Career paths of academic researchers: COMPUTING

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Computing - Stephen

After completing a PhD in Computing, Stephen held two research contracts over a period of two and a half years before moving into his current job as a research scientist with a major electronics firm.

WHAT PROMPTED YOU TO CONSIDER OPTIONS OUTSIDE ACADEMIA?
After my PhD I stayed at university to try out contract research work as a possible long term career choice, however, the best the department could offer me was a 6 - 9 month extension to my 18-month contract. I was looking for more stability and options outside academia seemed to offer more permanence, a better salary and the opportunity for career progression. I wanted to really get stuck into a proper career path with the associated responsibilities and rewards.

HOW DID YOU FEEL ABOUT THE TRANSFERABILITY OF YOUR SKILLS AND KNOWLEDGE?
Initially, I had hoped to stay roughly within my research field but this did not happen so I knew I would carry little of my expertise across. I did have a concern about not using my specific subject knowledge but I was confident about the general transferability of my skills - particularly computer programming and research methodology that apply in many situations.

COPING WITH THE TRANSITION
I'd started to think about what might come next quite soon into the first research contract having seen other people having to move from one contract to the next. What happened was, the contract would start, you'd get into it, then you'd have to start looking for the next contract. The lack of security within the University was a strong motivator for me to move.

I used the Careers Service (including attending focused sessions for contract research staff on CV and interview skills), newspapers, trade magazines, the internet and recruitment agencies to help identify vacancies.

I found the transition to be lonely - but it got better. Leaving friends and family was difficult and I had to get used to having less freedom. I'd enjoyed the relaxed, friendly environment and good social life at the university. In terms of integrating into the new work environment, on a personal level there were no problems (good interpersonal skills were pretty important to smooth the way). However it took several months before I felt I was doing anything useful.

THE APPLICATION & INTERVIEW PROCESS
I needed both a CV and an application form for the jobs I targeted. The university CV course was very helpful for this. I would encourage people to identify exactly what the job is and try to match their CV/application form accordingly. For the job I am now in a fairly broad CV was sufficient as they took me on as a research person and then allocated me to a project. The interviews for different jobs were very mixed so I never knew what to expect. Some were heavily technical, others completely non-technical, which seemed strange for I.T. jobs. When asked why I wanted to move out of academia I said that I wanted to do something 'more real' and that would actually
be useful to someone rather than research for the sake of it. The whole process was a lot more enjoyable than I expected. I felt filled with confidence and raring to go. The 'real world' isn't so bad!

YOUR CURRENT JOB AND FUTURE PLANS
My current job involves developing high-end set top boxes for next generation digital TV and embedded software development. I really enjoy bringing all the bits together from the various project partners - very much what I enjoyed in my university project research. There is still the issue of 'will it ever get used?' and I do a lot of demos.

Working for a customer brings an increased commercial emphasis - things have to work! I don't write papers, but I do write documentation. Typical tasks in my working day (I have a nominal 37 hour week) might include software development, systems design, demonstrations (sometimes up to 5 a day), team planning, technical meetings, customer handling, co-ordinating other groups (internationally), networking and internet browsing. I get to play around with a lot of interesting software! I work flexitime and find I have more free time now than I did at university - work outside academia is not 'harder'.

Part of my work at university that I enjoyed was the teaching and I find I can use those pastoral, mentoring skills in my present work. Generally, I have a much clearer sense of direction, though my current job can be frustrating. I do miss the pure research - the freedom to try really new things - and the social side of the university, especially football! I would re-enter the university sector for the challenge of doing something really new and I think I'd be better at it after a period in industry. Taking a salary cut would be painful and the issue of stability / security would still be there. In the meantime I have another job move on the cards - hopefully to a role with more responsibility, still outside academia.

