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of Higher Education

## Manage Your Career

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### From Academe to Market Research

*By Donny Wong*

So much has happened in the decade since [I last wrote](#) for *The Chronicle* about my nonacademic job search. Then I was finishing up my Ph.D. in the life sciences and considering a career in consulting. Ten years later, I am living overseas in London, I'm married to a Brit, and, most relevant here, I have a career in the pharmaceutical industry. My years as a bench scientist feel like they occurred several lifetimes ago.

Toward the end of graduate school, I began [looking for a job](#) in management consulting, since that industry was actively recruiting Ph.D.'s and I knew very little else about other nonacademic career options. What I was really looking for was something on the interface of the scientific and commercial worlds that would tap into the analytical skills and scientific knowledge that I had gained during graduate school. I explored my options in management consulting, in boutique health-care consulting firms, and in the realm of licensing, intellectual property, and patent law. Eventually I found my ideal position as a pharmaceutical market-research analyst.

Although I thought I knew a lot about the health-care industry before joining my company, I had never heard of this particular segment of the pharmaceutical industry before. To me, "market research" meant telephone polls during election cycles, or focus groups behind one-way mirrors where customers discuss why they like their favorite breakfast cereals.

However, like any other business, the pharmaceutical industry needs to thoroughly understand who its customers are, how its products are used, how those products compare to the competition, and what new challenges the company might face. At cocktail

parties, I jokingly tell people that my job is fortune telling—and that's really not too far off from what I do on a day-to-day basis. I identify trends and create forecast models for new drugs based on the hidden meanings behind clinical-trial results.

Despite the fact that my Ph.D. was somewhat oncology-related (I studied the enzymes involved in the repair of damaged DNA), I had to swallow my pride and lose my status as an "expert" in my field when I started at the company as a research analyst. My first task was to write a syndicated report on the obesity drug market, of which I knew absolutely nothing. Writing that report was like writing my Ph.D. thesis all over again.

Since then, I have built up my knowledge of metabolic disorders and have become an industry expert, frequently cited in the media about my opinions regarding drug markets. My old Ph.D. adviser used to joke that while he hadn't seen me in ages, he would periodically hear me talking about a new drug on NPR in the mornings.

A Ph.D. isn't necessary for my job, but many of the transitional skills I learned in graduate school (i.e., project management) and the understanding I acquired there of the language of science and medicine were a huge help in getting me up to speed quickly.

I now manage a team of 10 analysts who write their own reports. In my role, I still get to wear my "professor hat": I guide the research of the analysts working on my team, question their assumptions, improve the rigor of their analysis, and mentor them on their own journeys from bench to desk. But instead of publishing papers in academic journals, we publish research reports for the pharmaceutical industry. And instead of lecturing to classrooms full of students, we give presentations to client teams. All in all, I would summarize my company, with its corporate yet collegial feel, as being an interesting bridge between the academic and commercial worlds.

Now that I have spent time on both sides of the company's doors, as both a job seeker and a hiring manager, I have seen what works and what doesn't work for those seeking to get a foot through the doors of my segment of the pharmaceutical industry. It is my hope to impart some of that insight to Ph.D.'s looking to transition from academe to the commercial world.

So here are my top tips about finding a job outside academe:

**Swallow your pride.** Having a Ph.D. means you are knowledgeable about a specific topic and can produce original research. But it doesn't make you necessarily smarter than non-Ph.D. holders. And certainly, a Ph.D. is not necessary for most jobs, including my own.

I work alongside many talented people from an assortment of backgrounds. Although having a Ph.D. in a relevant disease area is a big plus when we make hiring decisions, there is just as much value in having relevant industry experience, or functional experience from working in market research or as a medical writer.

I don't regret for a second the years I spent in graduate school, and having a Ph.D. still carries significant gravitas when interacting with clients. But I cannot help but note that many people I have met over the years who are working at equivalent positions in various companies (including my own) are, on average, about eight years younger than me. That coincides exactly with the number of years that I was in graduate school pursuing my master's degree and Ph.D.

