Career paths of academic researchers:  
SOCIAL SCIENCES

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**Applied Psychology - Trevor**

**Background**
After my degree in Applied Psychology and a Ph.D. in Human Computer Interaction both from the University of Wales, I did two years contract research work at Sheffield followed by four years back in Wales. Although at first I enjoyed contract research work, I gradually became more dissatisfied with doing just research work and wanted to broaden my experience. I was also reaching the upper end of the pay scale and there was a scarcity of well-paid research posts. There was however a relative abundance of teaching posts and as I had enjoyed my previous teaching experience, I decided to look at the opportunities that were about.

I found an advertisement in the Guardian for a job at a post-1992 University, applied and was invited to an interview. The interview panel was larger than I expected and the questions covered a broad range of topics that included my teaching experience. I also had to make a presentation to the Department. Now I am a Senior Lecturer teaching undergraduate Psychology and conducting research.

**Transferable skills development**
The transferable skills that I developed during contract research work include:

- **Decision making** - Breaking down the process into steps and considering all available options before making realistic and achievable decisions.
- **Levels of problem solving** - Analysing data and information to define the root cause of a problem and identifying creative, innovative and enterprising solutions.
- **Research and analysis** - Conducting field and deskwork to investigate, explore and develop research and writing technical reports.
- **Interpersonal skills** - Building relationships by developing, supporting and encouraging others.
- **Teaching, training, coaching and development** - Planning teaching sessions with clear aims and objectives. Presenting information clearly and confidently. Using visual aids to stimulate interest.

**The skills that I have had to develop since leaving contract research include:**

- **Time management and multi-tasking** - Setting realistic time scales and planning work to achieve goals and targets. Reviewing progress of a number of activities against objectives and developing contingency plans to overcome problems.
- **Administration** - General administrative activities associated with the position.

**Messages**
Broaden your experience by exploiting every opportunity that comes your way to do non-research work. For me it was undertaking teaching whilst working as a researcher. Maximise the number of publications you do and make sure that you are named on all of them. This puts you in a much stronger position over people who try to go straight from a PhD into teaching.
**Geography - 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 and Intellectually challenge.

**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.
Public Policy - Cliff

Background
I graduated with a 1st and then obtained a Ph.D. in Sociology. Fresh from my Ph.D., I wanted to continue doing research and the move into contract research was a natural progression. I have researched public policy, politics and how businesses can become more involved in charity and community work. My objective was to develop original case studies of contemporary development in public policy, to disseminate articles, to teach students on summer schools, and to deliver lectures to graduates on Masters courses. My last post was researching new Public Policy developments in the Welsh context.

I became more and more disillusioned with research work and combined with personal reasons and the need to get more permanent employment I decided to look for work outside contract research.

My main source of job applications was the Times Higher Education Supplement and in total I applied for 9-10 jobs. I was shortlisted for six, but not offered a position. However, at one interview I was told that a lecturing post would soon become available and that if I was interested to apply for it. I did, and, after I went through the normal interview process I was offered and accepted the position. Now I organise seminars, deliver lectures and I am developing a new course on Organisational Behaviour.

Transferable Skills Development
The main skills I developed in contract research that I now use in academia are:

. Communication: Particularly facilitating easy reading by adapting writing to the readers level of knowledge and illustrating complex points.
. Planning and organising: Setting a realistic timescale and target to achieve objectives.
. Levels of problem solving: Making judgements, being flexible and adaptable and considering alternative solutions and strategies.
. Networking: Exchanging information with others and developing useful working relationships.

The skills that I have had to develop in my new role are:

. Communication: Conveying enthusiasm, demonstrating interest and involving people.
. Decision making: Breaking down into appropriate steps and activities, making realistic achievable decisions.
. Interpersonal: Managing people, giving constructive feedback, leading, motivating and co-operating with others.
. Teaching, training, coaching and development: Preparing clear aims and objectives for teaching sessions, using visual aids to assist understanding, asking questions to encourage involvement and creating a shared vision.

Messages
I believe it is important to test the entire job market and not confine yourself to research and academia, as there are many opportunities in both commercial and charitable research. My advice is to consider all options, get some teaching experience if possible and get accredited work published. Establish your ground rules for the job that you want and above all don't waste the opportunity that research work offers for developing the skills that you can use in later life.
Social Policy - Lucy

Background
I graduated with a B.Sc. in Economics and Sociology followed by a PostGraduate Certificate of Education in Further Education and obtained my Ph.D. some ten years later. My first work after my P.G.C.E. combined two part-time posts, one tutoring and one doing research in the voluntary sector. I did this for four years and then lectured on social policy at a Welsh University for three years. This fixed term contract ended at quite short notice and, as I needed to work in South Wales, a colleague mentioned that another Welsh University was looking for a researcher so I applied and was successful in getting a contract research post.

