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**The Ph.D.'s Guide to a Nonfaculty Job Search**

***You, too, can join the ranks of the gainfully employed outside of academe***



*Image: John W. Tomac for The Chronicle*

By L. Maren Wood

For most Ph.D.'s, the nonacademic labor markets are shrouded in mystery: Where do I look for jobs? How do I meet people if I don't have contacts outside academe? Did I just waste the past eight years of my life on this doctorate when I should have been earning an M.B.A.?

Ill-equipped to manage a nonfaculty job search, many new Ph.D.'s struggle to find openings relevant to their interests and skills. As a Ph.D. who came up short myself on the tenure-track market and left academe to start my own consulting company, I designed a "Boot Camp for the Postacademic Job Seeker" to help graduate students interested in positions beyond the professoriate. In the boot camp, Ph.D.'s spend four weeks exploring career options, identifying their transferable interests and skills, writing résumés, and learning how to network beyond academe. Here are seven tips I've learned from teaching at the boot camp to help you begin your nonfaculty job search:

**1. "It's the economy, stupid."** Ph.D.'s are often surprised at how long it takes to land a full-time job outside of higher education. As the weeks turn into months, many begin to doubt themselves, their degrees, and their training.

The reality is, finding a job takes months for everyone, regardless of education and work history. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the average period of unemployment is nine months, with a median of 17 weeks. Those numbers are depressing, but they should remind Ph.D. job seekers that their experience is not unique. Do not let a difficult search or a slow economic recovery fill you with doubt. Your doctorate has value, as evidenced by the numerous blog posts written by Ph.D.'s who have successfully made the transition out of the professoriate.

That said, it will take work, creativity, and perseverance to land your first meaningful, full-time nonfaculty position. What the unemployment figures do suggest is that you may have to rely on temporary gigs while you search for it. You may have to intern, volunteer, or take low-paying jobs in the interim. For those in faculty positions (temporary or tenure-track) who are considering exiting the professoriate, the time to start your nonacademic search is now. Use the time left in your teaching contract to begin building a network of contacts and laying the groundwork for your search.

The good news, as shown in the recent placement study by the American Historical Association, is that most Ph.D.'s end up with good, middle-class jobs that use their skills and expertise. They become researchers, analysts, managers, administrators, and consultants. Many run their own businesses. You, too, can join the ranks of the gainfully employed outside of academe.

**2. Employers care more about skills than credentials.** In academe, credentials are key. So when Ph.D.'s read job ads for nonfaculty positions, they are easily discouraged when an ad requests a degree or credential that they don't have.

Most employers, however, do not care about your specific degrees. They care about your skill set, experience, and body of knowledge. That doesn't mean your Ph.D. was a waste of time. It means that organizations and companies hire people from a wide variety of educational backgrounds and work histories.

The problem for Ph.D.'s is not a lack of skills, but rather an inability to effectively convey the nature of those skills. Graduate programs don't teach students how to communicate what we do, and so we end up talking about what we know.

Articulating what you can do for a company or an organization is the most difficult part of the job search. To get started, think about a typical day or week in your life as an academic. Write down every task you did to prepare for teaching, conducting your research, or serving on a committee. No task is too small to list.

By reading blogs, websites, and industry publications, and by conducting informational interviews, you can learn the lingo of an industry or employment sector you're interested in pursuing. Then use that lingo to refashion your inventory of academic tasks into a list of skills that a nonacademic employer will recognize. Your experience leading class discussions becomes facilitating. Literature reviews become best-practice studies. Lectures become one-hour multimedia presentations. You will be surprised by how many of your academic activities can be translated into skills valued by the business world and described in its preferred jargon.

**3. Your dissertation matters.** In my consulting business, I work with professional organizations and university departments to track the career outcomes of their Ph.D.'s. What has become apparent to me as I've tracked placement data is that your dissertation topic matters in finding job opportunities. To people outside the ivory tower, a Ph.D. means you are an expert. In what subject are you an expert? That is what will set your application apart from others.

Sure, you have highly defined skills as a researcher, analytical thinker, and writer, but you also have a particular expertise that cannot be gained in six weeks of on-the-job training. If your dissertation focuses on gender, race, poverty, climate change, Latin America, emerging economies, immigration, or whatever, then look for jobs at organizations that focus on those issues. They will find your skill set and expertise valuable.