**Be persistent.** I was rejected twice by my company. The first time, I submitted my résumé at a career fair and, two weeks later, received a polite e-mail saying "thanks, but no thanks." So I continued my search. A few months later, I went to a different career fair while at the tail end of writing my dissertation, visited the company's booth, and submitted my résumé again.

This time, I got an interview. In fact, things were going really well, and the company was moving quickly. My first interview, done over the phone, occurred just before my Ph.D. defense, and the second-round interview was scheduled just a few days after the defense. In addition to several face-to-face meetings, I also had to complete a writing test. I thought I was a shoe-in for the job, which would have involved working on the company's new line of syndicated reports.

Unfortunately, shortly after the second interview, things began to slow down, grinding to a halt. After a month of waiting for the elusive offer letter, the hiring manager called to explain to me that while I was the top candidate for the position, there was a hiring freeze until the company could see if the new product line was

profitable. Ultimately, it wasn't, and the position was eliminated.

Many months later, I sent the vice president of the company an e-mail asking if there were any other positions for which they could use someone with my qualifications. He invited me to lunch to discuss options. When I arrived, unbeknownst to me, he had arranged a full day of interviews, including a meeting with the same hiring manager who had sent me a rejection letter half a year earlier. She subsequently hired me.

**Be clear about your reasons for leaving academe.** As a hiring manager, I am always keen to learn why candidates are quitting academe. I want to see that they understand the full reality of what it means to turn their backs on half a decade (or more) of rigorous training, and to no longer utilize any of the technical skills they have learned.

During interviews, I always explain that leaving the bench is not a revolving door, but is very much a one-way street. Too often, I see candidates apply just to explore options, without a clear reason of why they want to move to a nonacademic environment.

It is my job to hire people who will succeed and thrive in my company's environment. And you cannot do so if you are hesitant about stepping out of the ivory tower, or are constantly looking back over your shoulder at the life you had, rather than looking forward. So I probe for both the "push" factors that are motivating job candidates to leave the bench, and also the "pull" factors about why they are interested in my industry or my company. If either factor is unclear, or if I see telltale signs—such as the ubiquitous lists of laboratory skills that show up on academic CVs—then I know that the candidates aren't quite ready to step into the nonacademic world.

**Work on your verbal and written communication skills.**

Those are important skills in the academic world, but they are critical in the business world, where everyone must work in a team environment. In my line of work, we must speak with clients and physicians on a regular basis, and we are in the business of writing reports and selling our insights to our clients. Despite how good a candidate's knowledge and analytical skills may be, if he or she is a poor writer, that ultimately results in more work for me since I have

to review every bit of content being created by my team.

That's why we have every candidate complete both a writing test and a presentation-skills test. And that's also why I reject so many applications solely on the basis of poor grammar on a cover letter or typos on a résumé. Attention to detail is another key marker of success. I evaluate verbal communication skills during face-to-face interviews, where I not only gauge the thoughtfulness of a candidate's response but also look for eye contact, enthusiasm, confidence, and grace under pressure.

**Do your homework.** I cannot emphasize enough how important it is to thoroughly do your research when applying for a job. Even before you interview, you should have a reasonable understanding of the company and the position you are applying for. Tailor your cover letter and résumé to specifically highlight how your expertise and skills match the company's expectations for the role. When I was applying for jobs, I created a unique résumé and cover letter for each position.

On the hiring side, I probably look at a minimum of 50 résumés for each job opening. Of those, I reject probably 75 percent right off the bat, due to typos or poor grammar, or because it was apparent that the candidate recycled the résumé in an effort to cast as wide a net as possible (and unfortunately, such services as Monster.com or LinkedIn make applying for jobs as simple as clicking a button).

