

ADVICE

4 Tips on Applying for Jobs Outside of Academe

By Ben Dumbauld | DECEMBER 11, 2019



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Last summer, *The Chronicle* published an essay I wrote as a nonacademic employer who went to a scholarly conference looking to hire Ph.D.s and came up short. In the months that followed, I heard from a lot of people — from graduate students to emeritus presidents — concerned about academe’s current inability to provide enough tenure-track jobs or adequately prepare Ph.D.s for alternate careers.

Perhaps as evidence of a lack of basic job training within doctoral programs, some of the readers who reached out to me also sent their résumés and cover letters — not asking me for a job but in the hope that I would look over their application materials and offer what advice I could.

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Just a few years ago, I was in the same boat. I'd spent hours drafting and customizing my CV, cover letter, and other documents in search of a faculty job that never materialized. With student-loan payments looming, I was also applying for nonacademic jobs, where I found more success.

Now that I'm on the other side of the hiring process, I've noticed common threads in what I like — and don't like — to see from Ph.D. applicants. I've distilled these observations into four tips. I know this advice won't change the state of the job market, academic or otherwise. Nonetheless, I hope that the following tips can serve as initial guideposts for graduate students and new Ph.D.s who are making or considering a career transition out of academe.

Tip No. 1: Don't try to erase your academic past. Many Ph.D.s, on first entering the nonacademic job market, worry that a doctorate makes them "overqualified" for entry-level and other positions. Don't succumb to that frame of mind: It only leads to self-sabotage and anxiety. It does no practical good to assume an employer has established criteria on what makes a candidate overqualified for a certain position. If you meet the minimum qualifications, you are qualified for the position.

Moreover, neglecting or dismissing the years of effort it took to earn a doctorate seems a somewhat disingenuous way to present yourself and your background in an application. And downplaying your academic career during a job interview might have an effect opposite of your intent.

Academe has its critics; yet, in my experience, plenty of people in the general public regard a Ph.D. as an accomplishment (however little they understand how you earned it). Treating your doctorate casually or with irreverence may create a worse first impression than acknowledging the hard work you put into it.

That isn't an invitation to attach the details of your entire academic career to your application. It's a suggestion to find a middle ground that represents your skills and tells your story without overwhelming the readers.

As employers, our fear of hiring an "overqualified" employee isn't that you will have more skills than are required for the position — it's that you will be quickly bored or uninterested in the work. Your task here isn't to somehow erase or minimize your academic experience, but rather to find a way to frame it as an asset to the position and/or the organization.

Tip No. 2: Be a passionate generalist, not an ardent specialist. A great many people enter graduate school with a broad passion for a particular subject, and a desire to earn a living pursuing it. We quickly learn, however, that our general passion needs to be winnowed down until it becomes a research project — detailed and fine-tuned enough so that, by the dissertation stage, it can be objectively claimed that it contributes to knowledge.

After years of being groomed to think that way, it can be difficult to revert to the mentality of a new graduate student with a broad passion for a subject. But doing that might help you land a nonacademic job.

In applying for tenure-track jobs, you are essentially asking for an institutional patron to finance your project for life. That approach won't work outside the ivory tower for a simple reason: Few employers can afford to finance your independent project. That truth may be easy enough to get over for graduates more inclined to teaching than research. But for those whose life goal was to write an academic book, you may need to reckon with the possibility that what you once considered your life's work may well end up a side project.

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Back when I worked for a city government, we were in a constant cycle of fulfilling the obligations of an expiring grant while adapting ourselves to a new one. In the K-12 world in which I now work, we are constantly adjusting to new state standards, policies, and educational trends. Nonacademic employers are looking for people who can make those quick shifts in direction.

And Ph.D.s certainly can. But I can't gauge your flexibility from application materials that only present you as an expert of a highly narrow subfield. When I read your résumé, I'm not scanning for names of prestigious journals or conferences. I'm interested in whether you are capable of discussing and writing about a variety of topics for many different audiences.

That doesn't mean you have to abandon your academic interests entirely and promote yourself as a generalist capable of doing anything. Rather, I recommend thinking through how your particular academic interests might translate to a broad audience.

The trends and directions of thought in the "real world" perhaps align more closely with those of the scholarly world than you might expect. For instance, in K-12 education, states are mandating changes that introduce LGBTQ+ perspectives, social-justice education, environmental science, and other topics into the curriculum. Any applicant who can demonstrate an awareness of research and teaching in such areas would instantly attract my eye — but not if that awareness is represented only by a list of academic publications or symposium talks on some extremely narrow topic.

The best cover letter I've received from a Ph.D. candidate concluded with a paragraph outlining three or four ways in which she was excited to use her area of research to contribute to our organization. In these few sentences, I was convinced not only of her expertise, but also of her ability to enthusiastically translate it into something that my organization would find valuable.

