

Empower Postdocs to be Integral Members of Mass General Brigham (MGB)

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SECTION I. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1. Vision Statement

- Identify evolving needs, challenges, and expectations within the BWH postdoc community through data collected from a MGB-wide survey.
- Share findings with leadership to guide policy development and program enhancements to cultivate a uniformly positive postdoc experience at MGB.
- We envision that MGB's deep commitment to training future clinicians will extend equally to postdocs, ensuring postdocs' success in their current research and transitioning to the next career stage.

2. Methodology Overview

a. Survey Design

- The survey was adapted from the 2022 survey, with additional questions designed to elaborate on identified areas of need and conducted using a Google Form from 12/5/2023 to 1/22/2024.
- The survey framework included categories covering participant demographics, financial and compensation benefits, career progress and mentorship, work environment and culture, onboarding, visa and immigration concerns, and other matrices for satisfaction in an open-form format.
- Respondents were asked to rate their experience from 1 (terrible) to 10 (wonderful) and how enthusiastic they were to recommend BWH to acquaintances.
- All questions were anonymous and optional to ensure confidentiality and candid responses.

b. Participant Demographics

- 295 participants (~37% BWH postdocs) from all departments and divisions at BWH.
- Respondents reflected diverse gender identities (53.6% women, 43.3% men), racial and ethnic backgrounds (29.9% white, 44.7% Asian, 10.3% Hispanic/Latino, 3.4% Black/African American and 5.5% others), educational attainment (73.2% PhD, 21.0% MD, 5.2% MD/PhD), 31.1% postdocs were mid-career to senior postdocs (at least 2 to 8+ years of primary degree) at the time of hire at BWH, and visa statuses (52.8% J1, 23.4% US citizen, 5.6% Permanent Residents and 18.2% other visas).

3. Key Findings

a. Overall quality of training and satisfaction levels

- The survey showed peak scores of 7 and 8, indicating generally high satisfaction levels. 36.4% respondents were "somewhat enthusiastic" and only 27.9% were "very enthusiastic" about recommending BWH to acquaintances for a postdoc training.
- 31.4% of respondents rate their experience as 6 or lower, while 36% remained neutral or would NOT recommend BWH to a friend or acquaintance.

- Qualitative comments highlighted issues such as financial and job insecurity, strained relationships with mentors, and lack of awareness of BWH policies.
- Factors associated with higher scores: (1) newest postdocs (<6 months), (2) MD or MD/PhD degrees, potentially pointing towards lower satisfaction levels among PhDs (especially those who have been at the institution for some time)
- Factors associated with lower scores: (1) experienced or witnessed unprofessional behaviors, (2) being paid below BWH minimum, (3) experiencing high levels of stress, especially financial stress, (4) perception of making little or no progress, (5) poor relationship with PI, and (6) being asked to do excessive work not directly related to project.

b. Areas showing improvements compared to the 2022 survey

- 11% reported being paid below BWH minimum in 2023, compared to 30% in 2022.
- For postdocs with 1 year+ at BWH, 48.7% reported completing performance reviews, compared to 26.9% in 2022. 31.5% reported being unaware of the requirement, compared to 47.2% in 2022.

c. Areas Needing Improvement

i. Financial concerns

- Respondents reported financial insecurity as the top stressor and least comfortable topic to discuss with PIs.
- Nearly 40% postdocs pay out of pocket for research-related expenses.
- 11% reported being paid below BWH minimum and/or encountering difficulty getting annual increases.
- 78% reported earning below the BWH's recommended salary and feeling undervalued and frustrated for being paid significantly below their peers at neighboring institutions.
- Higher salary groups included males vs. females ($p=0.005$ with 30.1% males at or above recommended salary compared to 14.1% females); MD/PhD vs. PhD ($p=0.043$) and Clinical research fellows ($p<0.001$).

ii. High prevalence of unprofessional behaviors

- Unprofessional workplace behaviors are severely underreported.
- 29.67% reported personally experiencing unprofessional behaviors, and 34.32% reported witnessing unprofessional behaviors.
- Most common behaviors reported: Poor communication, inappropriate jokes or excessive criticism, supervisors failing to provide guidance, forcing postdocs to work excessively long hours, or excessively micromanaging postdocs.
- Concerning examples provided: hostile work environment, bullying, sabotaging, public humiliation, and sexual harassment. Many comments reported female, non-white, non-citizen, or junior staff were especially at risk of being targeted.
- On "who displayed unprofessional behaviors": PI/ Direct supervisors (31.9%), other faculty members (13.3%), senior staff (16%), peers (13.8%), and junior colleagues (8.5%) and administrative staff (4.8%).
- On awareness of resources for conflict resolution: 35.4% responded "not aware of any resources".
- Reasons for not using resources: fear of escalation or retaliation (17.9%), no confidence that resources can solve concerns (20.9%) and being unaware of any resources (20.1%).

iii. Other areas of concern raised in the survey

- Career insecurity was the 2nd topmost stressor, corresponding to the lack of opportunities to develop professional skills. 44% considered internal promotions despite limited open positions and unclear promotion criteria and guidance.
- Lack of secondary mentors and online presence via lab website or catalyst profile.
- International postdocs reported difficulties with visas and grant or job applications.
- PIs lack people management and mentoring skills and treat postdocs as technicians by assigning postdocs to do excessive “shared” lab responsibilities.
- Poor BWH onboarding process and HMS integration, and administrative staff being unresponsive or slow.
- BWH postdocs felt “second class” to quad-based postdocs and clinical staff.
- Parent postdocs reported a lack of support for childcare.

4. RECOMMENDATIONS

- Establish a Postdoctoral Affairs Office led by a PhD or MD director to manage current resources and coordinate and implement new policies
- Enforce salary increase by 10/2024, addressing gender disparity in salaries, establish a mechanism for automatic annual increases, with continuous assessment and adjustment of the salary scale to ensure BWH remains a competitive employer in the Boston area.
- Improvement to VISA and onboarding services.
- Conduct exit survey to gather feedback, insights, and data from departing postdocs.
- Require annual leadership and people management training for PIs with postdocs.
- Establish a mentorship program and encourage secondary mentors for postdocs.
- Develop resources and workshops for postdocs to acquire professional skills and clarify departments’ internal promotion criteria to instructors or staff scientists.

5. SUMMARY AND CALL TO ACTIONS

The survey revealed high satisfaction levels among postdocs but highlighted areas of concern, including financial stress, unprofessional behaviors, poor onboarding services and career insecurity. By implementing our recommendations, BWH can foster a supportive environment, ensure postdocs' well-being, and enhance research excellence by establishing a dedicated postdoc office, enforcing fair salary increases, and improving mentorship, services, and resources for postdocs. Failing to do so risks a decline in postdoc morale, productivity, recruitment, and retention, ultimately undermining BWH's reputation as a leading research institution.