

15 minutes to develop your research career

Podcast Transcript

Episode 2: Stepping up, moving on and alternative career paths for researchers

Claire Doffegnies: Hi, this is the [Taylor & Francis](#) and [Vitae](#) podcast on developing your research career. I'm Claire Doffegnies, from Taylor & Francis.

Marie Thouaille: And I'm Marie Thouaille from Vitae.

Claire Doffegnies: In this episode, Marie and I are going to be exploring the many and varied career paths that are open to researchers.

Claire Doffegnies: What options are available to you?

Janet Metcalfe: We found people who went into research outside academia, but they're also going into research policy. They're going into science communication. Lawyers, as in patents. They're working as professionals inside higher education.

Claire Doffegnies: Does it always have to be academia?

David Smith: I think there's so many career options for PhD students. I think that the skills that you acquire are some of the most transferable skills that exist.

Claire Doffegnies: What happens if you'd like to go elsewhere?

Janet Metcalfe: I'd encourage researchers to just be brave. They have so much experience, and so much to offer.

Claire Doffegnies: And if so, where might that elsewhere be?

We're here in London and we've got our bus passes at the ready. First stop, Euston. And we're going to be discussing researcher's career options with a number of people. Including a specialist careers consultant, and the head of Vitae.

We'll be exploring what opportunities are out there for researchers, including alternatives to academia. Giving you some ideas and tips, if you're considering stepping up or moving on. So settle in for the next 15 minutes, as we explore alternative career paths for researchers.

Marie Thouaille: I'm here today with Janet Metcalfe from [Vitae](#).

Janet Metcalfe: So I head Vitae, and Vitae's an organization that supports the professional development of researchers. Clearly, careers of researchers is a very important part of that. It's understanding what types of careers researchers can have, but also giving them some help and advice, in terms of how to find the best career for them.

Vitae has recently done a project called, What Do Research Staff Do Next? And that's looking at, where do postdoctoral researchers go, if they don't get academic positions? It's a fantastic array of occupations that came out. I mean, we found people who went clearly, into research outside academia. But they're also going into policy, research policy. They're going into science communication. Lawyers, as in patents. They're working as professionals inside higher education. That's now, emerging as quite a big career opportunity.

For example, working in research offices or in public engagement, inside universities. Or even helping researchers, themselves. So as researcher developers or careers advisors. And one of the interesting things to come out of this project, is that of the people who responded to this survey, which was across Europe, 80% of them wanted to be academics, while they were still in academia as a researcher, but only 15% will go back. Their job satisfaction is very high.

Marie Thouaille: That's a very striking statistic. What do you think are the transferable skills that researchers have, and how valued do you think they are, outside of academia?

Janet Metcalfe: Well, that's one of the questions we asked the people who responded to this project, about which competencies they're using most in their current employment. The one that came top in every single employment sector, was around communication skills. Which is clearly something you develop, while you're being a researcher. About half were highlighting their critical thinking, the importance of teamwork and collaboration, and independent working. Which every researcher knows, is something that they get very used to.

When we talk to employers, one of the things that comes out really strongly, is agility. The ability to react quickly to changing circumstances. And I think that's something that researchers do have, in that their research projects are always changing circumstances. But they may not realize that they can apply that.

Marie Thouaille: How mobile is the job market for researchers? Do you think there's geographic limitations for PhDs emerging in the market?

Janet Metcalfe: Oh, I think one of the challenges for researchers is trying not to be mobile. So many of them are chasing opportunities and moving all over the world, in order to find that postdoctoral position, or to find a permanent academic position. I think that's one of the challenges for the role. How much are you prepared to sacrifice, in terms of your personal circumstances, in order to get that treasured academic position?

Marie Thouaille: So we've talked about the value of researchers, maybe going from an academic job into a non-academic job. But I wonder about the opposite. If a researcher goes into a non-academic job and comes back into academia, does that work? Is that valued? Is there a benefit to this?

Janet Metcalfe: The intersectional mobility of researchers is still very much out of academia and into other sectors. It's increasing, but there's still much less movement in the other direction. That can be quite challenging. I mean, certainly, we found examples of it in the people who responded in

our project. But I think academia is still got some way to go, before they recognize the value of that external experience.

