Career paths of academic researchers:

MARINE STUDIES

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Background
My first job for ten weeks after I graduated with an Honours degree in Marine Biology was gathering data on fishing activity. I wanted to continue in this field and contract research enabled me to do it. I worked for a year as a Research Assistant, where I enjoyed working with undergraduates on their fish biology course. I would have continued with this but when my contract required me to work at a laboratory on the East Coast I saw a post that was advertised internally and applied for it. My interview with a panel of three people was quite daunting, but I was very enthusiastic which I believe got me the job ahead of the other applicants and I started immediately my research contract ended.

I specialise in ecotoxicology and I get involved in long-term monitoring plans and short-term contracts that are often in novel fields of research. I regularly work at sea for up to three weeks and at other marine institutions with many trips around British estuaries. I am responsible for a 3-year in-house contract in a specialised field of ecotoxicology and I have made presentations of this work at conferences and eventually expect this work to be published.

Transferable skills development
. Communication - Conveying information clearly, accurately and enthusiastically to groups and individuals with varying levels of knowledge and understanding. Asking questions of others and using active listening skills to help resolve problems.
. Planning and organising - Setting a realistic timescale, ensuring that all necessary resources are available, reviewing progress against original objectives and developing contingency plans. Working unsupervised for long periods of time.
. Levels of problem solving - Analysing and evaluating relevant data and information and applying own knowledge to interpret and consider all alternatives solutions and strategies.
. Networking - Developing networks to build working relationships with national, international and associated industrial bodies.

In my current role I have had to develop a wide variety of specialist skills that are relevant to the particular jobs that I do at the laboratory and on field trips. The most important skill that I have developed which has stood me in good stead has been initiative.

Messages
Even though you may feel at home in contract research, keep looking for the opportunities that unexpectedly present themselves. Competition is very fierce for posts in commerce and other fields of academia and the background knowledge, experience and academic qualifications are generally very similar between all the applicants. There will always be opportunities for free thinkers and the people who will succeed are those who appear more open and enthusiastic at interviews, those who can get a good job done and those who can demonstrate the ability to surmount problems independently.
Maritime Studies - Stewart

Background
I followed my B.Sc. in Maritime Geography and Doctorate in coastal flooding and erosion management in England and Wales with 18 months in a non-contract research position. Then I spent four continuous years in contract research working on projects that lasted anything from 4 to 18 months. The projects included a report to the Department of Transport and Chamber of Shipping on the UK economy's requirements for people with seafaring experience and one for the EU on implementing Standards of Training, Certification and Watchkeeping Conventions within Far Eastern maritime training colleges.

The end of my four years research coincided with the de-merger of the Department. I was offered a seven-month teaching contract from the end of my research project to the de-merger of the department to cover teaching requirements. Subsequently I was offered /negotiated employment with the two host departments into which Maritime Studies was split, again on a short-term basis. In some ways I was lucky that I was in the right place at the right time and the people employing me knew what I was capable of.

Now I lecture in the Business School and the Department of Earth Sciences. I teach second year undergraduates, MSc. Students and am fully involved in tutorials, seminars and fieldwork. The knowledge gained from my research work has been useful in contributing material to my lecture programme.

Transferable skills development
The main skills that I have developed in contract research include:
. Communication - Presenting information and conversing at the level of knowledge and understanding of others. Writing with simple language and outlining aims and objectives, methodology, conclusions and recommendations.
. Planning and organising - Planning own work to achieve goals and targets by agreed deadlines
. Interpersonal - Taking a specific role in a team. Building relationships and morale by developing, supporting and encouraging others in the group.
. Teaching, training, coaching and development - Planning and preparing materials with clear aims and objectives and a logical sequence of key learning points. Using a variety of visual aids to stimulate interest and a variety of activities to motivate others to learn.

The main skills I still may need to develop further since leaving contract research include:
. Decision making - Breaking down the process into appropriate steps and considering all the available options. Taking risks and making decisions with only limited information.
. Problem solving - Using observation and perception to develop creative, innovative and enterprising solutions.

Messages
My advice is to use the system to provide you with as much professional and transferable skills development as possible. Undertake research work that is not just
theoretical and of use only to the department, but work that an alternative employer might be interested in and more importantly can use. Above all do not restrict your horizons and apply for as many jobs as you can.
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