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Post-PhD job hunting (outside of academia)

Alex, a PhD graduate from the University of Cambridge, has some insightful advice on job hunting outside of academia once you complete your research. Find Alex van der Wateren on LinkedIn [here](#).

Have you just finished your PhD and looking to start your career, but don't know which jobs to go for? You DO know that you don't want to do a Post-Doc? Then I might have some advice for you!

I have recently completed my PhD research in Chemistry. Below, I will share some of the things I've learned in the past few months of job hunting.

Put in the effort

I found that spending a few hours here and there did not make my job search progress as much as I would have liked. After a short Post-Doc that finished early in 2017, I worked in a retail job as a stopgap, but I found that I did not have much energy or time left at the end of the day to really dedicate myself to looking for a more permanent role. Once I figured this out, I decided to quit the retail job and focus completely on my job search. You need to set aside plenty of time to get anywhere, particularly if you do not know what role you are looking for,

Restrict your search

It is incredibly important to limit your search, considering there are thousands of jobs out there for which you might meet the minimum requirements. You can easily waste a lot of time aimlessly browsing job boards. Decide if you want to work in your current city/region or if you would happily move for the perfect job. In the latter case, it is essential you narrow down which type of job to pursue, as it takes time to make quality applications.

Apply only to the right jobs for you

I spent quite some time reading job descriptions of many different types of jobs, to hone in on the ones that interested me most and suited my skills and ambitions best. If you are not right for the job, you are wasting your time. To illustrate: a few months back I applied to a number of administrative roles, which I thought would be a good temporary solution for me so I could earn an income and get some experience outside of academia whilst looking for a more permanent role (not in administration). However, I've not been invited to an interview for any of these jobs. I suspect the hiring managers saw my education and thought that indeed the job would just be a stopgap for me. After several applications for administrative roles and 0 interviews, I've decided to abandon this strategy and instead only look for more permanent roles that I am actually excited about and wish to build a career in.

I have been much more successful at applying for more permanent positions that match my background and ambitions well. At the moment, I am in the selection process for several of these jobs. It is thus essential you apply for the jobs that you are right for and that are right for you!

Meeting the requirements is often not good enough

In my own experience, meeting the minimum requirements for a job is not at all a guarantee you'll be invited for an interview. In order to get a placement at university, you may only have needed the right A-levels with at least the minimum set grades, but that is not how it works when looking for a job. Often a vacancy is for just one position and dozens of people apply, many of whom will also meet the minimum requirements. To secure the job, you need to be the best! It is thus key to set yourself apart from the other applicants.

Anything substantial you have done alongside your education might do this. Have you been an active part of a committee? Mention that! Do you have any volunteering experience or did you do an industrial placement? These would also be great to mention, either in your CV and/or your cover letter. Mention what your main activities were and what you achieved. It shows you have interests outside of your degree and that you have developed some skills you may not have used during your degree.

If you do not have such experience, it is never too late to start. You can find a charity you want to support by volunteering for them, or perhaps you can do some tutoring, or do a summer internship. You can also make yourself a more attractive candidate by taking some relevant courses that give you additional skills/knowledge that might be useful for your desired career.

Be organised

Make sure you keep a good record of the applications you make: it looks unprofessional if you accidentally apply to the same vacancy twice. When applying for many jobs at a time, it is easy to lose track of when you have made your applications. A solution to this is to use software, such as Excel, to save all essential information about your applications. I have created one large datasheet in which I enter details of each application I make, recording the date of my application, the link to the vacancy, the job title, pay (if given), company name and how I applied. This gives me the chance to review whether I've heard back yet from my applications: if it's been 2+ weeks without any message, I usually send a follow-up. I also enter the result of the applications so I can see if there's a pattern that might help me focus my future efforts only on vacancies for which I am a strong candidate.

Note that sometimes the job description is removed once the vacancy is closed, so if you apply to a vacancy, save this information on your own device in case you get invited for an interview.

Agencies

Through my trawling of job boards, I noticed many jobs are advertised through recruitment agencies. Recruitment agencies can help with your job hunt as they often know their industry quite well, and some of the key companies in this field might work with them. Recruiters will also have a good idea of what the requirements are to be a strong candidate for specific roles. It is thus a good idea to have a chat with a recruiter working in the field of your interest to get feedback on your CV and to ask if they think you would be a strong candidate for the roles you are interested in. Or, alternatively, if you need to adjust your expectations with regards to starting salary and type of roles to go for.

However, there are benefits to applying directly to the company too, as it is clear what company you are applying to, as opposed to vacancies offered through agencies, which often do not mention their client by name; usually they only provide a brief description of the company. The latter situation makes it harder to decide whether you really want this job and makes it harder to tailor your cover letter (although some applications through agencies do not require a cover letter). I've found that after applying to a vacancy offered by an agency, if they thought I was a good candidate, they would call me to tell me who their client is, tell me more about the role and ask me to write a more tailored cover letter which they'll then use to put me forward for the role. So, although it is an extra step as opposed to applying directly to a company, good recruiting agencies will talk to you about the role before putting you forward.

Considering many jobs are only offered through agencies and they can help you navigate the field, it is worth calling a good recruiter to see if they can help, as they might just have the right job for you!

Get help

If you are applying to jobs that suit your background and ambitions and for which you have the desired essential qualifications/skills, but repeatedly find you aren't shortlisted for an interview, you should review what you are doing. It can be very helpful to ask your contact at the company why they have decided not to

take your application forward, as most companies won't give you feedback on your application except when you explicitly ask for it.

Ask friends and family to take a look at your CV and cover letters: maybe you are consistently making the same mistakes. The careers services at your (former) university may also be able to help you out. In addition, there might be job fairs and career events in your area where they offer feedback/tips on your CV and cover letters. You can also find many tips online.

I hope my experiences will give you some good starting points for your job hunt. Good luck!