anything like that – being open about the fact that, “actually I’m coming to the end of my doctorate and I’m looking for a position. I might be interested in working for you.” Yeah it’s about that. Making sure that you’re doing good work, and that you can be out there and talk about you’re work, and meeting good people.

**KL:** Mhm. I love that advice. Well we’re going to take a brief break, when we come back we’re going to hear more from Emma about postdoc professional development. Back in a moment.

[Music playing in the background]

In addition to producing the “Research in Action” podcast, as the research director at Oregon State University Ecampus, I’m fortunate to work on developing original teaching and learning research projects. A recent one I’m excited to share with you is our Online Learning Efficacy Research Database, which allows users to explore whether the learning outcomes of online and hybrid education environments are equivalent to face-to-face environments. This tool supports faculty in comparing course modalities and making assessments of the outcomes of studies. Learn more about the database at Ecampus.oregonstate.edu/research-database.

# Segment 2:

**KL:** Emma, I would imagine based on the things you described in our first segment, that professional development is huge for people in postdoc positions to really try and get them into a place where they can move on and up into the academic world. I’m wondering if you could talk a little bit about the professional development opportunities that are useful for postdocs to pursue.

**EDC:** Yeah absolutely. As you say, professional development is everything in this position, because as I said before, only about 10 percent if the postdocs in the UK, and I don’t think it’s very different in the U.S., about 10 percent of the post docs will end up in academic positions - but the numbers will tend to suggest something like 70 to 80 percent won’t get into an academic position. The numbers also suggest that those who don’t end up in academic positions end up employed, unsatisfied with life, unhappy, and in good jobs. So there’s two sides to profession development. One is, be aware and open of what opportunities are out there and be talking to lots of people, but if – well for any career, but particularly for an academic career, you need to be planning from day one. You need to be thinking about where you want to get to, what you need to do to get there, look at job applications. I think the best thing to do is look at what job you want in however many however many years’ time – five years’ time. Where do you want to be in five years? Look at those job adverts, and then see which of the boxes you can tick already. Are they asking for strong publication records? If you have one, great. If you don’t, what are you going to do to make sure you’ve got one? Increasingly, you’re seeing people asking that they’ve already brought in money in the postdoc position. I would say ten years ago that wasn’t the case, but academia is changing. So we’re having more and more Ph.D. students - graduate students being pumped in at the bottom, and the number of positions at the top aren’t really changing. So the things that are being asked of the people is more and more, because actually there’s more competition so there’s more people with more skills at the top. So its things like bringing in funding, and that doesn’t need to be huge grants. It can be things like travel money, or perhaps if you’re in a discipline where you need to bid for time on a certain piece of equipment. I was a biomedical researcher and we did crystallography, and we did time on [*indiscernible*] and things. So just showing that you’ve been involved, and bidding for that, being successful for that. Then those are the types of opportunities that you’re going to want to be seen that you’re doing those things. So it’s really doing everything you can – to - you figure out where you want to be in five years-time, what you need to do to get there, and then you take professional development opportunities that are going to help you to get there. And there will be a number of people out there who can support you with this. The most obvious, of course, is your line manager. Hopefully you’ll be thinking about this from graduate school days, you’ll have selected someone who sees this as a trainee – mentorship position, and is out there doing all of those things for you. But then also, a lot of institutions will have people like myself – certainly in the UK we do - In the U.S. I think you do to some point as well - My role is to run workshops, and events, and opportunities to help postdoc researchers develop all of these skills. So make the most of those networking. I don’t think I can say networking too many times- going out and talking to people about what do they do? Ask them about what they do. What do they do to get their position? Making sure that you get your name known. I once heard someone who ran one of our big funding bodies – kind of the funding side of it say, “it’s much harder to say no to a face you’ve know – a face or a name you’ve know, than it is to someone you’ve never heard of.” So just get out there and get people to know you. I think the other thing that’s really important is mentoring, which I’ve mentioned, but actually not by your line manager. So your line manager will mentor you, but hopefully will have that role, but there’s always a conflict of interest. They can never give you completely impartial advice about what you should be doing, because actually, it might come down to it that the best thing for you to do for your career is to go for a job that’s advertised two years before the end of your position, and go and get that. And your line manager has a real conflict of interest there in suggesting you do that, but then they have this project left that they have no one to run. So, for me, one of those key opportunities is, if you’ve got a mentoring scheme that will give you somebody outside of your line of management, to make the most of that.