Marie Thouaille: So Janet, that's been really, really fascinating to speak to you about this. And I was wondering if you could tell us, what your top tip is for researchers, as they think about their careers.

Janet Metcalfe: I'd encourage researchers to just be brave. They have so much experience, and so much to offer to any employer. They should be positive. They should look at the opportunities that are outside and inside academia. Just realize they have so much to offer, and make a really positive decision in terms of careers.

Claire Doffegnies: Janet's given us a great introduction. But what does this mean in reality? Who can you turn to for advice, if you're considering a route out of academia, but still want to use all those valuable skills you developed as a researcher?

Next, we're going to talk to Kate Murray, who's careers consultant at [King's College London](#), to hear about the questions researchers ask her the most, and the advice that she gives.

Kate Murray: My name is Kate Murray. I'm the careers consultant, specifically for research staff here at King's. So I work jointly with my colleague, who works with PhDs. We work across the whole gamut of people at Kings, everything from ancient politics research to zebrafish. It could be anything.

And the kind of stages that they're at, I would say mostly, people are talking to me within about a year of thinking about leaving. Within a year of that contract coming up, some people come and talk to me just as their contract's finishing. It's always slightly alarming. There are some very organized people that come and talk to me right at the beginning. But typically, it's within six months, a year before the end of their contract.

Marie Thouaille: I was wondering, if you could tell us a little bit more about the guidance that King's currently offers.

Kate Murray: We spend up to an hour at a time with people, and people can come as often as they like, to talk to us. And we talk through that whole career decision-making piece, if you like. Everything from, I don't know whether I want to stay here, what are my options? And then, into the more practical stuff. The CVs, applications, interviews, helping people with assessment centers.

And also, we work through research society. So in faculties, we will be approached to come and help, as part of their careers events that they organize, as well. We also have online resources. Today, for example, I'm going to be recording a webinar, or delivering a webinar about interviews. People don't have to come in, they can do it sitting at their desk, as well.

Marie Thouaille: Do you think part of the issue is that a lot of researchers feel maybe it's a distraction to be focusing on your career, rather than the work that you're doing now?

Kate Murray: I think that's probably true. I think that people do see it as a distraction. And sometimes, obviously, people are not encouraged to spend that time thinking about themselves. But if being satisfied in what you do makes you a happier worker, I feel that spending a bit more time thinking about yourself, and how you approach work, or what you want to get out of it, should be to the benefit of the whole organization.

Marie Thouaille: I was just wondering if you could give us one tip, that you'd give someone who's just completed their PhD and isn't sure where to go next, or what to do next.

Kate Murray: The conversation that I often have with people, is trying to help them decide what change they want to see in the world. What is the thing that they are most bothered about, that they want to see a difference? And once you have some idea of what that is, the thing that concerns you in the world, then from there, other decisions come. The kind of sector that you want to work in.

Once you've got a sense of what that change is, and for whom you want to make a difference, or to whom you want to make a difference, then it makes the rest of the decision-making a little bit easier.

Claire Doffegnies: Now, we're going to move on to talk to a couple of people, who've actually chosen to pursue alternative careers to academia, themselves. Why and how did they decide to make that leap? And what advice would they give to someone thinking of doing the same?

David Smith: I'm David Smith. And I'm a product analyst on the digital products team, at [Taylor & Francis](#). My job is mostly, looking at information about new products or existing products, and how we can improve those using better information about our customers.

Claire Doffegnies: Can you tell us a bit about how you came into your current role, and how you think your PhD helped you with that?

David Smith: I was more interested in having a career in technology. And so, I joined the graduate scheme at Informa, and joined Taylor & Francis in their technology team. Definitely, my background in academia has helped me with that. I think it was easier for me to get a technology job here, than it would have been to get a technology job at Amazon, or whatever, because I have a good knowledge of the field that the team works in.

Claire Doffegnies: And were there any particular challenges, during your transition from research to your new career?

David Smith: One of the things I miss definitely, is having time just to talk to people about things that might seem irrelevant. And out of those conversations, usually, you end up finding something actually, that's really relevant. That happens a lot less in a business context, because there's a lot of goals and targets and aims, and people are very focused on those goals.

