



Institute of Sociology
Czech Academy of Sciences

How to Build an Academic Career You Actually Want

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National Library of Technology

Who am I and what do I do?

- My research concerns why and how people develop and change their attitudes and behavior
- I collect large-scale survey data and analyze them using advanced statistical methods
- I lead two teams: **Czech Education Panel Survey** and **OP JAK Work Package on societal conflict**
- I mentor two PhD students and four postdocs
- I published **36 peer-reviewed journal articles** (mostly Q1-Q2); 67 outputs in total (articles, chapters, books, reports) over the past 10 years

How my job changed

December 2022

- Researcher

January 2023

- Team manager
- Project manager
- HR
- Administrative force
- Team leader
- Teacher
- Mentor
- Supervisor
- Diplomat
- Researcher



Achieving success in research...
...means less time for actual research.

3,234 active researchers and leaders across academia from 113 countries:

45% agree they have sufficient time for research

68% say the pressure to publish is greater than two to three years ago

Act I: Choose what success means

What does success mean?

It depends on who you ask

- Family
- Department/faculty leadership
- Evaluation committee
- Colleagues
- Bibliometrics
- Grant agency
- Your neighbours
- **Yourself...**



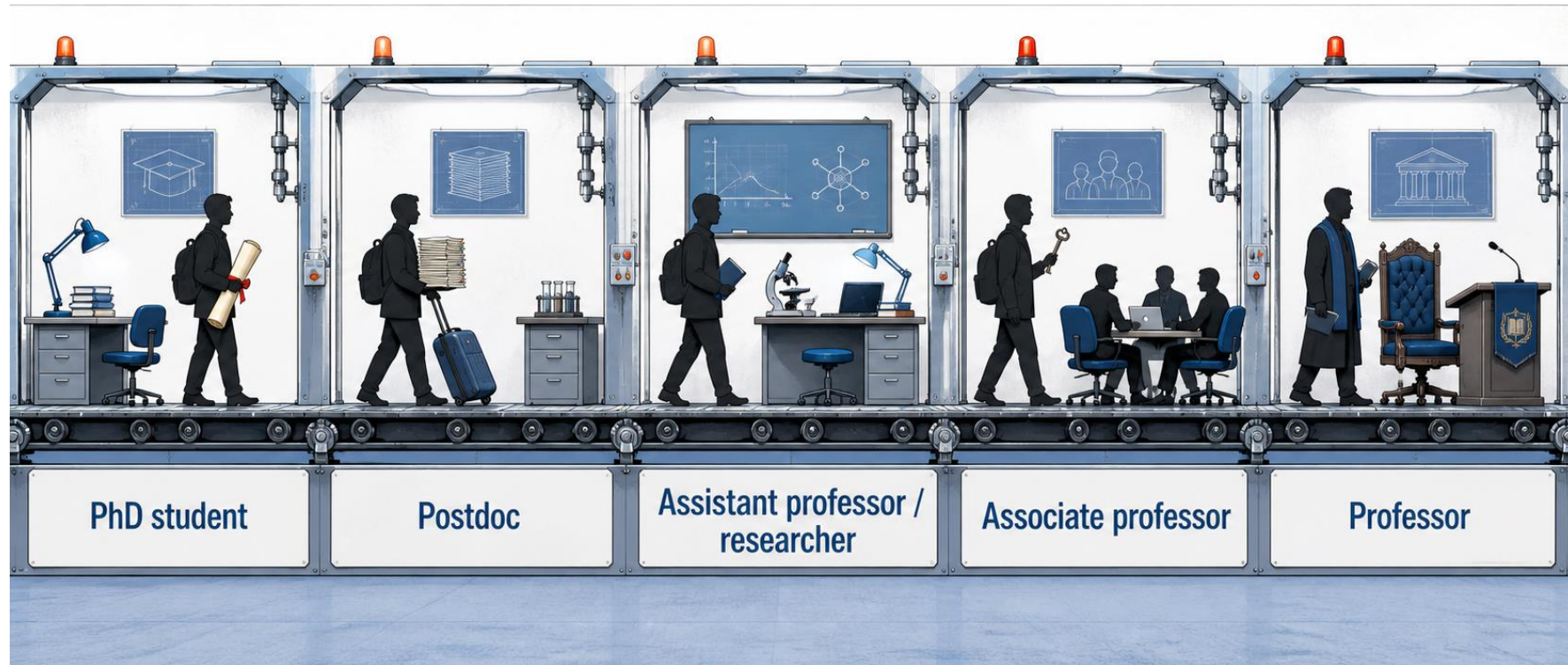
What does success mean?