**KL:** So I would love to dive in more to these support structures available forthis professional development**,** and you had mentioned your own position and some things that are kind of embedded within the university structure. Can you describe that a little bit more, and talking a little but more about the kinds of programs and services that you offer?

**EDC:** Yeah absolutely. So in my role, I’m what’s known as a researcher developer. So and – we have lots of researcher developers across the UK, most universities have them. You have them in the U.S. – might have different names in the same way that postdocs have lots of different names. So I do quite a few different things. One of the things that we do is that we organize workshop programs. So I run some workshops myself, and we bring in other people to run workshops. Some of the basic ones are around this kind of key – just planning your career. I run some kind of longer workshops, and just longer sessions. So we’re unusual at Strathclyde in that we have what is called an accredited program, so that people can do postgraduate certificate, postgraduate diploma, or a Masters in researcher development, and that actually fits within a wider program where they can actually do courses in teaching or in knowledge exchange that they can build together. So there we really look quite in depth at maybe – do we do one that’s called successful research career, where people do exactly what I talked about before, they look at where they want to be and really – in quite some detail look at what the steps are that you could go through to do that . What are they going to do? And we look at the bigger environment as well. The more you understand the bigger environment, I think is better. Certainly in the UK, we’re going through huge changes in the research environment; the way our funders work, different strategies. And I think in the U.S. you have some different pressures that change quite regularly on your research environment as well. So being aware of that, and how can you make the most of those opportunities that are coming up? We also run kind of specific workshops on maybe writing research grants, or how to win research funding. We do some things around publication understanding – publication strategies. Nowadays it’s not necessarily good enough to just get your paper in a good journal – is it the right journal? Does it fit? Is it going to give you lots of citations or is it – in the UK we have something called the research excellence framework, where we’re kind of audited on our framework papers, and where you publish for that might be different for how you publish for citations. You need to be aware of when you go for a job, what’s going to matter? So we run, as I was saying, we run this accredited program where you can do this [*indiscernible*] or up to a Masters. We also do this one hour workshops where people can just come in for a half-day session, we’ll give them some skills and some tools to just go out, and then they can go and use those. We also run a mentoring scheme, so one of my colleagues – I’ve got a colleague who also works on this with me, and we run a mentoring scheme where we match researchers with senior researchers – you know, postdocs, or early career academics, or anyone really who’s interested in research, with a more experienced researcher to help them out with that. I also support, we have a research staff association—I can talk a little bit more about that a bit later. A research staff association in which I support quite heavily, to help them navigate how that works. It’s really just lots of opportunities to come in, think about the skills you need – and we’re constantly looking at what’s changing, so there are always new things coming in in the UK, and internationally, things like open access, so open access journals have become a big thing. So thinking about how do you publish open access journals, how does that affect you? We’re always trying to stay at the forefront of what’s going on so that we can upscale our researchers with those

**KL:** Long term listeners of Research in Action might be aware that we do have an episode talking about five year planning. So that’s definitely aligned with what you’re talking about here, so I will link to that in the show notes for people who might want to take a look. I’m wondering if there are other specific resources for professional development that you would recommend for postdocs.

**EDC:** There are quite few places you could go. Um I would say in the U.S., you’ve got a National Postdoc Association, and they’ve got quite a few things on their website that are useful. It tends to be the type of thing that happens more at an institutional level, I feel, and it’s getting – it’s gaining ground nationally, certainly in the U.K. We have also – for quite a while now, an organization called Vitae. That website would be good for going to to look at what types of things are there. And again covering the things that I’ve been talking about - it’s all about funding, publications, networking skills. Um there might be teaching, if you’re looking for a professor positions, then actually they might need to see some experience that you’re doing teaching. So supporting you with how you might do that. There’s also, if people are looking to move to Europe, there’s an organization called EURAXESS, where their goal is to support research mobility, and they’re moving into career development now as well. So they have some really good resources on their website. Find out the people in your organization who are supporting this, and sometimes that might be hard to find who that is. Hopefully they’re telling you that they’re there, but most times you need to talk to the other people around. Certainly, I worked at the NIH for 3 years, and only just today discovered that the National Postdoc Association – Well I didn’t know they existed at the time, I know they exist now, but I have just found out that they were about three minutes from my house. But so sometimes it is about you have to go out there and just – and sometimes it’s about – it’s difficult. Because if you don’t know it’s there, you don’t know to look for it, but ask people. Go out and talk to people, and find out what they’re doing.

**KL:** Well we will definitely link to some of these resources in the show notes as well. We’re going to take another brief, when we come back, we’ll hear a little bit more from Emma! Back in a moment.