**4. Don't rely on job advertisements to find your new position.** Learning about academic jobs in your field is fairly straightforward. There are only a handful of faculty job boards. But where do you look for nonacademic jobs?

That depends on what you want to find: Industry jobs are listed on company websites; nonprofits post to *The Chronicle of Philanthropy* and Indeed; jobs in the federal government appear on its official jobs site, USAJobs; *The Chronicle of Higher Education'*s Vitae lists academic and nonacademic jobs from various employers; while other organizations advertise only in local newspapers.

It can be overwhelming and confusing to figure out where to begin looking.

The truth is, you shouldn't be looking just at job boards anyway, unless your purpose is simply to learn about employers in a field or about potential career paths. Richard N. Bolles, author of the best seller *What Color Is Your Parachute?,* estimates that about 70 percent of jobs are never posted anywhere. Most people, he writes, find their jobs through a network of friends, families, co-workers, and associates.

In other words, if your job-hunting strategy is limited to reading position advertisements and submitting your résumé, that might explain the lack of responses, dearth of interviews, and continued unemployment. Your success in your post-academic ventures depends on your ability to connect with people and build relationships.

**5. Networking.** It's your ticket to a new career. You probably have more people in your network than you realize. In the boot camp I run, I ask participants to write a "broadcast email" about their job quest and send it to every person they know. The email should include information about what you've been doing (completing your Ph.D., teaching as a contingent faculty member), and describe opportunities you hope to explore. It should be somewhat specific (you'd like to work for a nonprofit or an NGO with a focus on poverty), so that people can forward your message to anyone they know working in that field. Ideally you should include a résumé.

Alumni networks are also key to a successful search. Ask your department administrator or someone at the campus alumni office for a list of people who graduated from your institution in the past 10 years. Look up those people on LinkedIn. The best sources of advice for Ph.D.'s moving from academic to nonacademic work are people who have made the transition themselves. Alumni are easy contacts to make because you share something in common and they are sympathetic to your plight. They've been there.

Informational interviews are also important tools in finding openings and connecting to potential employers. You can arrange interviews with people you know or with total strangers. An informational interview is an opportunity for you, the job seeker, to learn about a new career path, about an organization or a company, and about potential employment opportunities. You may have to do 10 informational interviews, or 300, before you land your first real job interview, but in this economy, that is the way it works.

Everyone understands that networking is how people find jobs, and no one will be offended by your request for an informational interview, provided you [follow proper etiquette.](http://chronicle.com/blogs/phd/2013/08/27/what-informational-interviews-can-do-for-you/) You will be amazed at how often someone will recommend you for an opportunity or introduce you to new people.

**6. Explore alternative career options.** It's critical to explore career paths beyond academe while you are still in graduate school. Doctoral students who don't do that are exposed to a narrow range of options. Applying for an internship at a nonprofit group or company can help you understand how to use your research and teaching skills in different ways. You may also find that you enjoy that work far more than teaching. Consider applying for a paid internship off campus instead of picking up an adjunct course. You need only so much teaching experience for your academic job applications, so one or two semesters working off campus won't harm your chances at a tenure-track job.

For those who can't work off campus for financial or legal reasons (graduate students in the sciences, international students), consider volunteering. Every organization needs volunteers. Match your volunteer interests with your academic areas of specialization: health care, ecology, environment, women's reproductive rights, etc. That will allow you to build networks outside of academe, add to your skill set, and gain relevant work experience.

**7. Take the long view.** Even if you were lucky enough to find a tenure-track job immediately after graduation, you would spend five to seven years before you earned tenure. Take a similar "long view" of your post-academic career track. You may have to start working at a small organization, in an entry-level position, with the goal of moving up. Creating a five- or seven-year plan can help take the anxiety out of landing your first position.

At this point, you just need to get started. Say yes to any opportunity that moves you in the right direction. Remember, you don't have to work in any particular field or for the same employer for life. It is not uncommon for people in the nonacademic world to change jobs every few years or to have more than one major career change. Don't worry about what you want to do with the rest of your life; just worry about what you're going to do *this* year, and consider it a steppingstone toward your ideal position.

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