When a lecturer in the same department resigned, the job was advertised, I applied and at the interview I satisfied their questions about my teaching interests and was appointed to the position. Had that job not been advertised I would have stayed in contract research for longer before thinking about making a move. Now I lecture in health policy, carry out research, write papers and deal with general administration.

Transferable skills development
The main skills I have developed in contract research include:

- Communication - oral and written - Adapting to the level of knowledge and understanding of others. Actively listening to encouraging involvement.
- Problem solving - Analysing data to identify the real problem and making independent decisions whilst being sensitive to the feelings of others.
- Teaching, coaching, training and development - Using a variety of teaching and learning activities and visual aids to motivate and influence others.

The key skills that I will need to develop in my current role include:

- Decision making - Taking calculated risks and knowing when an estimate or an exact decision will do. Breaking down into appropriate steps and activities, making realistic achievable decisions.
- Networking - Supporting existing groups and developing new partnerships. Actively networking people for mutual benefit or development.

Messages
Strive during your Ph.D. years and subsequent contract research work to write as many papers as you can. Make sure that your name is not only on your papers, but also on any joint papers preferably as the first named author. Getting your name noticed is everything so include it on all research proposals you make and network as much as possible.
After completing a M.Sc. in Social Research methods, Carole held one research contract for 18 months before moving to work as a consultant for an executive search company.

**WHAT PROMPTED YOU TO CONSIDER OPTIONS OUTSIDE ACADEMIA?**
My contract had run out (having been extended by 3 months already) and wasn't able to be renewed. At this stage although I had enjoyed the freedom of the work environment and the focus on meeting and interviewing people, I particularly wanted to get a permanent job with a future. I also wanted something with more of a team spirit. Where I was in academia, it felt like everyone was only out for themselves, all trying to make it as social researchers or academics rather than working for the unit.

**HOW DID YOU FEEL ABOUT THE TRANSFERABILITY OF YOUR SKILLS AND KNOWLEDGE?**
I had been using a wide range of skills in my research, including interviewing, statistical and computing skills, administration, analytical and writing. I felt fine about the transferability of my general skills and although I had a concern that I might feel I was going backwards if I wasn't using my academic knowledge, I knew that if I went into something different I would have to start again.

**COPING WITH THE TRANSITION**
I knew my contract was ending in October and started looking for work in mid-June. It was awkward at work because everyone knew I was leaving so I just had to get on with it. I looked everywhere for vacancies - newspapers, magazines, the internet and it didn't take long to identify ones to go for. Although I did not enjoy the applications/interviews process, the actual transition into my current job was easy and I was able to integrate into my new work environment very well and very quickly.

**THE APPLICATION & INTERVIEW PROCESS**
I used both C.Vs and forms in my applications. The interviews I attended were not dissimilar to the one I had for my research post and I wasn't asked about my motivation to move out of academia. The fact that decisions were not made quickly made the whole process very time consuming and, frankly, depressing.

**YOUR CURRENT JOB AND FUTURE PLANS**
My job now is ideal for me. I love interacting with people on a daily basis and I get people jobs so it makes them happy! It's a rewarding environment to work in - even if I do have to work on a Friday afternoon! The job is all about people skills and although the interviewing and analysing people is similar to what I was doing in academia the whole environment is more professional, corporate and exciting. The tangible rewards are in the form of bonuses, huge pay rises, incentives, no bureaucracy and getting immediate results. I feel as if my career is developing very quickly which is exactly what I wanted. I don't maintain my academic contacts and would never consider re-entering the university sector - I love my job here. I don't work long hours, it's fun and exciting and very rewarding.
HINTS AND TIPS
• Typing application forms can make the presentation look a lot more professional.
• Any additional computer skills you can develop will help.
• Working outside academia is not cut-throat or ruthless.
Social Research - Elizabeth

After completing a Ph.D. in a sociology topic, Elizabeth held five short-term contracts before moving into work as a research officer for a charity based in Scotland (from which she has since moved on - see update).

WHAT PROMPTED YOU TO CONSIDER OPTIONS OUTSIDE ACADEMIA?
My situation was rather different from other contract research staff as I held a number of short-term contracts on a free lance basis. After about a year my financial position was not very positive so I took a part time job in IT support within an academic department. Basically, I looked outside academia for a mix of personal reasons and because I wanted to re-evaluate. There were some noises from some of the lecturers in the department I was in about finding me a research assistant job. And ultimately there was such an offer, but this came after I had accepted the post I now hold.