Many cover letters and résumés I receive highlight laboratory skills, but unfortunately my company has little use of PCR or protein purification skills, no matter how much of an expert you are on the latest technologies. One candidate did tailor her application enough to get an interview but was rejected after she made the mistake of asking us where we keep our labs (with a Google search she should have learned that we have none).

By the way, there is nothing wrong with a functional résumé if you don't have significant work experience. But just remember to make the functions relevant to the job you are seeking. Too many academics feel the need to list every single skill and achievement they have ever accomplished in their lifetime.

**Don't apply until you are ready to start working.** Job ads are placed to fill specific openings, and most companies are in a hurry

to fill those positions. In the business world, time is more valuable than money (in contrast to the lab, where it feels like you have all the time in the world, but very little money).

Too often I receive wonderful résumés from highly qualified candidates who are still many months from completing their degrees. Because I cannot afford to wait six months for new employees to start, I have no choice but to send my apologies, along with an invitation to apply again when they are closer to finishing. Some companies, particularly in the consulting and banking industries, have annual recruitment cycles based on the academic calendar and try to identify an incoming "class" of recruits up to six months in advance. But such efforts tend to be the exception rather than the rule.

**Network, network, network.** My final piece of advice: Use your network as much as possible. Reach out to classmates, friends, friends of friends. Tap into your university's alumni networks. Many people out there have successfully transitioned into nonacademic jobs and are willing to help you find your ideal position or share strategies. I can personally count at least five people who I have helped to bring into my company. Some of them were classmates, others were strangers from my university who reached out to me looking for career options. We didn't necessarily have job openings when they first got in touch with me, but oftentimes those folks became the first ones I contacted when I learned of openings. It is always preferable to have a connection on the inside who can drop your résumé in front of a hiring manager, rather than to submit your application randomly in the hopes of being picked out of the pile.

Instead of your subject-specific knowledge or technical skills, it is your university network of students, postdocs, and alumni that will be one of the most valuable things that you take from your time in graduate school.

*Donny Wong earned a Ph.D. in the biological sciences from Harvard University in 2003. He is now senior director of metabolic disorders at Decision Resources, in Britain.*

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Sort by Oldest first Follow comments: by e-mail by RSSReal-time updating is **paused**. ([Resume](#))**Gretchen Weber** 1 day ago

"Shoe-in"? Is this an editing error or ignorance of idiom? The expression is "shoo-in," as shooing cows into the barn at night or shooing pigeons off the windowsill.

7 people liked this.

**11182967** 1 day ago in reply to Gretchen Weber

A quick Google search suggests this is hardly a settled issue. There are arguments for both the "shoe in the door" and the "shoo in the cattle" versions (the former personifies an action; the latter implies an unseen agent doing the shoo-ing--both seem a little odd). Pulliam: can you take on this one and provide us some degree of certainty of derivation? (OK?)

10 people liked this.

**henry\_adams** 1 day ago

Thank you for letting people know how the world outside academia works. I wish that graduate programs prepared their students for nonacademic job searches!

Henry Adams

8 people liked this.

**fortysomethingprof** 1 day ago in reply to henry\_adams

Should we offer three credits of golf in case the students decide to become businessmen? There have to be some boundaries on what we are expected to prepare students for. You can say, well there are general things like communications skills and whatnot, but we already do that. How do we broaden education all the while our disciplines become even more specialized?

(Edited by author 1 day ago)

2 people liked this.

**fobean** 1 day ago in reply to fortysomethingprof

My, my. Could you be a trifle less condescending? I think it would be a struggle, fortysomethingprof.

Let's look at the numbers. Virtually all graduate programs now produce many more PhDs than there are jobs in academia. Further, programs consider anyone with a PhD that is "vintage" (over three years old) to be spoiled goods. This means that in many fields (the humanities, particularly) approximately 90% of PhD recipients will wind up working

outside academia.