# Segment 3:

**KL:**  Emma, I’m curious, in this kind of larger conversation about professional development, what are some things that researchers can do to help themselves?

**EDC:** So one of the things really – one of the things that I’m really, really keen onwhich I call staff associations – which plenty of other people call them that as well. But like everything else we’ve been talking about, they also have a ton of different names, and you’ll see names like forums, and groups, and researcher, and postdoc. In the U.S. your main one is National Postdoc Association, and they’re - compared to anything we have in the UK, they’re a big organization. But really it’s about researchers getting together and supporting themselves. So – and they can take lots of different forms. It might be a group of researchers in one department coming together. It might be the whole institution. We also - we don’t have the National Postdoc Association, which is across the whole of the U.S. In the UK we have UK Research Staff Association, which is smaller, but again it’s national and has regional groups within it, but really they’re a place where researchers can come together. And they generally have two main purposes, and a third one usually appears. One of the purposes often is about representation. So quite often you’ll see them forming because researchers have come together because there’s an issue. Sometimes it will be to do with contract or just something they feel they need more representation, so they’ll come together and form this group. The second reason they form – however they form, they’ll get both of these things from them – it’s for a sense of community. And in the UK that’s something we see a lot for postdocs, and humanities, and social sciences, because there are fewer postdocs and they tend – the nature of the researchers is more, um – you’re not with other people as much. So if you’re a scientist you’re probably in a lab with a load of people every day, so you’ve got a support network. You feel like you have a sense of community there. But quite often if you’re just there doing your research on your own in your own office, you might not even be based in the university a lot of the time, then quite often these groups will come together for the researchers to just kind of get to know each other – to have some other people who know each other, you know, really form that sense of community. The third reason, it’s not a reason why they form, but it’s one of the things that happen, is they usually end up with a career development aspect to them – because the minute you put a group of postdocs into a room they’ll start talking about careers. And so they usually start to form things like that. So some of the things that I’ve seen people doing from these is – one, they might start inviting people into the kinds of workshops that I’ve been talking about. So they’ll start identifying their need of, “Oh. I like to know how I need to move on in my academic career, so let’s move some people in to talk about that” or they’re interested in other careers. That’s not something that I’ve talked about that much today, even though 90 percent will not have other careers, but everything that I’ve been talking about is applicable to other careers as well. So those workshop programs, they also represent themselves for if – when there are issues coming up, and maybe just small those small issues where they think, “maybe just I have those problems.” those start to come up through the groups. And they can start to make things better for themselves as a group within an institution. Those obvious have immediate impact on people and can support their careers. But one of the other things that tend – well there are other things that come out that maybe are not so apparent for people’s careers, but the reason why I think people should get involved with them. One is a leadership position, and if you need to go in to an academic, or any job that you want to go into, people want you to be showing how you can be a leader. The minute that you are in a group and talking about how you can represent yourselves, maybe if you’ve taken a position, maybe you’re chairing it, or maybe you’re organizing an event or something, then you’ve immediately got, “look at this thing that I’m doing different…” You know, “here are these people that just sat there doing research, making publications, well actually, look. I’ve worked this whole thing and I’ve shown that I can do much more than just make an organized conference. Much more than just research.” Um there’s also the networking portion of it. You’re generally exposed to the kind of senior leadership in an institution, and that’s really good for understanding, how do institutions work? If you’re going to become an academic, you have to understand how they work. And in a postdoc position, you tend to be quite sheltered from that. But again, it’s about getting your name known. People recognize you. And so when people start thinking about, “Oh. I need someone to come do this for me. Oh, I know! They’re brilliant. I’ll get them in.” Or when you’re applying for a job at that institution they’ll know you – they’ll go, “Oh they’re brilliant. They’ve been running all of this stuff. Yeah, they’re great. We already know what they’ve been doing.” So it’s about that leadership and that networking. Those leadership skills are certainly not what you’d advertise on the front of those groups, but the things that are really hard to get in, necessary, when you’re working in that postdoc position for someone else.

**KL:** So I’m curious about these associations. Are you typically seeing them doing, like, virtual meet ups? Are they doing face to face conferences? Are they, you know, with in institutions – are they across institutions? What are kind of the logistics of the setup of these associations?