HINTS AND TIPS
· Don't move because of perceived lack of opportunities in academia. You need to try even harder to find them than other jobs but they do exist.
· Be sure of what you want and make sure your new job provides it.
· Consider trying to obtain extra business qualifications (if you don't already have them).
· Search on the www for vacancies and always get as much information about a company as you can before interview.
· Look through trade papers and magazines to help identify sector specific recruitment agencies and web sites.
The Competences displayed by Contract Research Staff who make a successful transition from one career to another

1. COMMUNICATION

1.1 Making an impact
- writes to provide evidence of suitability
- writes concisely and unambiguously, with a variety of layouts to help the reader
- presents self effectively in interviews and presentations with the intention of demonstrating strengths for the post
- asks questions to ensure the post and organisation are appropriate for the candidate
- articulates constraints (such as geographical limitations) effectively

1.2 Networking effectively
- networks with people who can influence
- uses a wide range of sources of information, both print and electronic
- builds relationships with named people in careers services or recruitment agencies
- asks questions of careers/recruitment staff to ensure that they understand what is sought and what will be suitable
- scans the environment by asking questions, visiting appropriate web sites and listening to people who might have an idea about the future

1.3. Persuading
- uses well reasoned arguments in applications, interviews and presentations
- is thoroughly prepared for application and interview - having researched the organisation and its environment and being fully self aware
- provides a range of examples of achievements which used relevant key skills

2. COGNITIVE

2.1 Positive/analytical thinking and use of judgement
- positive thinker, when things go wrong, looking forward and putting effort into next attempt
- sees potential in things which are not immediately obviously suitable
- uses judgement to assess the suitability of a post in relation to key skills, preferences and potential
- analytical thinker in identifying own strengths, key skills from experience in the present and previous positions and relating them to requirements of new posts
- makes timely decisions to take action (or not)

2.2 Lateral/creative/conceptual thinking
- lateral thinker, in looking far outside the expected posts in seeking a change - systematically assembles and presents relevant data about self and links it to qualities required for posts
- makes connections between unrelated fields of work and the application of key skills
- innovative in seeking posts and presenting oneself as a candidate
- uses initiative to make self known to people who can help

2.3 Political/Collaborative thinking
- strategic thinker, planning the 'campaign' for finding a new career
understands the political implications of situations and events by being sensitive to the environment in which an organisation is operating and to interview questions or answers to candidate's questions
• collaborates with colleagues, friends and advisers who can give advice or feedback to help the process of changing career

3. SELF DEVELOPMENT

• undertakes voluntary work/work shadowing to get experience to help in decision making
• uses mentors to support transition
• gets additional qualifications to help transition
• has an ongoing personal development plan which is regularly updated

4. SELF MANAGEMENT

4.1 Positive/enthusiastic
• realistic about how long things will take and expectations
• has energy
• is enthusiastic - talks with passion/sees a positive side to everything/does things does with good spirit even when they are not preferred tasks
• responsible - works to standards expected/meets deadlines/has pride in work and self

4.2 Persistence/stamina
• persistent in making applications despite disappointments
• stamina to keep making consistently high quality applications and attend and make an impression at interviews whilst still maintaining standards in current duties and responsibilities

4.3 Flexible/open-minded
• flexible, in listening to feedback which requires action not previously thought of and in applying for posts which had not appeared appropriate formerly
• open minded in applying for a range of posts which require key skills but will need a lot of new learning as well
• inquisitive about what the world outside academia has to offer
• does not dismiss anything

4.4 Self confident and self controlled
• talks objectively about strengths, needs for development and achievements - with evidence
• self aware - has a list of everything to offer an employer, backed by evidence for previous performance (at work or elsewhere)
• objective - looking at things as they are - without bias from past experience
• adaptable, being willing to try new things which are necessary to progress in the direction required to fit a career plan
• assertive
• self controlled when facing anger, disappointment, frustration and able to vent these emotions quickly and then move forward positively
• has a clear vision for self
• insightful - knows how to build a positive reputation
5. DRIVE TO ACHIEVE

· immerses self in finding knowledge about new career field
· proactive in seeking new opportunities
· uses external resources to help achieve goals
· pays attention to detail