So, it isn't "in case" students wish to work outside academia. It is the virtually sure thing that they will work outside of academia. The resistance to being realistic about this has to do with the potential fallout if grad students knew that they had a 90% chance of having to leave the academy (unless they are part of that elite class of people descended from academics, people descended from the wealthy class, very pretty people with excellent social skills, or gay people--well, those gay people who essentially live on campus like perennial students who never become adults with families and are good-looking, to boot). If grad students knew this, they might stop being grad students, and then for whom would you be teaching graduate classes?

Most PhDs are now worthless in terms of a person being able to get a job and support him/herself and a family. For those people not descended from the wealthy class, for whom a degree is meant to help them in a career that will earn money, this is seriously problematic. If graduate students were trained better in how to get a job outside academia, there might be fewer really bitter people who talk to their representatives about why it is that graduate programs need to be cut. I know that I frequently write to my representatives and talk to fellow constituents about why it is that graduate programs at public universities need to either justify themselves or be cut--as they are a huge waste of taxpayer money and the lives of very bright people who might have otherwise served their communities.

You might want to consider just how convincing a person with a PhD and no job can be to a representative.

The truth of the matter is that most people studying for PhDs should be either required or seriously encouraged to pursue a degree or certification in addition to their PhD--one which will give them marketable skills. If I had known, for example, about Western Governors University back in the day, I would have studied TESOL in addition to my PhD studies (WGU is inexpensive and designed for people who are autodidacts with tough schedules--it is also well accredited). Or, I might have studied Instructional Design. Or, I might have studied nursing. Or, I might have studied software or some IT field. With any of these marketable skills--and a PhD--I would have had a job long ago.

Your department does not need to offer classes--classes are offered in other departments, and your department could easily team with other programs on campus for a "minor" area that would offer job skills. For example, a degree in English composition/rhetoric/literacy with an education "certification" in TESOL. Or, a degree in history or art history or English literature with an education "certification" in instructional design or an Information Studies degree in website design (both very handy for someone who winds up at a museum or other secondary educational field). Or, a degree in psychology with an associated degree in nursing (very handy for someone who might be a diabetes educator, addiction counselor, or who ultimately pursues a certified nurse practitioner degree and could prescribe medications).

Seriously--try not being snarky and pay attention instead to the voices of people who are telling you that you are ruining people's lives. You are ruining people's lives--you are responsible for this. You cannot pawn it off by talking about their "poor choices." You need to deal with the fact that maintaining your position (if it is not in a STEM field) can only be accomplished by ruining the lives of 9 out of 10 of the graduate students you teach and of 5 out of 10 of the undergraduate students majoring in your field. You aren't that special. Your job is unnecessary, you are over-paid for it, and the damage you do is not justifiable. You can ameliorate the damage--but only if you listen to others and quit being snarky.

(Edited by author 1 day ago)

4 people liked this.



**803861337** 13 hours ago in reply to fobean

Thank you. Talk all you want about how your discipline is underrepresented; given the amount government spends on you (which is a lot even with cuts) you are effectively an unjustifiable expense. "Your job is unnecessary, you are over-paid for it" says it all. Anyone in an unnecessary job should be ready for the winds of change to show the public how useful their position really is; one of the beauties of living in a democracy.





**quepasso** 7 hours ago in reply to fobean

just a little perspective on the STEM bubble. while it is true still that almost everyone i know in the biomedical field (and myself) still finds employment in academic areas the writing is on the wall. postdocs are being paid <20/hr before taxes (and these are mostly not great training opportunities with a prestigious mentor but just cheaper and easier to sell on a grant application than hiring a research scientist). almost everyone i know (granted that is not quite a meta-analysis) is taking any job wherever they can (showing the growing desperation), everyone is scraping for funding and the pot is getting smaller each year and the number of applicants larger. we are at best at ~20% funding rates for any major source and it is going only in one direction. so ~80% more will be left dry. and everyone everywhere is expected to get funding (with massive overhead of course) - even at teaching schools. all that is not even really a problem - just the way it is. the problem comes in when everybody is told that they should just get more education/degrees they will be fine. i remember one of my committee members saying with full conviction that the PhD will open a lot of opportunities. really? without a postdoc your opportunities are to teach community college, if that. and if you did not get funding during your postdoc (again funding rates at ~20% and dipping) you'll be uncompetitive for a faculty position. next thing you know your biomed student is settled with \$100,000 in debt and working as an adjunct at three institutions with no benefits just to stay above water. for the majority, i bet you, it is coming if not already here.

