Sincerely,

Brian (Founder & Editor-in-Chief)

I just got my PhD: Am I ready for an industrial job?

by Dora

This is a question that many recent PhD graduates ask themselves. When I finished my PhD I was dismayed to see that all entry-level positions required prior-industry experience. How can I have industry experience if I just got my PhD? Of course, some of my classmates worked in industry for a few years after getting their Bachelors and they had an advantage in the job market.

> *The rest of us, who were so eager that we went for a PhD right after college, were turned down by employers who were looking for those candidates who had experience working in the corporate world.*

If you have a PhD and relevant technical skills, why is it so important to have industry experience? Now that I have several years of industry experience, I have some ideas as to why employers have a preference for candidates who have worked in the corporate world.

To summarize it briefly, the pace and the goals are very different in industry compared to academia. Graduate students work long hours, sometimes 6-7 days a week, but the timelines for most projects are on the order of months. Committee meetings are scheduled once or twice a year, and many students only meet with their supervisors once a month.

> *While graduate students do put in many hours (sometimes at a high cost to their health and social lives), they do not experience the sense of urgency on a daily basis that researchers in industry do.*

While I worked as a scientist in industry the turnaround time for my assignments was on the order of days, if not hours.

> *Sometimes I was handed a dataset in the morning and asked to analyze it and turn it into Powerpoint slides for an afternoon meeting with a Divisional Vice President. My work had to be completed quickly and it had to be high quality. In other words, I had to come up with a system, or workflow, to ensure that I could analyze data and prepare reports efficiently.*

In addition to the difference in the workflow, the focus of your job in industry is to come up with a product that has a market and is convenient for the users. Purely scientific and exploratory projects are encouraged, but developing and optimizing the product pipeline is the highest priority. Some junior scientists find this to be a bit of a culture shock.

> *In academia your goal is publish; in industry you need to put a product on the market. Scientists in industry also publish papers, but usually less frequently.*

If you have recently received your PhD or are currently a post-doc, here are some suggestions to help you succeed during job interviews and in transitioning from academia to industry:

Tip#1: Network, Network, Network!

Almost everyone I know got their first industry position through a friend, professional contact or a recruiter. Very few PhD's get their first industry position through an internet application. Just put yourself in the shoes of a hiring manager, who is usually a high-level manager supervising an entire group. They already have a full work-load and in addition to their usual responsibilities they need to scan piles of resumes for each position.

> *If you were the hiring manager, would you prioritize applications through the Internet or the ones handed to you by someone in your group?*

Recruiters can also be helpful in finding out about open positions and reaching out to hiring managers on your behalf. Unfortunately, many entry-level PhD positions that recruiters have are for contractors. In other words, you work by the hour without any benefits or paid time-off. While contractor-level positions are not ideal (especially if you are the sole provider for your family) they can provide you with valuable experience and networking opportunities for future opportunities.

Another reason that applying through the Internet can be detrimental to your job search is that once you apply to a company through their website, the recruiter can no longer "represent you" at that company for 6-12 months even if it is for another position. In other words, if you applied for position A at company X through their website, and a recruiter calls you about position B at company X which would in fact would be a much better fit for you, you will not be able to go through the recruiter for position B. The reason is that once HR at company X has your CV, they will not compensate recruiters for submitting CV even if it is for another position.

Thus, my recommendation is to apply to all positions either through a friend, professional contact or recruiter. The Internet can be useful for finding out about job openings, which you can forward to your contacts or recruiters to see if they can support you in the application process.

In one of my previous blogs I included strategies for enhancing your job search through Linkedin.

Finally, keep track of all the companies you applied to either through the Internet or a friend. If a recruiter contacts you he or she will need a list of companies you already applied to, so they can eliminate those companies as they search for jobs for you.

Tip #2: Set yourself apart from other candidates during job interviews

If you have a PhD, you are probably an expert in your field already. During your interview, your potential employers will ask you many technical questions to ensure that you have the right technical skills for the job. However, there are also other qualities that they look for:

- Leadership, someone who takes initiative
- Being self-motivated and independent
- Conscientious of timelines and turnaround times
- Great writing and communication skills

Be sure to highlight your experience in these areas during your interview. Most employers screen candidates by phone before a face-to-face interview.

> *Show up for the phone interviews with the same enthusiasm as if you had a face-to-face interview.*

I have outlined important strategies on how to answer tricky job interview questions in a previous blog.

Tip #3: Take note of the skills that you can transfer from academia to industry

Completing a PhD takes more than just good science. It takes discipline, dedication, commitment and a belief in yourself that you can earn the highest degree offered by an academic institution. If you get clear on the skills that you learned through your PhD process, you will have a great advantage during your interview and your transition to industry.

> *Examples of very useful skills in industry include: leadership, written and oral communication, teamwork, being detail-oriented and project management.*

In my case, resilience was the most useful skill.

Like all other students, I ran into setbacks and had to overcome many hurdles before I could pull my thesis together. Many projects will not succeed in industry either - the most important skill is to be able to bounce back and continue showing up at 100% at your new job. This will be particularly important in the beginning when you are still on a learning curve and get a lot of criticism from your supervisor. Use this criticism as an opportunity to grow professionally.

Tip #4: Practice oral and written communication skills

If you do not like public speaking or voicing your opinions in group meetings, you can still get by in graduate school. Most students only need to give a few presentations, and speaking up at meetings is not crucial for success.

> *In industry, how you present yourself in meetings is very important.*

People will respect you if you speak up at meetings and present your work eloquently. If you have to give a job talk, be sure to practice it with several people beforehand to make sure that your arguments and science flow well, and that your presentation skills are professional. In other words, keep the audience engaged and insert transition slides so they can follow your story.

If you still have a few months or years in your postdoctoral fellowship, be sure to use every opportunity to publish. Original research articles are the most respected, but review articles and book chapters are also highly valued during the hiring process.

In the pharmaceutical industry, for example, many companies do not have a writing group – it is the responsibility of the scientists to write up their research into internal reports to communicate their results with other departments. Thus, the more practice you have writing, the more attractive you will be to employers.

Tip #5: Scan job openings and talk to professionals regarding marketable skills you can still pick up

> *There are graduate students who are so immersed in their research that they have very little sense of what employers are looking for.*

Companies value skills rather than high GPA's and pure science. They want to hire someone who can hit the ground running and needs very little training. It can be quite an eye-opener to scan job openings to find out what employers are looking for.

Sometimes being familiar with particular software (that you could learn in a few weeks) could set you apart from other candidates and get you the job. Other times hands-on experience with an instrument that is used by a group down the hall from you can get you in the door to an industrial position.

If you still have a few months or years left in your postdoc, take advantage of this learning opportunity to acquire skills that are valued by employers.

Alumni and professionals in your field are also great resources for learning about marketable skills. They can make recommendations regarding which skill sets to emphasize in your CV and interviews, and what courses or experience you could still acquire to make yourself more marketable to employees. Be sure to ask professionals about personal qualities (leadership, taking imitative, being detail-oriented, oral/written communication skills) that would be to your advantage to discuss during in-person or phone interviews.

Finding your first industry job can seem overwhelming – it is truly a full-time job to find a job.

I have described in detail how to balance digital job-searching tools with personal networking. Once you get your foot in the door, either through a contractor or entry-level position, advancing your career and branching out your professional network will become easier.

Finally, remember that "It is easier to get a job when you have a job." If you are not happy with the position you have, start looking for a new one while you are still employed. However, unless the job is a really bad fit, be sure to stick with it for at least 6 months to get some experience and show employers your commitment.

About our contributor:

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Comments

- by Halina Zakowicz (not verified)