

Psychology PhD Students Can Prepare for Non-Academic Careers With 3 Steps\*

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An academic Department is both an exciting work environment and a challenging place to find a faculty position. New students arrive and new courses begin each year. Faculty positions in academic Departments are offered at a less predictable rate, due to economic changes, retirements, and other constraints. Fortunately, individuals with a Psychology PhD skillset have employment options in industry, government, and non-profit organizations. This article addresses how individuals with graduate training in Psychology and related fields can prepare themselves for the non-academic job market.

Surveys indicate that the majority of PhD recipients in Canada are not employed in academic positions. According to Statistics Canada's 2011 National Household Survey<sup>1</sup>, only 39% of Canadian PhD recipients were employed in post-secondary academic positions. The majority (61%) were employed in non-academic sections including management, recreation, sales, and trades. Are PhD students prepared for the non-academic job market? A survey of Canadian postdoctoral scholars<sup>2</sup> found that only 8% felt well-prepared for the non-academic market. The majority (51%) indicated they were “not at all prepared”, an alarmingly high percentage given the employment outcomes of the majority of PhD recipients. In sum, graduate students should consider and prepare for alternate career paths that value PhD-related skillsets.

### **Know Your Options**

Table 1 shows common non-academic career paths that Psychology PhDs have taken and the required critical skills. The Table demonstrate the significant overlap in industry and academic skillsets that PhD students can capitalize on when considering non-academic careers.

As Director of two graduate training grants, I worked with industry and non-government organization (NGO) partners to offer PhD students internships in non-academic settings. Our partners thought the internships were attractive for several reasons. First, the interns represented highly qualified personnel who use cutting-edge technologies. Second, the interns had experimental design and testing expertise, important for product development. Finally, the interns represented potential (future) full-time employees, attractive in a competitive market sector. Several of our interns accepted full-time positions with the industries after completing their degrees.

### **Identify Your Strengths**

Three common steps that graduate students can take to prepare for non-academic career paths include: 1) identify their transferable skills; 2) create a resume that advertises those transferable skills; and 3) pursue short-term non-academic work experience, either during or after the PhD training.

*Transferable Skills:* Transferable skills are those learned in one setting (such as graduate school) and used in another (sometimes unrelated) setting (such as industry). Transferable skills for PhDs, shown in Table 2, often include professional skills of Project skills, Entrepreneurship, and Communication Skills; and the technical category of Knowledge and Information skills. Technical skills include expertise with hardware (such as eye tracking or EEG) and software (including statistics, website design, or programming) that are common in PhD training.

*Resumes:* The resume is a short (1-2 page) document intended to market an individual to an employer, and contains sections for work experience; technical and professional skills; and contact information for work-related references. A resume is NOT the same as a curriculum vita; publications and presentations are relevant only if they demonstrate the student's skillset. Most universities offer a resume-building

course and other professional skills training courses through graduate schools and Career Planning Centres.

*Work Experience:* Several sources offer students at Canadian universities short-term (4- to 6-month) internships. One is the MITACS Accelerate program ([mitacs.ca/accelerate](http://mitacs.ca/accelerate)) that offers matching funds for students to train with a non-academic partner, including industry, government, and NGO positions. Relevant examples for Psychology from their website of internships include machine learning; use of social media; natural language processing. Another MITACS Accelerate program includes the academic supervisor as a partner in the internship. Both of these programs require the approval of the academic supervisor. MITACS offers other student support as well (see [www.mitacs.ca](http://www.mitacs.ca)).

Students can also apply directly to industries that have established internship programs. Microsoft, Amazon, and Google have offices in Canada with advertised student internships. General examples include technical writing; web development; market research; and data science. Non-profit and governmental agencies also offer internships, including Aga Khan (a youth-oriented fellowship); the Asia Pacific Foundation; and the National Research Council of Canada. These positions may require fewer skillsets from prospective interns, as the positions are not always research-oriented.

### **Timeline of a Non-Academic Internship**

The timeline from an interview to beginning an internship is shorter than most academic timelines. As an example, the “first contact” interviews between industry partners and potential interns in our training network occurred 6 months before the internship start date. Holding an internship outside a university requires students to be away for some time, and graduate students wonder whether the faculty mentor and university will support the student’s non-academic employment options. Most universities offer graduate students options to take short (4-month) internships during a summer term (while students are not taking coursework or working as teaching assistants) without disrupting progress in a PhD program. Another opportunity is the time between submission of the dissertation thesis and the dissertation defense committee meeting. A third option is to hold an internship after the dissertation defense.

### **The Take-Home Message**

With a small amount of planning, Psychology PhD students can position themselves as strong candidates for careers in industry, government, and non-profit organizations. Individuals who identify their transferable professional and technical skills; prepare a resume with those skills; and pursue a non-academic internship will be in an excellent position to compete for employment options that build on their PhD-related skills<sup>3</sup>.

### References

<sup>1</sup>Edge, J. & Munro, D. (2015) *Inside and outside the academy: Valuing and preparing PHDs for Careers*. Ottawa: The Conference Board of Canada.

<sup>2</sup>Mitchell, J.S., Walker, V.E., Annan, R.B., Corkery, T.C., Goel, N., Harvey, L., Kent, D.G., Peters, J., Vilches, S.L. (2013). *The 2013 Canadian Postdoc Survey: Painting a Picture of Canadian Postdoctoral Scholars*. Canadian Association of Postdoctoral Scholars and Mitacs.

<sup>3</sup>Palmer, C. (2019). A postdoc is not the only career option for Psychology PhD's. Presented at *Women in Cognitive Science-Canada*, Waterloo, June. [www.mcgill.ca/spl/publications/](http://www.mcgill.ca/spl/publications/)

**Table 1: Typical Non-academic Positions and Skillsets**

<b>Position</b>	<b>Required Skillset</b>	<b>Relevant Academic Skillset</b>
<i>Research Analyst</i>	Data analytics Market review and analysis	Data analysis Literature review
<i>Business Development Manager</i>	Evaluates research directions Builds new collaborations	Evaluates literature Works in teams
<i>Technical Writer</i>	Produces specialized documents	Prepares journal articles
<i>Information Technology Specialist</i>	Identifies and solves problems in complex projects	Problem solving (piloting and adjusting experiments)

**Table 2: Typical Transferable Skills From Psychology PhD programs****Project skills:**

Project management  
 Managing budgets (*participants, supplies*)  
 Team work (*supervision of assistants*)  
 Organising meetings and events

**Entrepreneurship:**

Leadership (*group meetings*)  
 Innovation (*novel research directions*)  
 Networking (*symposia, workshops*)  
 International experience (*conferences*)

**Communication skills:**

Writing (*term papers, publications, abstracts*)  
 Public speaking (*teaching, research talks*)  
 Languages (*spoken/written/read*)  
 Web, email, content creation and social media

**Knowledge and information skills:**

Teaching and training (*hardware / software*)  
 Data management (*software, statistics*)  
 IT applications and programming languages  
 Writing reports (*technical documents*)