In short, you need to figure out how to pitch your research — not as a prospective book project — but as a middle-school lesson plan, a concert series, an exhibit, or a professional-development seminar.

Tip No. 3: Do the opposite (mostly) of what academic applications require. What's most important on an academic application might be least important on a nonacademic one. Outside the ivory tower, the "Ph.D." label after your name already distinguishes you from other applicants. We assume your doctorate means you are very good at research, can self-manage, and are extremely dedicated to work that interests you. Those three letters do a lot of work for you.

One of the strongest pieces of advice I can give someone applying for nonacademic jobs is to simply remember: The person looking at your résumé likely has *no* background in the specific culture of your academic discipline. We don't know whether the journals you've published in are top-notch or pay-to-publish scams, whether the awards you've won are prestigious, whether the conferences you've presented at are well-attended. And we are not going to spend our time trying to find out. Instead, we'll skim through all of that to get to what is all too often on the second page of a Ph.D.'s résumé — the work experience and qualifications we actually care about.

What tenure-track jobs at a research university tend to value the least may very well be what nonacademic jobs value the most:

- Seeing evidence of service shows you are capable of working with other people and managing events and projects — a vital skill in most jobs.
- Seeing that you've published in general-interest magazines or websites means an editor found you can write well (or well enough) for a broad audience.
- Seeing that you gave talks outside of academe — at public events, book fairs, music festivals, public symposiums — shows you interact well with different people in person.

The two exceptions to this general rule are for skills equally valued both within and outside of higher education:

- **Grants:** They're the lifeblood of most nonprofit groups. Showing that you know how to write successful grant proposals can only benefit you. It's far more important to list your grants than your academic honors.
- **Teaching:** Never underestimate the "employable" skills you develop through teaching. Classroom experience shows you know how to explain difficult concepts, are used to public speaking, can work under time constraints, and, let's be honest, probably have some experience managing difficult people and situations. That said, as an employer, I'm interested in variety over specialty: I would much rather see you list the summer-arts program you ran for middle schoolers than yet another intro-level course you taught.

Tip No. 4: Please — please — have a life outside academe. On the faculty market, you are told to downplay the nonacademic parts of your life (or risk being seen as a less-than-serious scholar or as someone padding an underwhelming profile). But in a nonacademic search, the opposite is more accurate: If your application doesn't tell me anything beyond your academic life, I would very likely dismiss it out of hand, concerned that such a candidate would be perpetually dissatisfied working anywhere but on a campus.

When I receive a résumé from a Ph.D., one of the first things I look for is evidence that you have worked outside the incredibly weird and unique environment that is higher education. I want to know that you were a barista, a paralegal, an intern, a restaurant host, a mail clerk, a delivery person. I'm not much interested in what the experience is, so long as it's there.

I am fairly convinced that I landed an interview with my current organization for three reasons: I demonstrated that I'd worked with students across a wide age range; I had some understanding of digital publishing; and I had mentioned in my cover letter a term paper I wrote on a topic relevant to the organization. During the interview, I remember talking about that term paper quite a bit, while the subject of my dissertation research never came up once.

The lesson: Hiring is serendipitous. Bits of minutiae about you, your personal life, your hobbies, your blog about food, your podcast on music — especially if they have some connection to the job you're seeking — might be what catches the eye of an employer. Don't feel at all dissuaded from mentioning those things in your cover letter as you might in applying for a tenure-track application.

But there is a stronger reason to build a varied life: The majority of jobs, studies show, are filled by networking. Many positions are never posted on job boards at all. Were I to be unemployed tomorrow, before looking at job ads, I would reach out first to my "network" — old co-workers and supervisors, friends, members of my church, people I've met through volunteering.

As a graduate student, you may have become convinced that devoting yourself entirely to academic work is the surest way to procure a tenure-track job. But doing so is an enormous gamble these days. Anyone who attains a Ph.D. is entirely capable of publishing, leading seminars, doing service, or otherwise fulfilling the responsibilities of faculty life. But the jobs aren't there, or at least not enough of them.

So have a life. Volunteer. Join a community orchestra, a political advocacy organization, or a softball league. Get to know people who live and work away from a college campus.

And don't hesitate to network with companies and organizations that you feel might be aligned in some way with your academic work and interests — even if they do not seem to be hiring at the moment. In my experience outside academe, I've found that more than half of the people hired are already within the employer's network — either as previous applicants, interns, freelancers, or employees of partner organizations.

Ignore the folks who don't respond to your queries and learn as much as you can from the ones who do. Down the road, you may be at the top of their list of potential applicants.

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