Career paths of academic researchers:

EDUCATION

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**Education - Byron**

**Background**
I completed undergraduate and postgraduate courses in Geography and became a Research Assistant studying poverty and rurality. Following a period off teaching in a secondary school, I switched research disciplines to education and worked as a Research Assistant on a study of teaching in a restructured public service and its interface between the community and local primary schools. I progressed to Research Officer in an independent research institute evaluating various central government and EU programmes and then returned to academic research as a Research Fellow working on a project studying the effect of gender and learning on achievement in junior schools.

Whilst in this final position, I recognised that without a PhD and with a career that veered between different departments, organisations and sectors, I was in a tricky situation. I decided to get out of contract research into a position that offered permanent employment with either the Civil Service or a commercial research organisation.

I scoured the jobs pages in the press and found that the Wednesday Guardian offered a number of job opportunities. The interview procedure for most of them was not that different from the interviews for research jobs though they asked more probing questions relating to business development and winning money in addition to competency in undertaking research work. Then, with job offers in both the Civil Service and commercial research, I opted for the latter as it did not require a move to London and the higher salary also appealed.

**Transferable skills development**
The main skills I developed from working as a researcher include:
- Research design with particular focus on deskwork to investigate, explore and develop problems.
- Generating methods to test research work. Developing economic models of research and undertaking theoretical and/or practical investigations.
- Oral and written communication. Writing and submitting proposals for new research. Presenting data, adapting to different levels of understanding and active listening.
- Interpersonal skills. Building and developing relationships, liaising with clients, motivating and co-operating with others.

I use all these skills in commercial research but I find that I have to refine and adapt them towards the commercial sector. The drawbacks of working in commercial research for me is the very strong feeling of a loss of identity as a writer, the undeniable need to make money, the loss of some autonomy when dealing with research sponsors and the poor sick pay and holiday entitlements.

**Messages**
I believe there is a big gap in the commercial market for quality people, which contract research staff can fill, provided you are prepared to lose a little autonomy and become more commercially aware and focused. However, you will find, perhaps for the first time, that you have some peace of mind as there is more job security and the jobs are usually better paid.
Education - Sarah

Background
I graduated with a B.Sc. in Economics and Statistics and immediately completed a Postgraduate Certificate in Education. I taught for four years, took four years out to bring up my children then began to look for part-time work. My first post was in the Department of Education at a Welsh University, researching the impact from the teacher's perspective that the GCSE exam, introduced two years previously, had had on pupils. This was followed by a number of smaller projects and some self-employed consultancy work utilising my knowledge of using statistics in education.

I was appointed to a full time research position studying how to deliver a particularly difficult module of health science more interestingly and innovatively. I enjoyed the variety of the work, the people I worked with, and the setting, and always felt that I was treated as an equal and integral to building up the research profile of the department. For me, the only downside to contract research work was the lack of continuity and the uncertainty associated with working on one year fixed term contracts.

I was getting more and more involved in lecturing which I enjoyed, and when a lectureship was advertised I applied, went through the interview process and was appointed. Now I feel that I am in a position where the reward is commensurate with my activities.

Transferable skills development
The main skills I developed in contract research that I now use include:
- Levels of problem solving - Analysing, evaluating and assessing relevant data and considering alternative solutions and strategies before making independent judgements and conclusions.
- Research and analysis - Undertaking theoretical and/or practical investigations. Generating test methods for quantitative research, planning and organising relevant field work.
- Teaching, training, coaching and development - Planning and preparing sessions and materials to present information clearly and confidently. Encouraging involvement and reviewing learning to improve performance.
- Networking - Exchanging information with others to establish and develop useful working relationships. Setting up and using email discussion groups.
- Communication - Conveying and explaining complex information in either written or oral format in a way that others understand and can act on.

Messages
It is important to keep focused and not lose sight of all the possibilities outside contract research. Set yourself some key objectives, establish a game plan and keep to it as far as possible. Recognise that you already possess many of the skills that you need to work outside contract research, and develop a strategy to build on them. Try to identify those transferable skills that you have not had the opportunity to develop in contract research and where possible create opportunities to develop them before deciding to leave.
Education - Steve

Route into HE
Steve went straight from school to a Geography degree before he embarked on a self-funded Ph.D. (done during a two-year contract research post), but had to convert to a part-time M.Phil.

Reasons for entering Contract Research
Steve really loved research and liked what he did.

Nature and range of work
Started off in Geography (poverty in rural areas) and then into Education research looking into gender and underachievement in junior schools. He also looked into education restructuring and the impact on teachers' work.

Likes about Contract Research
- Fieldwork.
- Writing.
- A good supervisor.
- Intellectually challenging.

Dislikes about Contract Research
- The restrictions arising from short-term contracts and levels of pay.

Reason for moving on
Promotion prospects were nil without meeting unreasonable demands and it was with great regret that Steve thought he had no option but to move on. He felt he had been treated unreasonably and there was no way to make progress. Steve felt that, in part, the difficulties with forging a career in research stemmed from his broad range of expertise (although this served him well for consultancy, even though he hates calling himself a consultant). Steve says he was driven by money and the wish for a permanent post.

Exploration of Options and Sources
The press was a very lucrative source of many appropriate vacancies for Steve, with many posts to select from and leading to a good range of interview offers. From the options available, Steve chose consultancy with an independent, international company which provides clients with specialist services in the fields of economic, environmental, social and innovation policy.

Messages for Contract Research
- Be sure what is going to be the right thing, to be able to distinguish when different vacancies become available.
- Use the Careers Service to help with C.V. and job search, if necessary.
- Publish as much as possible.
- Be involved in the University to gain experience of senior committees, unions etc.
- Be organised.
- Do not be put off by early disappointments.
- Network.
- Keep in touch with fellow contract research staff.
· Try to develop key skills which might be called on elsewhere.
· Be aware of key skills which come as part of the job, such as doing research, writing, writing tenders, working effectively with other people.
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