Academia is the alternative career: a career journey from performing research to supporting research

Dr. Jennifer Brennan
Director of Research, Development and Innovation
Overview

1. Facts and figures about non-academic careers
2. A personal reflection on my career path
3. Some thoughts on skills for non-academic careers
Facts and Figures
VITAE Study 2016

“What do research staff do next?”

• Survey of ~850 respondents who had taken a non-academic career path
• Covered 24 MS & 55 nationalities
• Majority had aspired to academic career during PhD studies
• 75% satisfied with current employment
• Just 18% expressed a desire to return to academia

https://www.vitae.ac.uk/impact-and-evaluation/what-do-researchers-do/WDRSDN
Four-fifths of respondents were employed in one of nine occupations:

1. Research and Development Manager 17%
2. Researcher 13%
3. Function Manager 11%, i.e. working in functions such as marketing and production
4. Research Policy and Administration Manager 8%
5. Vocational or Industrial Trainer/Instructor 7%, including researcher developers and careers advisers/coaches
6. IT and Technology Professional 7%
7. Public/Science Engagement Professional 5%
8. Teaching Professional 5%
9. Journalist/Editor 4%

Other professions reported include: engineering professionals; health professionals; senior manager and officials; and management consultants and analysts.
My journey to and through a “non-academic” career
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Position</th>
<th>Employer</th>
<th>From - To</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Director RDI</strong></td>
<td>Technological Higher Education Association</td>
<td>Apr 2017 - Present</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Marie S-Curie NCP &amp; ND</strong></td>
<td>Irish Universities Association</td>
<td>Jan 2012 – Mar 2017</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Scientific Officer</strong></td>
<td>Irish Research Council for Science, Engineering and Technology</td>
<td>Oct 2007 to Dec 2011</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
| **Researcher**        | • Dublin City University  
                      | • University of Liverpool, UK  
                      | • University of North Carolina, USA | Oct 2002 to Sep 2007 |
| **Doctoral Student**  | Dublin City University                                                   | Oct 1998 to Sep 2002        |
| **Undergraduate**     | Dublin City University                                                   | Oct 1994 to Jun 1998        |
In the beginning…..

- Dublin City University
- B.Sc. Analytical Science, 1998
- PhD in Chemistry, 2002
- Supervisor: Prof. Robert Forster
- “Traditional” PhD

Motivation:
- Interested in research
- Didn’t want to work in a QC lab!
Chapel Hill, NC

- 2002 – 2003
- Postdoc at The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill
- Tier One US Research University
- Prof. Royce Murray (top 10 in my field)

Motivation:
- A good postdoc position and international mobility -> academic career
- To live in the USA
Liverpool, UK

- 2004 – 2006
- Research Associate at The University of Liverpool
- Prof. Mathias Brust (top 10 in my new field)
- Post funded by FP6
- Research work and grant management/administration
- Teaching experience

Motivation:
- Gaining research skills and admin skills
- More international mobility -> academic career (?)
- Personal reasons
The road home......

- 2006: returned to Ireland
- Temporary research position
- 2007: Awarded a personal fellowship

Motivation:
- Moving home: Personal Reasons
- Fellowship: First steps towards an independent academic career
Everything changes……

- July 2007: Decided to leave academia – started a job search
- October 2007: Found a non-academic position

Motivation:
- Lack of research career path
- Concerns about work/life balance
- Just a feeling……
Making the transition

• Open-minded (applied for many different jobs)
• Realistic (salary, entry level)
• Curriculum Vitae
  • Changed from 6-page “academic” to 2-page “commercial” format
  • Presented research experience, including publications and conference presentations as:
    • Evidence of skills e.g. communication, project management, problem solving, statistics, analytical ability, IT etc.
    • “Achievements” e.g. grant funding won, papers published etc.
    • Unless it was a technical job, removed the technical details of the research
    • Detailed lists of publications and conference presentations removed (non-research people are not interested in the details)
  • A little bit of luck – position required a PhD in Chemistry
A new beginning……

- Small research funding agency
- Recruited as Scientific Officer
  - ERA-NET in Chemistry (~ 1 year)
  - Postdoctoral Fellowships and European Programmes
- Managed funding Calls from start to finish – single handed, lots of independence

Motivation:
- “Research-related” job
- Build on existing skills, learn new ones
A natural step......

• Jan 2012- March 2017
• National Contact Point (NCP) & National Delegate for Marie Skłodowska-Curie actions
• From spring 2014, also working with IUA Director of Research (CEO) on sectoral research policy
• By Jan 2016, managing a small team promoting MSCA and supporting applicants

Motivation:
• Career Progression
• “More visible” Role
The next level……

• Since April 2017
• Director of Research, Development and Innovation
• THEA represents the 14 Institutes of Technology
• My three objectives:
  • Advocate & Promote
  • Facilitate & Support
  • Policy & Agenda

Motivation:
• A new challenge
• A desire to work more on research policy than research support
Skills for non-academic careers
Required Skills

Many skills developed during research career were essential for my career “outside academia”

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Required Skills</th>
<th>Details</th>
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<tr>
<td>Communication Skills</td>
<td>Presenting, Influencing, Training, Listening, Writing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Project &amp; Event Management</td>
<td>EU projects, conferences, workshops</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Analytical &amp; Critical Thinking</td>
<td>Data analysis, synthesis, critical reviewing</td>
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<tr>
<td>IT Skills</td>
<td>Statistics, MS Office, web &amp; social media</td>
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<tr>
<td>Interpersonal/Supervisory Skills</td>
<td>Team-working, supervising, “self-starter”</td>
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VITAE report showcases other examples and has some nice profiles of researchers who transitioned out of academia
Any special training?

- “Unstructured” PhD – no training offered
- No researcher career development programmes at postdoc stage
- Keen to take advantage of what was offered afterwards e.g. in the US, audited a Grad School course in research admin
- Also looked for teaching and mentoring opportunities and opportunities to “learn on the job” – latter has been more NB in recent years
- 15 short training courses
  - EU Proposal Writing
  - Project Management
  - Critical Thinking
  - Train the Trainer
Final Thoughts

• Academia is the alternative career, but it’s not the lesser option
• Don’t ask your PI for career advice – they only know about academia 😊
• Lots of rewarding, exciting careers out there - inform yourself about the opportunities via LinkedIn, NatureJobs news etc.
• Take advantage of what your institution offers for personal development, training and career advice
Thank You and Good Luck!

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