Finding Nonacademic Work Overseas

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By ROBIN MORIARTY

Whenever I speak with friends in the academic world, the conversation seems to inevitably turn to the same subject: how to make the transition from an academic career to a nonacademic one. Five years ago, I embarked on just such a transition. I earned a Ph.D. in political science from Emory University in 1998, with an emphasis on international relations and quantitative methods. While completing my dissertation, I worked for two years as a visiting instructor. I enjoyed teaching and interacting with students during those years, but I began to realize that academe was not the right career for me.

I was getting bored. I did not want a future of publish or perish, and, quite frankly, scholarship wasn't my passion. Making the decision to leave was very difficult because everyone told me that leaving academe now would mean leaving it forever.

I did not want to burn any bridges, but I had to make a change, so I eliminated all of my academic options. In the process of defending my dissertation and graduating, I did not apply for any tenure-track jobs or visiting positions.

There I was -- no plans, no interviews, no job. And I didn't know where to turn for help. Besides a lack of information about my options, I was suffering from a lack of confidence that I now realize plagues many new Ph.D.'s.

My department and my university did not seem equipped to help. The department was full of career academics, and the university's career center was geared toward undergraduates or M.B.A.'s. I sent out some résumés but received no responses.

Finally I realized I needed professional help. Other people had paid me to teach them about international relations, I figured, so maybe I should pay someone to teach me about job searches. I had very little money, but I hired someone to develop my résumé and to coach me. He helped me identify my transferable skills and my job prospects, and he helped me refine my two-minute speech to explain how my academic skills could be used in the business world. He provided a much-needed boost of confidence; I didn't feel stranded and hopeless anymore.

After getting my act together, I started pounding the pavement. As you can imagine, a Ph.D. in political science gets an interesting reaction in the business sector. It's a confused, "I'm-not-sure-I-know-what-to-do-with-you" kind of look.
Employers usually asked me if I was a philosophy major, or if I had an opinion on the latest political scandal. Because my academic work focused on international issues and strategic decision-making methodologies, I clarified that I wanted to work in international business on strategic issues.

After a few months of hearing no, I started hearing yes. I ended my search by accepting a job in the international division of BellSouth. I started traveling and working with teams in emerging markets to guide them as they evaluated strategic options. I was actually using my academic training while teaching others to use analytical methodologies in decision making.

I am now the regional director of Latin American Operations for BellSouth. I live in Buenos Aires and work in four countries -- Argentina, Chile, Uruguay, and Venezuela. I feel good about my company's work because we are building infrastructure that will help economies develop, and we spend millions of dollars every year to get working children off the streets and into schools.

After I had been in my new job only a few weeks, the human-resources manager came by to say hello. She asked how I was adjusting to the "difficult" corporate world after coming from the "less stressful" academic world. It was all I could do to keep from bursting out laughing.

Let's see: I'm only working five days a week. At night, I am not furiously preparing a lecture for the next day. And I actually enjoy weekends without the nagging feeling that I should be working on more revisions and resubmissions. Yeah, I think I've adjusted just fine, thanks.

And it turns out that what my company likes best about me is that I'm "different." If you ask a question of 10 M.B.A.'s and of me, you'll get one answer 10 times and another answer that comes from a unique (and admittedly sometimes strange) perspective. Variety and new approaches are an asset for any organization.

I haven't left the academic world completely. I am just participating in the parts that I find most enjoyable. I take graduate courses, I give guest lectures, and I have been involved in mentoring programs for undergraduates. If I ever go back to teaching some day, I will be a much better contributor because of the variety of experiences I am having now.

Because of my positive experiences, people often ask me for advice about making a career change. Here is what I tell them:

Get help. I don't mean from your friends and family or even from your campus career center. They all mean well, but get help from someone who can see you objectively and who knows what employers are looking for. You don't have to hire someone, as I did. Find someone who has had a lot of experience in job searches. Books can be helpful, but I think that Ph.D.'s need additional assistance and coaching because the key is to translate academic skills into business ones, which is not always covered in the manuals.
Choose carefully. Pick an industry or a company whose activities and values are in line with your own. I am more motivated to work for a corporation that is developing infrastructure in the developing world than I would be for one that sells widgets. Find the right combination for you.

Use your academic skills. Find a job that lets you apply the skills you learned in your Ph.D. program. Look for opportunities to use what you already know (although it will be on an application level rather than a theoretical one).

Do not underestimate the value of a Ph.D. A doctoral degree provides instant credibility that helps any organization when meeting with clients, vendors, banks, or government officials. A Ph.D. distinguishes you and identifies you as a serious professional with intelligence, conviction, determination, and sophisticated skills. Do not diminish your accomplishments; otherwise, employers will diminish them, too.

Stay involved with academe. Find a way to contribute. Attend and give lectures on campuses. Share your experiences. Many new ideas and fresh perspectives come from the university. Not only will this keep you sharp, it will be helpful to your new organization.

If you are thinking about leaving academe for another line of work, let me reassure you: The opportunities are out there, and the change can be rewarding.

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