- Nobel Prize?
- Becoming a dean?
- A professorship?
- An ERC grant?
- Your own lab?
- A paper in Science?
- A stable and decently paid job?
- Doing work you still enjoy?



My goal

- Doing a job I love with decent income and enough personal/family time
- What I



- What I learned: there is no universal path to a successful

First things first: choose what success means to you

- What questions do you want to work on?
- Who are your ideal colleagues?
- How much autonomy and stability do you need?
- How much time do you want to devote to your career?

If you do not define success for yourself, somebody else will define it for you...

I am a group leader, researcher, assistant professor

What I thought successful academics do

- read
- think
- discuss
- analyze data
- write
- discover
- mentor
- give speeches
- communicate with media
- Communication regarding office building alarm
- Scanning tickets, collecting invoices and writing report from a previous week business trip
- Meeting to provide feedback on colleagues' paper
- Went to the administration to sign documents
- Formulating request for change in a project budget
- Writing a review for MA thesis
- Updating two syllabuses
- Providing access to our data to project partner
- Writing monthly report of project activities
- Making room reservation for an upcoming meeting

Act II: Improve your odds

You cannot plan a career, but you can plan the next transition

- What is the plan after Ph.D.?
 - Postdoc position
 - Tenure-track position
 - Research or another career outside academia
 - 57% of EU researchers work in business enterprises; 31.6% in higher education; 10.1 % in the government sector, 1.3% in NGOs in 2024, (Eurostat, 2024)
- Plan backwards from the next transition, not forwards from your current task
- It is hard to plan where you will be in 5, 10 or 15 years, but you can plan what will be needed for your next step/transition in your career

My plan after Ph.D.

- Work on publications
- Get a postdoc position abroad
- Find a way to secure a stable job
- Win a grant



Reality after Ph.D. – Nebraska

- Meeting J. R. Hibbing
- Learning new methods
- Applying for postdocs and tenure jobs
- 28 applications for postdoc and assistant professor position
 - 1 interview
 - 1 job



Reality after Ph.D. – Sweden

- a two-year contract followed by two one-year extensions
- Different research culture
- We are still in touch and collaborating
- I applied for 4 projects in Sweden and 4 projects in the CR in 2021–2022
- Received GAČR Juniorstar and OP JAK



What did I learn?

- Short postdocs (2 years) may leave very little time to prepare for the next transition
- **How to prepare for postdoc during Ph.D. studies**
 - Learn (new) methods
 - Spend time abroad
 - Decide on „your“ research topic
 - Teaching is important but, your **publication record is the king**
 - Consider applying for project(s)
 - Think about where you want to live (for some time)

Act III: Build a career you can
sustain

Mental health first

- 29.9% of early career researchers report elevated psychological distress across all outcomes
- 29.8% reported elevated depressive symptoms
- 29.7% anxiety symptoms
- 28.3% eating disorder symptoms
- 22.9% alcohol misuse
- 18.6% non-suicidal self-injury
- 18.8% suicidal ideation

Article | [Open access](#) | Published: 29 June 2026

Prevalence and severity of mental health problems in early-career researchers: a systematic review and meta-analysis

[Aljoscha Dreisoerner](#) , [Vanessa Goetz](#), [David Frohnmayer](#), [Ulrich S. Tran](#), [Martin Voracek](#) & [Urs M. Nater](#) 

[Nature Human Behaviour](#) (2026) | [Cite this article](#)

What does it take to survive (a successful) scientific career?

- Know what the system rewards
- Have clear goals
- Don't take criticism personally
- Understand that failure is part of the job
- Understand that your colleagues are potential collaborators, not rivals
- Be effective & patient at the same time
- Protect time for research and life

Finishing Ph.D. is the real start

Do not wait for independence before learning some of the skills of an independent researcher

- grant writing
- presenting
- time management
- reviewing
- mentoring
- public communication
- (teaching)

The Ph.D. is a relatively safe time to learn through failures.

