Transitioning Your Career from Academia to Industry

By Alaina G. Levine

AGU recently hosted a webinar concerning “Transitioning Your Career from Academia to Industry.” The main point of this webinar was to confirm that if you are interested in going into industry (which could mean the private sector, government or the non-profit arenas), not only is it possible, but it is can be very straightforward.

The keys are knowing your unique expertise, skills and experience and being able to translate that value into the language of the industry and organization for which you desire to work. Learning the vocabulary is not an insurmountable challenge – it involves research on your part and a lot of networking to connect with people in your selected industry. The networking is important because not only does it allow you to have informational interviews with decision-makers and trend-makers in the industry, but it also gives you knowledge about hidden opportunities, such as job openings, board appointments, committee assignments and even awards, all of which ultimately help you also learn the industry and position you and your value in front of the right people.

Here are some questions that came in during the webinar and immediately following via email. Some of the questions have been edited for clarity, space, and anonymity.

Q: How do I answer the question “how determined are you to leave academia and become a part of the industry”? If I am not 100% sure yet, I feel they would rather take someone for an internship who is sure about it. So should I “lie to them” and say “I do not consider academia anymore”?

A: Both of these questions touch on similar issues so I wanted to answer them collectively. No matter where you are in your career, you want to keep your options open and consider all opportunities that may meet your needs and goals for your career progression. Successful people remain successful because they always keep their eyes open for new, diverse opportunities which they can explore and which can lead them to the next opportunity or job. In short, not only is there nothing wrong with keeping your options open, it is a wise choice to make, especially in this economy. Furthermore, as an early-career professional, you are still exploring what would make the best sense for you in terms of potential career paths. People in senior positions recognize that those who are in the early parts of their careers may still not know exactly what they want to do with their life; heck, many people who are 40 don’t know what they want to do with their life!

But consider this scenario: say you apply for an internship, and in the letter of interest you communicate “I am not sure I want this job but please hire me anyway”. If I was the decision-maker and read this, I probably would immediately remove your application from the running. Why? Because by telling me that you don’t know whether you want this opportunity or that you are still exploring, you are telling me that
you are not 110% committed to the job. You are communicating an attitude of being very self-centered and unmotivated. This is never a message that should be conveyed to a decision-maker, especially in applications for jobs, internships and fellowships.

When you apply for a position, be it a postdoc in an academic research group, an opportunity with the Peace Corps, or an internship, with each application you have to demonstrate why you want this opportunity and more importantly what you will contribute to the organization if you get this opportunity. The crucial move for you to make is to share what skills and experience you have that will add value to the position and the team, and to amplify that you are enthusiastic, excited and extremely committed to serving the organization.

The reasoning behind this move is because of another issue at play here: most job seekers don’t realize it, but the job search process is not about you, the job seeker, and what you can get from me, the decision-maker. Rather, it is about me the decision-maker and what you can do for me. So if you always frame your communications with the other party with this in mind, you will find more opportunities will be made available to you, which you can then carefully decide privately which ones you would like to pursue.

Communicating your enthusiasm for a decision-maker or a particular opportunity and not saying you are not sure you want it is not lying. This is not being inauthentic. In fact, it is the opposite- you are truthfully sharing the strategic information that will help the decision-maker make their decision. You are articulating why this position is a great match for your skills and interests and what value you can provide the decision-maker and their enterprise. You are truthfully stating how you can help them and solve their problems, and in the job search that is the meat of what matters.

If in a discussion, either a formal interview or an informational interview, someone asks you how determined you are to leave academia or why you want a particular internship, you can tell them the truth: “I am excited about your organization because of X and Y reasons and I think that my unique blend of skills, expertise and experience would serve your team well in the following ways.” Keep the conversation about them and what you can do for them and how you can help them solve their problems better. And as a result, you will find more opportunities will come your way which you can explore and decide upon, privately.

Q: Is it better to ask for informational interviews over phone/Skype? Or, if we happen to be around the place, should we ask for a personal meeting/visit?

A: It isn’t clear to me from the question whether you are asking if A) should you ask for an informational interview when speaking with someone over the phone or Skype or B) should you conduct an informational interview over the phone or Skype. Both questions are important and both scenarios lend themselves well to analysis. But first let me clarify that informational interviews (or “informal conversations”) are the cornerstones to networking and to career advancement because they allow you and the other party to lay the foundation of a mutually beneficial partnership that can last a lifetime.