My part time job in particular was a really valuable period of time as it allowed me to work through those silly fears about being "tied down" and having a nine to five job after a Ph.D., and also to appreciate how pleasant it can be to work alongside colleagues as part of a team and not as a lone warrior.

I analysed my experience of academia at some length and decided my personality would be best suited to doing social research outside of both academia and the corporate world in a policy development organisation, NGO, charity or think tank. I very much wanted to have the chance to experience a different research environment.

HOW DID YOU FEEL ABOUT THE TRANSFERABILITY OF YOUR SKILLS AND KNOWLEDGE?
I felt there was a strong case that my knowledge could be transferred. My PhD was quite generalised in the sense that it drew on a number of different disciplines - organisation theory, employment studies, feminist theory, sociology of science - and with each position I applied for there was some way of tying my knowledge into the post by emphasising certain aspects.

The jobs I targeted were those where I perceived I would be able to contribute efficiency and management skills but also be involved in knowledge and policy. I felt I had a useful set of skills, including marketing, communication and general business skills developed through my free-lance contract work, and never had any lack of confidence in selling these to a potential employer in any environment.

COPING WITH THE TRANSITION
It took about 6 months to identify vacancies but that did include November to January where the job market was non-existent, and a house move which took up a month. Mainly I read the job pages in the local and national papers and used internet job sites. There were a couple of less formal opportunities which fell through because of lack of funding. I had a lot of support from my partner and family and there were no major issues for me.
The biggest challenges were:
- leaving behind an incredibly flexible and autonomous culture and accepting I would need to go into an office roughly 9-5 (this has not been precisely the case but it is still more structured)
- giving up an idea of purity - that being involved in making knowledge is somehow a higher plane of activity
- not having control over what research I do and how. To an extent this is a symptom of working in a very "controlling" culture, but would likely be the case anyway.

However, I have found the whole process satisfying. I have had no real regrets about it so far and feel my assessment about the environment that would suit me best has been a fair one. I integrated immediately into my current job and feel it is a far more comfortable work environment than academia - it seems to suit my approach far better in that I still do research, but it is more varied, dynamic and practical in orientation.

THE APPLICATION & INTERVIEW PROCESS
I needed to prepare both a C.V. and application forms and at one of my interviews was asked to sit a test and give a presentation as well as having a panel interview. The differences between academic and non-academic interviews are, in my experience, quite marked. In academic interviews the focus has generally been on intellectual orientation with little apparent interest in practical details such as terms, conditions, management styles, accountability, allocation of work etc. In non-academic interviews the focus has been on practical and procedural aspects rather than theoretical positions - i.e. "what would you do if X happened", "how would you go about dealing with Y". The whole interview is more about doing the job than making the knowledge.

I was regularly asked about my motivation to move out of academia. I tended to emphasise a desire to work on more short term projects, to have more than one project on the go at one time and to have a more immediate connection to policy processes and practical outputs. This seemed to be generally accepted. The motivation for asking the question seemed to be a concern on the part of the interviewer that I was an "airy fairy" intellectual in an ivory tower who would not understand the need to compromise results in favour of practicalities.

In the interview for the post I got, both the manager and the director had worked extensively in academia and seemed to understand my desire to move out but not "burn my bridges", so I felt there was some sympathy of values and intent there which was part of my decision to go with them.

On the whole I find non-academic interviews easier to deal with, not least because they are less likely to focus on the specialist area of the interviewer which may not be yours! Looking at the process of applications and interviews as a whole, I felt reasonably positive about it. It gave me the chance to present myself fairly.

YOUR CURRENT JOB AND FUTURE PLANS
At the time of writing I am about to change my job again but still outside academia. However, my work as a research officer with a voluntary agency (working for children and families) has given me a sense of achieving social action rather than just creating ideas and this has been extremely important to me.
I have a varied workload, so I'm not in the library all the time (or indeed, ever!) and have the chance to get involved in staff management. I am closer to the policy process and feel as though I am helping to make the world better rather than just engaging in sophistry. Research and funding applications are still part of my work, but the emphasis is much more on the practical application of my work and time-scales are much shorter. Sometimes there is a tendency for senior managers to rush into projects without paying attention to the need for sound intellectual foundation and thought over detail. This is due primarily to the pressures of time and money.

I do miss the "pure" values academic work places on reading and learning, the thrill of creating knowledge, and the atmosphere of leisurely discussion, but I do enjoy my actual work and I like my colleagues (who come from backgrounds including services delivery, academia, local authority and voluntary sector) a lot.

