Unleash your PhD power!
Career development as a basis for professional success
By Chiat Cheong

Make the most of your PhD power, whatever career path you choose!

BCF Career Event is an excellent opportunity to meet potential employers. But maybe as a PhD with a background in academia, you feel that there is a gap between you – the PhD – and the type of candidate that is being looked for. There is no reason to worry, but good preparation is essential to make your next career step a success. Here are some pointers to give you a jumpstart.

If I were to ask you to state the significance of having a PhD in your career, what would you say? If you find this difficult to answer, then I challenge you to think this through. Why? Because if you want employers – especially those outside academic research – to value your PhD, you have to be able to tell them what extra abilities come alongside your PhD.

Within the academic environment, a PhD doesn’t seem to be a big deal: ‘Everyone’ is (about to be) a PhD. It surely takes hard work, but a PhD is ‘just’ a starting point for research, isn’t it? What defines your success? Your academic CV states your scientific field of expertise, the techniques you master and your publication record. Although criteria are continually evolving, traditionally success in academia is measured in this way.

The majority of PhDs will however continue their career outside academia. Many a PhD struggles with the transition. How can you sell yourself if everything you have worked for, does not seem to matter anymore?!

To reassure you, moving out of academia may feel like leaving everything behind to leap into the unknown, but it certainly is not. Your PhD has equipped you with many skills that retain their value even when you change your work environment. These so-called transferable skills are the true power of your PhD. So if you are not aware of them yet, you’d better start defining your skill set now.

Examples of valuable transferable skills shared by PhDs

- Intellectual abilities/strong analytical skills
- Info-savvy/self-sufficiency
- Ability to work both independently and in teams
- High standards
- Perseverance/resilience to setbacks
- Project management
- Communication skills

If you have only worked in the academic environment thus far, you may have the impression that a skill set like this is not that exceptional. Also, people without a PhD may have these skills too. But please note that an average person won’t (pssst… there are many of them outside academia)! Your PhD title is actually rock solid evidence for your valuable skill set!

PhDs have a lot to offer, but often non-academic employers are not fully aware of this. Some may still have a stereotype in mind: intelligent, theoretical with narrow focus on one particular specialism. Encouragements in academia may have channelled your development in this direction, but you certainly have much more to offer. The challenge is to communicate your skills in a way non-academic employers understand and… value!

OK, preparing for the next step of your career is important, but where do you start? One approach is trying to figure out where you fit in. Many then find themselves lost in the many options that never seem to be a match. Another issue is that a job that matches your abilities may not necessarily be the job that gives you fulfilment in your profession.

Personally I believe the question you need to ask yourself should be: ‘What job suits me?’ Find out what you ideally would like to do, in what kind of setting, what kind of conditions are important to you, etc. Take yourself as a starting point and plot your profile. This approach not only allows you to evaluate opportunities, knowing what you want also enables you to land a job through networking.

Be proactive in career development. Talk to potential employers e.g. at the BCF Career Event to learn what they are looking for. Listen carefully and learn the terminology to describe the skills you already have.

Ask questions and figure out what you like and dislike and use this to draft your preferred profile.

Good science remains key to succeed as a PhD student. Meanwhile work out how your PhD abilities can be applied in favour of your employability. Your career development is your personal responsibility; a fulfilling career will be your personal gain. If you don’t know how to structure your career development, then find support. Career services, coaching and courses are available at your university or at dedicated organisations.

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