

# What Else Can I Do? And Other Frequent Questions

By Mary Dillon Johnson

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**Question:** I have decided I don't want to stay in academe, but what else can I do?

**Answer:** The first thing to do is to rephrase your question to, "What do I want to do?"

Implicit in your question is the fear that your graduate education has been little more than narrow training for a career as a professor. The most important single thing for you to realize -- no matter what your field of study -- is that you have many options. Now it is up to you to figure out your interests and skills and to learn about the world of work beyond the ivory tower so that you can make a match between what you like to do and are good at doing and appropriate employers. Your academic field may well have something -- but by no means everything -- to do with the interests and skills you use and develop in your career beyond the academy.

A wealth of resources is available to help you in a nonacademic job search. Look into the career programs and counseling your university offers for graduate students. Take advantage of the many stories about Ph.D. career paths online and in print. Let yourself react to these stories: Which jobs sound good to you? Which make you shudder? What skills seem similar to your own?

One of the most entertaining ways to test your reactions to the career choices of people of your age and background is to read the weddings and engagements section of *The New York Times* on Sundays. Take a look some time and use your reactions to what people do to help you figure out what you want to do.

Read **Do What You Are**, a helpful guide by Paul D. Tieger and Barbara Barron-Tieger that uses personality as an additional factor to consider in making career choices. For a comprehensive and sensible view of the whole career-search process, I still recommend the classic and frequently updated **What Color Is Your Parachute?** by Richard Bolles. I think it is also worth looking at the classified ads in major newspapers, not so much to find a job opening (although that is always a possibility), but to find out how employers think about their needs, how they describe the duties and requirements of different types of jobs.

Along with print and Web research, networking is an essential part of your career exploration. The word "networking" tends to put graduate students off, so instead I should say, talking to people about what they do, and giving them an idea of who you are, what you have to offer, and what you want. Start asking everyone you know -- parents, relatives, friends now, friends from college, people you meet -- for names of people to talk to in areas that interest you. And don't forget to check if your university has an online career network that will give you access to many more names.

How long will the search process take? That depends on how diligent you are and on how quickly you come to focus on a type of occupation, like manager or writer, or a career field,



like international development or television. I have seen it take some students a couple of months and others, more than a year.

About now you are probably thinking it would be easier just to accept that postdoc you were offered but don't really want, or to wait until the next round of on-campus recruitment and hope there's something you can apply for there. And you're right. The process of figuring out what you want and matching that up with a career field and an employer is hard, and it may take a long time. But it is the basis for a career path that allows you to take advantage of your interests and skills, including those you developed in graduate school.

**Question:** My adviser is urging me to apply for jobs this coming academic cycle, but I'm not sure whether I want an academic career or not. I feel that I should be sure and that I will have wasted the last six years if I don't become a professor. But I think I want to look into other options. What should I do?

**Answer:** Your uncertainty and conflict are common to many graduate students in their final years of study. When you decided to go to graduate school, you may well have thought you wanted to become a professor. Then for the first few years of graduate school you concentrated on your academic work and thought no more of careers. There is no reason to feel guilty if you don't want an academic career now. People change; circumstances change. And there's no reason to feel that you have wasted years of your life if you don't stay in academe.

During the course of getting your Ph.D. you have developed not only a specific area of expertise but also an array of skills that are transferable to many types of careers. And in completing all the requirements of the degree, you have demonstrated your ability to do something hard and to accomplish something significant. That is experience that many employers will value.

So, let's lay out a practical plan for you now. Since you have not rejected an academic career, it makes sense for you to follow your adviser's recommendation and prepare over the summer to go on the academic job market in the fall. But you might make this a selective search where you apply only for those positions that really attract you, or if the positions don't sound good, then only for positions in geographic locations that sound attractive. And I hope that going through the application process and going for interviews will help you decide whether you want this career. A speaker at one of our alumni career chats noted that he didn't know he wanted, indeed loved, an academic career until after he was working in his first teaching job after graduate school.

With a selective academic search you will have time to explore nonacademic options. Go to some of the nonacademic career programs offered on your campus; talk to alumni and friends; do research in books and on the Web. Look over the books in your career-center library or go to the career section of any major bookstore and settle into a comfortable chair with a stack of books on career areas that sound interesting. The important thing is to keep researching and thinking about careers so that you choose the career you want rather than settle on the career that's easiest to get.

**Question:** The economy is so bad that I'm afraid to look for a job. Do you know anyone who has gotten a nonacademic job in the last year?

**Answer:** I do know Ph.D.'s who succeeded in getting good nonacademic jobs this past year: with an investment bank and a patent law firm; in economic consulting, biotech-pharmaceutical consulting, and educational consulting; in a university technology-transfer office; as a research scientist for a biotechnology company; as a medical director for a pharmaceutical advertising company. And these are only the jobs I happened to hear about. No matter how bad the economy, people will always get hired.



But I know that looking is very hard right now. My basic advice is to allow more time for your search, be more diligent in your efforts, and cast a wider net than you would have three years ago. Follow up on everything you send out. Try to get more names and leads from every person you talk to. Put multiple feelers out at the same time (so that a "no" from any one doesn't hurt so much). Try to build a relationship with anyone who expresses interest in you but says there's a hiring freeze on now (hiring needs can change suddenly). While you are looking, try to get part-time work or volunteer work or take classes that move you toward your career goal.

Finally, take good care of yourself. Rejection is hard on everyone. Seek out the comfort of family and friends, and stop in at your campus career center for a check-up on your strategies and a boost to your morale.

