



Confidence and Context: Using SkillScan with PhD Students and Postdoctoral Researchers

In this edition of *Coach Insights*, Natalie Lundsteen, PhD., shares her experience and advice working with postdoctoral students.

“My current career advising helps doctoral students and postdoctoral researchers, who are deeply expert in their field, gain fundamental self-knowledge. The SkillScan card sort is an excellent tool for working with this population given their unique challenges and rewards.” – Dr. Natalie Lundsteen



Dr. Natalie Lundsteen is Director of Graduate Career Development in the Graduate School of Biomedical Sciences and Assistant Professor of Psychiatry at the University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center, where she oversees career resources and programs for graduate students and postdoctoral scholars. Natalie has also advised graduate students, postdocs and alumni as a career counselor at MIT, Oxford University, and Stanford University.

Little Understanding of Personal Skills and Strengths:

In the life sciences, undertaking a postdoc is a traditional step on the career path towards an academic research position. Decisions about career trajectory and next steps generally occur during the postdoc phase. Academic research (i.e. 'the professoriate') is the traditional and logical career destination following a postdoc, but academic jobs have diminished over the past five years. Currently, the likelihood of a scientist obtaining a tenure-track job is about 15%. Because they have invested so many years in study and training, many PhDs are not aware of career options beyond academia. More importantly, there is little understanding of personal skills and strengths to inform decisions for pursuing other options.

Training a Card Sort Support Team:

Before the large group training of 40-50 postdocs and graduate students, I train about five postdocs from the Postdoctoral Association (PDA) one week before the main SkillScan event. This pre-trained group then assists their peers during the large group workshop. Because international researchers comprise 70% of our postdoc population and 40% of our grad students, many of whom are in the U.S. for the first time, the card sort support team assists those who need language and definition clarification or more time in the sorting process.

The Big “Aha”:

What surprises me is the low confidence level of these hyper-educated researchers, particularly during the initial sorting of skills into proficiency

categories. I must encourage them to think about their skills outside of the intensely competitive academic research environment. Yet, very few have much experience beyond a laboratory, so there is a "context gap". They also compare their own skills to their hugely successful research mentors or other true experts, so discussions about defining "proficiency" can go on and on.

Making Time for Professional Development:

While we always have a crowd at this session, we have huge fluctuation in the RSVP list due to concern about taking professional development time out of the workday. This is frequently frowned upon by many of their research mentors who measure success by hours spent at the bench. However, once the researchers attend the session, they love the SkillScan exercise—even if it means two hours away from experiments! Feedback from



the sessions is uniformly enthusiastic, because there is a concrete takeaway with the skills worksheet. They also like creating plans to develop or improve skills for future work.

Appeal to Scientists:

Scientists, in particular, like the linear progression of the exercise and the tactile experience of categorizing. Confidence is always boosted - this is noted both in a follow-up session and in direct comments following the exercise. Attendees are eager for the follow-up session that takes place two weeks later, in which individual skills are translated onto CVs, resumes, and LinkedIn profiles. I find the Skill Wheel to be helpful in identifying specific career paths for PhD scientists that encompass various skills, and I reference ScienceCareers' online "MyIDP" tool for creating a development plan.