

# Next Steps after Your Postdoc or PhD – Non-academic Careers

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The nature of work, both inside and outside academia, has changed significantly in the twentieth century. The onus is increasingly on individual job seekers to take charge of their own careers, including acquiring job training and undergoing continual professional development, seeking out external mentors and sponsors, and developing and managing a clear professional persona, online and off. With this in mind, I suggest the following steps to help guide your career exploration and job search. Although these steps are presented separately and sequentially, you will make the process your own.

## **1. Take a Personal and Professional Inventory**

Think back on when in your life you felt most energized. What were you doing? Write several stories about your own successes, giving as much detail as you can about each experience. What is true about all or most of these experiences?

What are your top values?

What are your strengths? These innate talents are clues to your future potential, whether or not you've developed corresponding skills.

What is your desired lifestyle, both in the short-term and in the years to come?

Use whatever techniques and resources will help you identify what's important to you. (This goes for each of the following steps, too.)

## **2. Research Potential Jobs and Careers that Match Your Needs, Wants, and Interests**

A significant challenge for PhDs seeking non-academic employment is lack of awareness about all the many job and career options potentially available to them. Being curious and open-minded about what's out there helps you gather information.

Research what other PhDs have done. There is a wealth of information available online. Check out what's available on my website---Resources and Transition Q & As. Where have alumni of your own departments found employment? What do your existing contacts do for a living?

Conduct informational interviews. These are common. Do what you need to feel comfortable reaching out to friends, family, acquaintances, and complete strangers. These meetings, whether in person, on the phone, or over the internet, will provide you with invaluable information.

## **3. Build your Professional Profile and Job Documents**

By now you've discovered a great deal about yourself and the wider world, and can see more clearly where you fit in the non-academic workforce. You know to think like an employer and how you can better position yourself for good opportunities.

Your job documents (resume and cover letter, as needed) should reflect your new career story and vision. They must demonstrate how you can solve the (implied) problem that underlies each job opening.

How will you introduce yourself? What can you say about what you do? Consider practicing an elevator pitch until you feel comfortable delivering it, and know that it tells an accurate, positive story about you as a professional.

Having a professional online presence is increasingly necessary for job seekers. Create and maintain a LinkedIn profile or About.me page; use other social media and networking sites that make sense for you. Consider an expanded presence, including your own website and blog, to better showcase your skills, knowledge, and interests.

#### **4. Network, Network, Network (and Apply for Jobs)**

The vast majority of jobs are never advertised, and even ones that are may not be truly available to external candidates. In addition, as a PhD and career changer, you may have to work even harder to show what value you bring to a non-academic workplace or non-faculty position. Potential employers and colleagues might have difficulty imagining someone with your background working alongside them. This is one reason why all the work you've done up to this point is crucial: You will be able to present yourself as a professional "X" rather than a "former academic" (for example).

Kick your networking into high gear. Let your contacts---all of them!---know what you're looking for. Tell them how they can help you move forward in your career.

#### **Optional: Get Experience and Needed Training or Certification**

You will know by now what you need, whether it's volunteering, doing an internship, or investing in skills development. Decide for yourself what's important for you to get where you want to go.

#### **Throughout: Support, Help, and Self-Care**

Optimism and a positive, flexible attitude are among the top attributes desired by employers. But being a job seeker is a tough process. Changing careers and perhaps undertaking a larger life transition are incredibly difficult. The process can take many months of hard work and offer few obvious rewards. Do what you need to keep motivated. Exercise, enough sleep, and good nutrition go a long way.

Take advantage of whatever help and support is available, both online and off. Join existing communities, build and lean on your own supportive network, and seek out professional assistance.

*Feel free to email me ([Jennifer.polk@gmail.com](mailto:Jennifer.polk@gmail.com)) for more information or to inquire about coaching. Best wishes to you!*