UC Irvine

UC Irvine Previously Published Works

Title

Making a Successful Transition from Academe to Industry

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/8ph830p2>

Journal

IETE Technical Review, 27(1)

ISSN

0256-4602

Author

Kelly, Christine

Publication Date

2010

DOI

10.4103/0256-4602.58968

Copyright Information

This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution License, available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>

EXPERT COMMENTARY

Making a Successful Transition from Academe to Industry

Christine Kelly

University of California, Irvine — Career Center 100 Student Services 1 Irvine, CA 92697

Today I met a PhD student who is considering his career options. He'd really like to be a professor, but he knows the challenges of the academic market and has seen people who, three years after graduating, are still not in tenure track positions. He is thinking about looking for industry jobs, but like many PhDs who thought they would be professors, he too is confused about how to make a successful transition. As the academic job market continues to contract, more PhDs will have to transition to careers outside academe. Fortunately in the STEM fields, business and industry are often more welcoming to employees with advanced degrees. But there are still challenges and pitfalls to be managed to make a successful transition. If you planned to be a professor you may not have spent time considering what else you would like to do, or where else you would like to work. And even if you have always planned to work in industry, the following tips may still be useful.

1. Look Inward First

Before you can launch an effective job search you have to know what you are seeking. You need to do a self assessment and ask yourself what you want to do with your life and where you want to work. A common misconception faced by PhDs transitioning out of academe is the belief that taking an industry job means sacrificing everything they wanted in an academic career. However, when you generate a list of what you want and need in a career, you might discover academe is not the only place that meets your needs. In fact, you might even find your needs do not align with an academic career. I have met many graduate students who have told me they do not want the life of their principal investigator in general or, more specifically, that academe is too isolating for them.

When creating your list be sure you are including both the pros and cons of academe and not making decisions based on myths you hold about an idealized lifestyle, like summers off.

Following are key questions you might want to ask yourself during this process.

- Do you want to be a sole contributor or part of a team?
- Do you want to be your own boss, or do you work

better with direction?

- What type of management style motivates you to perform at your peak?
- Do you want to be in a more applied or theoretical job?
- Do you want to be the person who creates new product ideas or the person who does quality control?
- What type of industry appeals to you?
- What type of co-workers do you want?

If you really want to stay in a university setting, explore the non-faculty options available to you. Search for PhDs on your campus in non-faculty positions and interview them about what they do, how they got their jobs and what advice they might have to help you transition into similar positions. Universities tend to be PhD friendly places, even if the position does not require a PhD. If an area of the University you would like to work for does not currently have any employees with PhD's, it does not mean they will not be open to the idea. Use your time at your PhD-granting institution wisely and network for career opportunities.

2. Learn to Promote Yourself

A common refrain I hear from graduate students contemplating a move into industry is 'I've only been a student, I have never even worked in industry, so who would want to hire me?' If you show that lack of confidence in your talents, nobody will want to hire you. You have to make a strong case that you have skills that employers need and want. And before you can convince someone else, you may need to convince yourself. It is easy to classify your graduate activities as teaching and research, but harder to break out how the skills involved in those activities may be attractive to an employer. For example, as a TA you wrote lectures, wrote homework assignments, led discussion sessions and graded papers. None of those activities are common in business/industry. But all jobs ask for evidence of good communication skills ('created and delivered oral presentations to audiences of 10-50'), or evidence of leadership/management ('developed performance standards, measured and evaluated performance based on those standards then provided effective feedback to up to 20 participants per quarter'). And if you have written a dissertation, you know how to create

and design an experiment, run the experiment, trouble shoot, perhaps secure funding and manage a budget, manage other graduate and undergraduate students, write a technical report of your findings and present that information to a group of experts. Take some time and create a list of all the things you have learned to do while being a graduate student. And if you are not sure what transferable skills you have, this link displays a very complete list to help in your process.

<http://www.career.uci.edu/>

Another key to selling yourself is learning as much as you can about the position and the employer so that you can effectively present your skills and experiences as matching their requirements. When preparing for the interview rather than trying to predict what questions you will be asked, think about what you want to tell them about yourself. Consider which five specific things you want to make sure they know about you before you leave the interview. For instance, if you have strong analytical skills think of a situation that illustrates those skills in action: 'For my dissertation, I estimated, analyzed and evaluated Particular Matter (PM) and Nitrogen Oxides (NO) emitted by heavy duty diesel trucks and trains in the San Pedro Bay Ports (SPBP) of LA and Long Beach, made policy recommendations and prepared a presentation for the Port of Long Beach'.

You will also want to prepare your success stories. Most interviewers use behavioral interview questions where they ask you to relate a specific instance where you have performed a task or dealt with a situation in the past that you might experience in this job. The theory behind behavioral questions is that the best predictor of future behavior is past behavior. You should have 3-5 stories about your achievements you can draw on to answer these questions. For each story, jot down a brief outline of the Situation, Action and Results and then examine each story to see what skills you used in that situation. Thus the same story may fit for a question like, 'Tell me about a time you dealt with conflict with a co-worker', or a time you worked effectively with a team', or a time you took on a leadership role'. Ultimately employers want to hear interviewees make a strong case for why the company should hire them rather than any other candidate; thus, the more you know about the company's mission and what they do the better you can present yourself as the best possible candidate for the position.

The more time you spend analyzing your transferable skills and thinking about what type of job and setting you want, the better able you will be to identify what positions and companies will be a good fit for you. And the better you prepare for the interview, the better you will be at convincing an employer that you are the right person for the job.

AUTHOR

Christine Kelly, PhD, is the Graduate Student Career Consultant at the University of California, Irvine. She received her BA and MA in Communication from California State University, Long Beach and her PhD in Communication from Purdue University. She taught at

both public and private universities before joining the UCI Career Center in 2008. In her current role she guides graduate students as they plan for their careers in academe or business/industry.

E-mail: kellycm@uci.edu

DOI: 10.4103/0256-4602.58968; Paper No TR_215_09; Copyright © 2009 by the IETE

Copyright of IETE Technical Review is the property of Medknow Publications & Media Pvt. Ltd. and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.