The informational interview is an information exchange – you and the other party both learn strategic information about each other, including your mutual skills, passions, career paths, interests and goals. And you can leverage the informational interview to gain knowledge about career opportunities that are hidden, to boost your brand (your promise of value) and reputation in the other party’s mind (as they are doing with you), and to explore ways in which you can collaborate.

As you network, that is, as you meet people at events, read papers and contact authors, or engage people through other channels, your next step should be to ask for or invite an informational interview or informal conversation. Now at a conference, you might be able to do this right away. Say for example, you hear someone give a talk which is really exciting. You go up and introduce yourself to them and ask them if you can take them out for a cup of coffee. That coffee meeting is the first significant engagement you will have with this person and can serve as an informational interview. So do keep your eyes open for opportunities to network and engage in “spontaneous” informational interviews as they appear. I have seen people walk by me at conferences and ran up to them and introduced myself and asked for a coffee meeting right then and there. If they are free during the conference they are often happy to meet with me. If they don’t have time we schedule a phone appointment for our informational interview.

On the other hand, if you don’t have the ability to meet the person face-to-face you can always email them and ask for an informational interview over email. I do this all the time and I generally get great
results. But one tactic I never use is to cold call someone and start talking their ear off right then
and there. If for some reason I cannot find the email address of the person with whom I desire an
informational interview, I do call them, but immediately ask if this is this a good time to speak. I then
tell them my interest in chatting with them and ask when their schedule would allow us to conduct an
appointment. I never assume they can do the informational interview the moment I call, which is the
reason for the verbal request for an appointment.

Q: I find this description of networking - continuous meeting new people, maintaining contact
long term, asking for more contacts, etc., to be incredibly frustrating. It sounds stressful,
difficult, and unattainable to an introvert such as myself. Where do I start?

A: No need to feel frustrated. As I wrote in Physics Today, “Efficient networking, where you are able to
build long-term partnerships, takes practice. You don’t have to be an extrovert to network, and even
outgoing personalities (and seasoned networkers) sometimes have butterflies in their stomachs when
they first approach a stranger at a mixer. But the more practice you get at introducing yourself to others,
the more adept and more comfortable you will become.

Recognize a few facts:

- You are probably already “networking”. When you meet someone at a conference and follow up with
them, that is networking. When you read someone’s paper and email them to set up a discussion
about collaborating that is networking. Networking serves as fuel for building alliances that may last a
lifetime, but it all starts with meeting someone.

- At networking events, like mixers and receptions, everyone is there for the same reason: to meet new
people. So even though you may feel shy, recognize that others may feel shy too. You can use this
mutual shyness as a way to boost your own confidence to start or join a conversation.

- Networking is required to move science and engineering scholarship forward. You can’t advance
science without a constant influx of a diversity of ideas and sources of inspiration and collaboration.
And you can’t achieve this without networking.

My advice for introverts is:

- Know your value statement: have a 30 second (or less) “commercial” ready when you meet someone
that describes who you are, where you are in your career and what your interests are.

- Attend low stakes networking functions to practice, where you don’t feel pressure or can even
get assistance with introductions to new people. Events on your campus are a great way to get
comfortable with networking. And if you are attending the AGU Fall Meeting, there is a terrific
networking reception that specifically aims to help networking novices learn the craft and connect
with professionals in industry. I will be there and can introduce you to colleagues!

- Also from Physics Today: “At networking affairs, one of my favorite opening lines is “what’s the best
part of your job?” As the other person recounts what is pleasurable about her work, she will be more
apt to speak with me about it. One of the keys to networking is that people generally love speaking
about themselves. So the more you ask contacts about themselves and what drives them, the better
you are able to start a beneficial relationship. As they speak, remain in eye contact. As people chat, I
like to jot down a few notes on the back of their business cards. When I follow up later, I remember
(and can remind them) of key points in our conversation.”

For more information, check out Networking: It’s more than sharing meatballs, Physics Today, March 2003,
http://scitation.aip.org/content/aip/magazine/physicstoday/news/10.1063/PT.4.2427

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