**EDC:** I would say yes to all of those - and it’s different everywhere. Every single one is doing something different, and they’re focus will be different. I would say generally they are face to face. If they aren’t with in an institution, the most common thing you would see – if you’ve got a big STEMM subject, you’ve probably got a group within that discipline and there will be face to face meet ups. Quite often times it will just be doing coffee, it will just be, you know, apart from have – and I would always suggest they have regular meetings, so that people actually come together and make things happen. Um yeah, so they might just being coming together for coffee, they might be coming together for organized things, they might be coming together for those kinds of workshops. Certainly do have virtual through the – I would imagine the MPA does it, but certainly through the UK Research Staff Association, and there’s also an international research staff called the International Consortium of Research Staff Association, of which the MPA and UK RSA members – they have virtual meetings. So I think if you’re speed across they might be physically over Skype or Google hangouts or something like that. When they’re organizing things, but then they also might be, if you’re doing a workshop, we’ve certainly done some Google hangouts through UKRSA that were just open to everyone across the country. And so we were just mirroring those face to face events that we do as an online event. So yeah they can be - I think everything happens.

**KL:** So I’m curious, for those 90% of people who don’t end up in an academic position after doing a postdoc, are there particular things that you would recommend for that group who’s maybe trying to explore whether they want to stay in academia, or maybe they’re actively seeking to leave because they see the writing on the wall and realize this may not be a fit for them?

**EDC:** Yes absolutely. It’s a difficult one, because you live in academia, you work in academia, so how do you find out about what goes on outside of it? I think again it’s down to talking to people. A lot of people around you will be going to different places and seeing what they do. Um we have, in the UK the ( ) have written a lot of publications along the lines of, what do researchers do, and what do they do next to get some kinds of ideas of places that those people go to. Um and I think it’s about being open to it. There’s a sense of failure, you know, this failure that if we’re not an academic, we shouldn’t talk about it. I think you should be talking about it, and you should be talking to people, and finding out, where do they go? What do they do? And then when you’ve got some ideas, maybe you’re talking to various people about what the ideas are, go and ask somebody who’s doing a different job – what do you do? And I know it’s really, really hard – So I did this myself. I moved to an academic career from a postdoc position, and I knew that I didn’t really want to become an academic. It took me a long time to admit to it – or realize it, and then admit it to myself. But once I started to look around at what those opportunities were – one of those things is I had access to be a career counselor, and that was absolutely valuable to me. Who just said, “Look at these academic roles.” And to me she just said, “Look, there’s as many people in the university with doctorate in front of their name working in the administration side, as there are out there doing the research. And I was like “actually I love university, so brilliant. Let’s look at what those things are.” But you might be again. Those things, if you want to move into industry or something else, start looking into job adverts, start to see what they sound like – does that sound like something that you want to do? See if you can identify some people who have done that, have made that move, or at least work in that and then ask them to meet with you – Can I take you for coffee and ask about what you do? And I know it’s really – it’s one of those things that sounds really difficult to do, and it’s one of those things when I first wrote those email to someone saying; “would you mind if I come and talk to you about your job, and can you tell me what you do?” I was so nervous. I wrote the email, I saved it, I checked everything was right, and I sent it off the next day. And of course they were fine about it! They either going to ignore you, or they’re going to say, “Oh you’re going to buy me coffee? Yeah certainly. Let me talk about myself for an hour!” Everyone loves to talk about themselves. So it’s about that research. I’ve talked to people about this, about approaching your career like you would approach a research project. You know, when you walk into a research project as a doctoral student, or as a postdoc – you don’t know much about it on day one, but you go out and you research, you read papers, you talk to people, you look at what’s going on. And so you do that and then start narrowing down your options. I saw some really good advice recently about there’s this book actually called, I think it’s called, what every postdoc needs to know, and that has some advice around actually make a scoring matrix. When you looked at those different job options, what are the pros, what are the cons, which come out with the highest score for you? And you’re always going to be losing things from academia, but you’ll be gaining things in other places. And talk about – even if you’re not sure, talk about academics and find out what they do, because I think a lot of postdocs don’t realize what academics do, and they think “Oh. I’m going to get to do research for the rest of my life!” And that’s really not what academics do – it’s really very minor part of their lives. So then you start to see some more cons there, and some more pros in other places. I would, as I always come back to. I would say get involved in research staff associations, because not only do they give you that way of representing yourself and all those other things, they give you a space to work on projects that maybe you wouldn’t get to work on in your own research. So when I was changing career. I kind of had the sense that I wanted to do something around career development, and so actually the workshops that I brought in and the speakers that I brought in were about my interest, which was career development. So perhaps if I had been really interested in moving to an industry, I would probably be thinking about “Oh. Who can I bring in from industry to talk about? And actually it gave me access to some funding to do postdoctoral career pathways, which is an opportunity that never would have come about had I not done that. So actually that’s – you know, that’s one of those things that you can take from your career and the path you want, and have a little bit of space and possibly a little bit of funding to do that. I think the other thing is, just take all opportunities, and this is any career I would say. There’s a career theory called “Planned happenstance” which is about, there’s a luck in all careers, but you have to plan for that luck to happen. So you have to take up the opportunities – don’t just sit there in your office, or in your lab, or wherever you are just going “I’m going to keep doing research, I’m going to keep doing research and it will all turn out alright in the end” actually go out there. You’re never going to meet people if you don’t go out and do something. And you don’t know where something might go – the example I’m using for this at the moment is, I run a workshop program here, and I decided the other day that I was going to join a yoga class. I’ve never done yoga and I thought, “I need to do this. I’m hitting 40 and I need to start doing something proper.” It’s within work and it’s a lunchtime session. The first person I speak to is like, “Oh. I’d be interested in running a workshop!” So actually, even by going and doing something that has nothing to do with my work. I’m like, “no, actually, that fits really well with what we’re doing and would be really helpful.” So it’s just about going with no judgement, and doing things that open you up to opportunities, and kind of just following your interest within them, but planning to do that. So that’s kind of that planned happenstance. Plan to be open to opportunities.