I use an enormously wide range of skills - practical project management, proposal writing and budgeting, diplomacy and negotiation, staff supervision and mentoring, project planning, responding to tender invitations, dissemination to practitioner audiences rather than academics - and am confident in transferring these to my next job.

In terms of the future, I maintain good links with academic friends and colleagues and may at some stage want to return to academia. I have not ruled out trying for lectureships eventually, but at the moment I see myself going to Senior Principal Officer level (and beyond!) in the voluntary sector or the Civil Service. I feel that I enjoy the idea of academia much more than the reality. The area of work I am in now connects my research to the broader picture and gives me the chance to work with some incredibly committed and stimulating people who really want to change society and improve it.

**Update 3 months on:**
I can now add, being three months into a new job, that I am definitely using all these wide skills in the new post! I feel the move has been a success in that it has vindicated my decision to focus more on project management and staff management skills rather than pursuing a research topic per se. I now do not conduct the research myself but manage the staff who do, and am involved in different activities such as negotiation, liaising with senior management, budgeting and representing the project externally.

My personal path has led away from "pure" research as I am more practical-minded but also, to an extent, has been dictated by the fact that the higher salaries and status / perks are offered for management rather than being an active researcher - unfortunately!

**Additional note:**
One final thing that occurs to me is the gender issue. I find that in the voluntary sector / quangos where I have worked latterly, there is a majority of women in senior positions and the gender issue doesn't arise. For example, I am currently one of three female, senior managers, managed in turn by a man who is himself managed by a woman, whereas in academia I was conscious of the splits between "women's subjects" and the paucity of female lecturers in all subjects. It is by no means a perfect
environment, but I enjoy the fact that I don't generally have to worry about sexism in the workplace!

**HINTS AND TIPS**
- Work on a concise and business-like C.V. which emphasises skills rather than publications.
- Don't be put off by the perception of what a 9-5 job will entail, but do prepare for a more structured work culture.
- If you do really love the research topic you are working on within academia, and are fascinated by research and finding things out, staying in academia could be best for you. If you do not have a passionate intellectual attachment to your topic, to do research for its own sake, it is worth looking outside. Social research exists in a lot of other environments and it can be well worth seeking this sort of experience.
- Develop additional skills - in particular awareness of policy processes and structures and presentation skills.
- Focus on professionalism. Being "corporate" (in dress, approach, manner) can be seen as a dirty word within academia, but wearing a suit does not negate the quality of your ideas.
Social Science - Diane

Background
I graduated with a B.Sc. in Economics and Anthropology and a M.Sc. in Economic and Social Science Research methods. My first research work was with Shelter which started immediately I completed my Masters. I was self employed and involved in everything from data collection and analysis to writing and presenting reports at conferences. From there I worked in contract research for two years, but my contract was not renewed. Luckily, I was immediately employed on a lucrative consultancy basis to carry out an evaluation project and I now work as a Consultant Researcher where my job is mainly data collection, analysis and report writing. This work is identical to that of a contract researcher in respect of data collection and analysis.

I have been to India to do a post graduate study of Homeopathy as ultimately I want to practise Homeopathy full time, but accept that it will take some time to build up a practise so I keep my ears and eyes open for part-time consultancy research work. My next assignment is for nine months and I will be working with a Learning Disabilities Applied Research Unit. I found this by word of mouth and by networking, I have been approached by a School of Social Science and a School of Health Science both with invitations of work.

Transferable skills development
The main skills that I developed in contract research and continue to use include:
. Written communication - Using simple easy to understand language that outlines aims and objectives, methodology, conclusions and recommendations.
. Oral communication - Conversing at the level of others, speaking with enthusiasm and interest and discussing points assertively not aggressively.
. Decision making - Breaking down into appropriate steps and activities, basing decisions on intuition, logic, information and data.
. Problem solving - Analysing, evaluating and assessing relevant data and information. Identifying root causes of problems, using approaches that are sensitive to the needs of others
. Networking - Establishing and developing useful working relationships, creating awareness of research work, contributing to meetings, conferences, and seminars to gain exposure.
. The two main skills that I have had to develop after my contract research work are using my own initiative and how to timetable my work to meet tight deadlines.

Messages
It is not always necessary for you to look for an alternative career to research. There is a lot of alternative research work out there. For instance, I was casually speaking to someone from Age Concern who asked me to send in a C.V. as they often look for researchers. There is definitely a life for you after contract research. All you need is to have confidence in your ability, value your expertise and realise the skills you are developing in contract research can be used in the outside world.
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