faculty need to stop thinking that it still works today how it worked for them - get PhD, postdoc if you want (as a stepping stone of course, not an endless loop), and then get a tenure track junior faculty position, some startup funds, protected time to get your research going (negotiated) and then you apply for funding with a realistic chance that a good proposal will eventually (upon third submission if necessary) get funded - and if you get good research done with your hard money you can compensate (to an extend) even if the funding thing does not work out that well. that is not how it works any more. now its PhD, have to get at least two years postdoc (under any condition) and need to secure funding while on your postdoc, become (non-tenure track) junior faculty (negotiate for whatever you want if you want to risk being passed over for one of the other 100 applicants), need to get funding (with at best one resubmission and that is going away too) asap and stay funded or you're a failure. again that is not a problem, just the way it is. tell students honestly and they can make their choice whether they want to be in it for the cost. don't tell them to get a PhD and they'll do just fine.

2 people liked this. [Like](#)



**Lily THERESA** 11 hours ago in reply to fortysomethingprof

That's funny. I spent one year at a smallish university in the south where all male professors in my department were expected to play golf together at least once a month. Since racquetball had been the gentleman's sport in grad school, I did indeed find myself ill-prepared. Three credits of golf might have come in handy with or without ambitions to become a businessman...

[Like](#)



**nunya** 1 day ago

This is another article detailing the importance of the process, rather than the product of a PhD. I believe I'm learning so much about the very things the author described, project management, communication, networking, detail, questioning - that I can easily transition. But, I also WELCOME a transition. Maybe that's the key.

7 people liked this. [Like](#)



**aoberlin** 1 day ago in reply to nunya

The key question is whether anyone cares that you CAN do these things when they have access to so many who already HAVE, and the answer depends entirely on the industry, your discipline, and your school. Management consulting, for example, is not a realistic option for many, or even most, PhDs.

2 people liked this. [Like](#)



**waratah104** 1 day ago

Excellent guidance. I can relate to everything he mentioned given my own experience. It rings true throughout, so I won't waste time complaining about idioms. Nicely done.

6 people liked this. [Like](#)



**quepasso** 1 day ago

where would one find a listing for such a job? certainly not on the chronicle or HREC, etc? i would never have figured a company would consider a PhD for a position where you don not need it. overqualified = rejected, no?  
what keyword would one use for a job search? report-writing? sales?

2 people liked this. [Like](#)



**dmarshak** 1 day ago

Gretchen is right about the spelling but not the meaning of "shoo". It is slang for "sure".

[Like](#)



**quepasso** 1 day ago

really? that is what this discussion is going to focus on, spelling? anybody got anything to actually say or ask of any real relevance?

7 people liked this. [Like](#)



**ocotilloangel** 1 day ago

Does anyone know how I can hire someone to guide me through this process? My academic expertise is totally transferrable to marketing and UX, and I desperately want out of the Ivory Tower, but I need (inexpensive) one-on-one help with my transition. While cultivating humility and networks is excellent advice, it seems as though Dr. Wong's experience had a lot to do with luck.

[Like](#)



**Lily THERESA** 11 hours ago in reply to ocotilloangel

To ocotilloangel: Contact Rose THERESA via @StoryLabSF

Like



**esineva** 1 day ago

One more evidence that HR rules (ruins) the planet. They establish rules, the others follow. Hey, PhD don't be afraid. Just play the game. And we will call it wisdom.

1 person liked this.

Like

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