**KL:** I love that Idea. Well we will link to all these things in the show notes. And the other thing I wanted to be sure to mention is a U.S. based organization called Beyond the Professoriate, which is basically doing a little bit of what you described here, Emma. They interview people and offer kind of online panels of people who have moved outside of academia, so you can hear about those experiences. It’s really similar to the informational interviews that you’ve mentioned here, so we’ll make sure to link to that in the show notes as well. But I want to thank you so much, Emma, for sharing your experiences and giving us some more information about postdocs and the kinds of things they can do for professional development. Thank you so much!

**ECD:** Thank you so much!

**KL:** And thanks also to our listeners for joining us on this week’s episode of Research in Action. I’m Katie Linder, and we’ll be back next week with another episode.

# Show notes with links to resources mentioned in the episode, a full transcript, and an instructor’s guide for incorporating the episode into your courses, can be found at the show’s website at [ecampus.oregonstate.edu/podcast](http://www.ecampus.oregonstate.edu/podcast).

# There are several ways to connect with the “Research in Action” podcast. Visit the website to post a comment about a specific episode, suggest a future guest, or ask a question that could be featured in a future episode. Email us at riapodcast@oregonstate.edu. You can also offer feedback about “Research in Action” episodes or share research-related resources by contacting the Research in Action podcast via Twitter @RIA\_podcast. Finally, you can call the Research in Action voicemail line at 541-737-1111 to ask a question or leave a comment. If you listen to the podcast via iTunes, please consider leaving us a review.

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# Bonus Clip:

**KL:** In this bonus clip for episode 102 of the “Research in Action” podcast, Dr. Emma Compton-Daw shares what she wishes she could tell people about the post-doc role. Take a listen:

**KL:** I’m wondering if there’s anything, Emma, that you think is kind of, maybe under the radar about postdoc positions. Something that people should know about postdocs, but isn’t an obvious thing. You know, like – what is it that you wish you could tell people about the postdoc role?

**EDC:** Right. Well, the one thing that I’ve not mentioned yet is that most postdocs don’t go on to become academics. So, I guess that’s always the caveat that I have to – you want to encourage people into these positions indefinitely. It’s the right thing to do, research is great. But in the UK it’s something like 10 percent of postdocs will actually get an academic position. That’s the negative side of it. The positive – what if there’s one thing you don’t know about doing a postdoc? Oh. Everyone will say, “Enjoy it!” It’s actually quite a free time of life. Quite often you don’t – I mean there are pros and cons to everything – but quite often you don’t have family ties, or you’re free to move, very often you’re very mobile. So I did my – I did three postdoc positions. My first was in the institution where I had done my doctorate, but then I moved to the National Institute of Health in Bethesda, Maryland, to do my postdoc there, and then I moved back to the UK. And it was amazing! There are very few jobs in the world that really let you travel so easily. Mobility comes with its issues as well, but I think – yeah. Enjoy it! I think that’s the thing – I mean, there are stressors, and there are pressures and everything, but actually, you’ve got that time to really be – kind of focus on one piece of research. Not being pulled in all different directions and go out there and kind of explore the world.

**KL:** You’ve just heard a bonus clip from episode 102 of the “Research in Action” podcast with Dr. Emma Compton-Daw sharing what she wishes she could tell people about the post-doc role. Thanks for listening.

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