Luck needs a (publication) portfolio

My publication strategy:

- 2 in preparation +
 - 2 approaching submission +
 - 2 under review +
 - 2 in R&R or production
-
- Be effective – invest time in publication projects that are promising
 - After a rejection, decide quickly what to revise and where to submit next
 - Lead some papers, co-author some other

Publication ketchup experience

Kudrnáč, A., & Petrušek, I. (2022). Welfare Regimes and Support for Income Redistribution in Europe. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 86(4), 968-996. doi:10.1093/poq/nfac046 (if:4.616)

Bohman A., & Kudrnáč, A. (2022). Like the cool kids? The role of popular classmates in the development of anti-immigrant attitudes in adolescence. *Group Processes & Intergroup Relations*. Online first. doi:10.1177/13684302221099444

Kudrnáč, A., & Allaste, A. A. (2022). Students' Participation in a Former Socialist Country: Developing a Sense of Internal Political Efficacy. *Problems of Post-Communism*. Online first. doi:10.1080/10758216.2022.2062001

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Kudrnáč, A., Vejchodská, E., & Slavíková, L. (2022). Effects of School Forums on Political Development in Early Adolescence. A Field Experiment. *Local Government Studies*. Online first. doi:10.1080/03003930.2022.2052855

Miklikowska, M., Rekker R., & Kudrnáč, A. (2022). A little more conversation, a little less prejudice: The role of classroom political discussions in the development of youth attitudes toward immigrants. *Political Communication*. 39(3), 405-427. doi:10.1080/10584609.2022.2032502

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Kudrnáč, A. (2021). A study of the effects of obesity and poor health on the distance to the ballot station and probability to vote relationship. *Party Politics*, 27(3), 540-551. doi:10.1177/1354068819867414

Kudrnáč, A. (2020). What does it take to fight fake news? Testing the influence of motivated reasoning among youth. *Communist and Post-Communist Studies*, 53(1), 151-167. doi:10.1525/cpcs.2020.53.1.151

Lyons, P., & Kudrnáč, A. (2018). Was Life Good in Communist Czechoslovakia? An Empirical Test of Halbwachs's Theory of Collective Memory. *Sociológia*, 50(3), 289-310.



A paper can take years. Your life keeps moving.

- I wrote an article in late 2022 and submitted it to Q1 journal in January 2023
- After one year, two months, and dozens of emails, I withdrew it and submitted it to a different journal in April 2024.
- It got accepted and published in October 2025
- Resigned and got a new job in SOU (CR)
- Moved from Sweden to the CR
- Divorced
- Received two huge grants
- Met my current wife and married her
- Our first child was born
- Bought an apartment, took out mortgage and moved
- Received Wichterle award
- Hired 2 PhD students, 4 postdocs - establish two research teams
- Got a second job (teaching at Charles University)



Aleš Kudrnáček, Andrea Bohman & Mikael Hjerm

1951 Accesses Explore all metrics →

Projects

- Watch out for funding opportunities
- Think big! **Be ambitious**
- Read before you start developing your idea, put your idea on paper, discuss it, rewrite it
- Dedicate enough time for writing your proposal
- Develop proposals iteratively (write in waves)
- Ask your colleagues regularly for feedback on key parts of your project
- **Be careful what you wish for – you might just get it...**

Projects

- You will need **luck and persistence** in applying...
- ERC starting grant



Successful proposals



Applications received



Success rate

GA ČR JUNIOR STAR	2021	2022	2023	2024	2025	2026
Number of proposals	352	314	227	173	159	224
Number of grants awarded	30	16	23	17	19	18
Success rate	8,5%	5,1%	10,1%	9,8%	11,9%	8,0%

Careers compound through people

- Science is collective, but careers are still evaluated individually
- **What qualities do I look for in my collaborators?**
 - Enthusiasm
 - Reliability
 - Generosity
- Agree on roles, authorship, and deadlines before the work begins
- Share credit and opportunities
- Be the collaborator you would like to have!
- Academia has no shortage of smart people. It needs more

Be effective – academia will fill every hour you fail to protect

- teaching
- reviewing
- mentoring
- committees
- management
- administration
- public communication
- overcommitment...



The art of saying „no“...

- Saying „yes“ to everything will likely make you unreliable or burned out
- Being busy is not the same as having a research agenda
- Without slack, there is no space for new ideas
- Academic service can support a career, but it can also consume it

Have a filter:

- Does this support my research direction?
- What specific value will it create?
- What will I stop doing if I say yes?
- What's my current work-service balance?

What is the first sign of a successful academic career?

Being comfortable declining offers.



What can a successful academic career look like?

- Do work you enjoy most of the time
- Have sufficient stability and income
- Have space to think
- Be able to turn down work you do not want to do
- Help others grow
- Have a life outside academia

Regardless of your definition of successful career – being a researcher is a roller-coaster ride. **Do not forget to enjoy the ride!**

What should be the main career goal?

A career that looks good not only on your CV, but also on an ordinary Tuesday



Thank you!

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