Actually, many of the skills, particularly from PhD research, are just so transferrable. Because the ability to look at things critically, to pull things apart, work out what's not working, to analyze information, to absorb huge amounts of information, and then synthesize that into something

smaller, all essential to a PhD. And extremely valuable in a business context, as well.

I think there's so many career options for PhD students. I think that the skills that you acquire through advanced study and research, are some of the most transferable skills that exist. You would struggle to find a successful company that doesn't want to employ people who have that kind of critical eye, and that ability to analyze. If you can sell yourself on that basis, I think there'll be endless possibilities.

Claire Doffegnies: Is there one skill that you use on a daily basis, that you honed in from your PhD?

David Smith: Yeah, I think it's just the ability to look at something critically, not to make lazy assumptions. Not to take for granted what you've been told. Essentially, that comprises my entire job, on a day-to-day basis.

Emma Kennedy: Hi, my name is Emma Kennedy. I am an education advisor in academic practice, at [Queen Mary University of London](#). My job involves mostly staff training, around teaching and learning. So we run a post-graduate certificate in teaching and learning, that a lot of the staff do. But also, one-off workshops that they do as part of their professional development.

Marie Thouaille:

Can you tell us a little bit about your background, and how you made the transition from PhD research into your current role?

Emma Kennedy: Sure, so my PhD was in English Literature. And that's mainly my background, until I came into this role. When I was a PhD student, I did quite a lot of teaching. I really enjoyed it.

Emma Kennedy: After I finished my PhD, I was looking for just the kind of jobs that were not necessarily traditional academic jobs, but that still involved teaching in higher education. That's when I came upon this job, and I was lucky enough to get it, because I have experience in teaching.

Marie Thouaille: Did you face any particular challenges, during your transition from PhD to working?

Emma Kennedy: Yeah. One of the main challenges I faced, was in terms of confidence. Imposter syndrome is a really big thing for PhD students. And it's not something you leave behind when you finish your PhD. Transitioning into a new role meant that I just felt all over again, that feeling of, am I trained for this? Do I have enough experience to be able to do this? Am I just an eternal student? That was a big thing, realizing that I can actually be a professional. Not feeling like just, quote-unquote, a student.

Marie Thouaille: Do you think that some of it is about the professional identity that you develop as a researcher, thinking you're a PhD student and now, suddenly, you have to develop a whole new professional identity?

Emma Kennedy: For sure. I think that's really important. I think a lot of PhD students really do themselves down by thinking, "I'm just a student, I'm just studying." But actually, you're not a student. You do have a professional identity. But it can be quite hard to accept that you have the skills necessary, to be a professional.

Marie Thouaille: Thinking about your own background and now your current work, are you able to apply your research background to your current role? And if so, how do you do it?

Emma Kennedy: Absolutely. I don't apply very much, in terms of the content of my research. My research was on 17th Century Literature, which is not that relevant to what most people are doing. But in terms of gathering together lots of information, passing information, things like marketing and project management, even though we don't necessarily think of what we do in those terms.

All the time, as a PhD student, you're managing a project. You're marketing yourself. You're communicating with lots of different parts of the university, often other agencies, as well. And quite often, the public. Yeah, I think I learned a lot from managing that PhD project.

Claire Doffegnies: What's your biggest takeaway from today, Marie?

Marie Thouaille: I think one of the themes that came up a lot today, was actually taking control of your career and not leaving it to the last minute. And actually drawing on all the resources that are available, and all the support that is available within institutions.

Either, if you're a PhD student or an early career researcher, there's a wealth of resources out there, which need to be taken advantage of. I also really enjoyed Janet's point, about being brave. I think that's a fantastic piece of advice, that I would love for everybody to take on board.

Claire Doffegnies: I think what I've taken away from today, is how many different career paths are out there for researchers. There's not a one-size-fits-all. Everyone goes into different things, and there's so many skills that you gain as a researcher, that can be useful later on in your life.

Thanks to Marie, and everyone who's contributed today. Hope you've enjoyed listening. Look out for our next podcast, which will focus on academic mentoring. It'll be coming soon.