

Transitioning to a Career outside of Academic Research

For many graduate students and postdocs, academic research is excellent training that ultimately leads to a career elsewhere. Luckily, the skills developed as a research scientist are highly transferable to jobs outside of academia. The first step is to identify those skills and translate them into plain English. The more difficult challenge for most PhDs is to figure out what types of jobs would be a good fit for their skills and interests.

A Short Pep Talk

If you have earned, or are about to earn, a PhD in a biological field, you have talents that make you an attractive candidate for many jobs outside of research.

First, you are good at both qualitative and quantitative analysis. Don't be too humble here; we're not talking about making new contributions to string theory. If you can do the statistics to support a typical science publication, you can easily learn the math that supports business decisions.

Second, you have faced problems that no one else has solved before. By definition, your thesis identified a completely unsolved question and set out a logical approach to get to the answer. Forget about whether the experiments led where you wanted them to go. The exercise of thinking through a problem and developing a solution framework has value in and of itself.

Finally, you have personal traits that are of value in other fields. You are probably a hard worker, perseverant, and creative. If you've been a good lab member, you've collaborated with colleagues. You may have made reagents that you shared with the broader community, taught a course, or mentored a student. In fact, you may also be involved in campus organizations, tutoring, sports, and/or community service.

All of these experiences make excellent stories for your résumé. One of the biggest steps toward landing a great job outside of academia is to translate these into a clear, one-page business-

style résumé. From your experiences, give examples where you demonstrated leadership and teamwork, intellectual and otherwise.

Highlight the outcome in each case. You will want to reframe your skills without using any sort of scientific jargon. Write in such a way that your résumé could easily be understood by your neighborhood grocer or third-grade teacher. Once you've done this, you're halfway there. Although you will need to tailor this prototype résumé to each job you apply for, that will be a matter of making minor alterations.



Amy Greenwood

How to Get from Here to There

I will go out on a limb and recommend not doing any form of job search other than informational interviewing.

An informational interview is one in which you speak to someone to learn about the person's career. It is typically done over the phone, less frequently in person, and lasts about 20 minutes (no more than 45). Do not ask for a job or jump too quickly to the topic of job openings. Do not explain your life story or go into great detail about why you want to transition to a new career. (In fact, be wary of oversharing in this context even if you know the person you are interviewing.) The idea is to give just enough background to explain your interest, and then let the other person do the talking.

Things you may want to ask include:

- What is the person's role?
- What is a typical day like?
- What aspects of the job are challenging?
- What aspects are boring?
- What are his or her colleagues like?
- How did the person come to take that job, and where does he or she think this career will lead?

The beauty of informational interviewing is that there are many possible upsides but almost no downside, since *you're not actually asking for a job*. In the worst-case scenario, you may



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find that a certain career path seems like a bad fit or you didn't hit it off with the person you interviewed. At least you won't waste more time going down an unproductive road, and you've practiced your interviewing skills. Nothing lost. In the ideal case, you learn about a career that seems fascinating and find someone who is happy to teach you what you need to do to get the job. Everything gained.

Start by interviewing anyone you know personally who has left research. Then ask friends and colleagues to introduce you (by email is fine) to people they know who have left research. Also, at the end of each interview there is usually an appropriate opportunity to ask if there is anyone else you should talk to about the career path you've been discussing (or about the transition from academic research, etc.). Ask the person you've interviewed if he or she would provide an introduction. Most people will say yes, but don't be discouraged if they can't think of someone right away.

The main way this not-actually-asking-for-a-job process matures into an actual job interview is by creating a network of professionals who know you are looking for employment. They've

heard your voice. They've invested in you a bit, but you didn't make them uncomfortable by asking for more than they were willing to give. Frequently an actual job lead will come from someone you hit it off with who knows of someone else who is hiring for a slightly different job. Just follow the path. At some point you will find you are having specific conversations about a specific job at a specific company. More importantly, you'll understand that job well enough that when it comes time for the actual interview you will be able to articulate how you, specifically, can bring value in that position.

In conclusion, by reframing your experiences in terms that are independent of academic research and by tapping into the wisdom and contacts of those who have made the journey before you, you can find a way to use your research training in a career outside of academia. ■

—Amy Greenwood

Note

Amy Greenwood (PhD in biology, California Institute of Technology, 2000) works as a business strategy consultant in Los Angeles.

Stand Up and Take Notice!

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- "When and How to Use the Other 'F' Word"
- "Barbie's Next Career... A Computer Engineer"
- "The Decade for Women: Forward, Backward, Sideways"

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