

Professional Development on a Ph.D.'s Schedule

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What do my living room, the Ronald McDonald House in New Haven and the New York City subway have in common? They are all places where I have conducted professional development on a tight schedule. Professional development is the process of developing skills and gaining experience that will help advance your career. Sometimes professional development involves developing skills that are not immediately relevant to your research. My hope for this article is that you will also find professional development opportunities that do not interfere with your academic priorities.

More Than Just Transferable Skills

The most common career article written for Ph.D.s often involves a discussion on [transferable skills](#) such as communicating, problem solving and analyzing data. These skills are extremely useful in a variety of fields and sectors and are the main reason why Ph.D.s are qualified for so many career paths. However, upon researching careers, many Ph.D.s will eliminate jobs that require skills that they have not developed rather than explore ways of acquiring these missing skills.

Ph.D.s fail to acquire additional training for many reasons including guilt, inertia and an overall feeling that their scholarly accomplishments should be enough to be considered for a job. All of these barriers are important and require separate articles to be addressed. For now, I want to tackle the most common obstacle that prevents students from acquiring additional skills: time.

For certain careers, employers gravitate toward candidates who demonstrate strong scholarly accomplishments coupled with skills and experiences developed outside of their academic pursuits. Therefore, students and postdocs are often advised to seek additional extracurricular experience such as internships, leadership opportunities and freelance consulting and writing. They may also take classes in subjects outside of their discipline or pursue certain professional certificates.

While these types of structured professional development are beneficial, they are not always realistic. Ph.D.s working in demanding fields may find it difficult to designate time for these types of pursuits. Even with better time management, many Ph.D.s will be unable to participate in internships or take courses. This is especially true for trainees who also manage family responsibilities.

Fortunately, there are several opportunities for professional development that will allow for skill development on a busy schedule.

Recognizing Places Where You Are Already Developing Skills

Before you consider pursuing new professional development opportunities, you should inventory places where you may be building unique skills. For instance, I recently worked with a postdoc who was chair of his co-op board. This experience allowed him to develop budgeting, negotiation and strategic-planning skills that were not part of his academic training. Another student with whom I worked volunteered for a crisis intervention hotline. During graduate school, my wife and I volunteered for the local Ronald McDonald House, where we honed our interpersonal and active listening skills. While pursuit of these experiences was motivated by altruism rather than pragmatism, the student, postdoc and I developed skills that were valuable to employers. If you are already participating in similar activities, highlight these skills when applying for jobs.

Online Courses Are a Busy Ph.D.'s Best Friend

One challenge to the graduate school and postdoc experience is that Ph.D.s become focused on a niche topic,

which can lead to intellectual stagnation. A great way to stimulate your brain and overcome complacency with a specific topic is to take challenging courses in new and exciting fields. However, regular classes and lofty registration fees often preclude Ph.D.s from taking courses at brick-and-mortar institutions. Fortunately, the rapid emergence of online education provides a perfect solution for busy Ph.D.s who wish to take new and interesting courses. Many online courses are free, which is perfect for a ramen noodle budget. They are also flexible, allowing students to view lectures at their own leisure. Companies such as Udacity, edX and Coursera also provide certificates and course credit for a fraction of the cost of what brick-and-mortar institutions charge. Some of the skills that you might develop by taking courses online might include computer programming, foreign language, finance and statistics. Taking a course will not only help you build skills for your next career, but may also bring a unique perspective to your research.

Podcasts: Professional Development Anywhere

My commute involves a car ride, a railroad, two subway lines and a one-mile walk. When I first started my current job, I viewed this time as wasted, especially because I have difficulty reading and sleeping on trains. However, my recent discovery of podcasts has led to an educational epiphany. I could actually learn new things during every step of my commute. In the last few months I have used podcasts downloaded onto my smartphone to stay up-to-date on current events, learn about business and finance, and even explore areas of science outside of my expertise. There are many excellent podcasts that I strongly recommend for Ph.D.s, including the TED Radio Hour, Radiolab, Freakonomics, Planet Money and the HBR IdeaCast. For those of you who have a long commute or are often engaged in tasks that do not require your full concentration such as stuffing pipette boxes or compiling long bibliographies, I encourage you to maximize your time by listening to podcasts. If I can turn time spent in a New York City subway into a learning experience, you can find way to use podcasts as well.

Virtual Volunteering From Your Couch

Virtual volunteering opportunities have made it possible for Ph.D.s to build concrete outside experience without stepping away from their research. These types of programs allow scholars to participate in opportunities on their own schedules. For instance, the U.S. Department of State's Virtual Student Foreign Service internship is a program where students collaborate on interesting international affairs projects through telecommunication and email. Other opportunities, such as Elsevier's new STM Digest program, provide opportunities for Ph.D.s to develop experience writing about science for the general public. Finally, innovation challenges organized by groups such as InnoCentive and OpenIDEO allow students to collaborate virtually to solve global problems. These experiences are excellent résumé builders that will help differentiate you from your competition.

Maximize Your Time

Pressure to publish your research or graduate in a timely manner can make professional development appear to be a luxury that you cannot afford. However, for many career paths professional development is essential. Fortunately, there are many opportunities that you can pursue that are conducive to an academic's schedule. If these opportunities are realized, time should no longer be one of the barriers preventing you from investing in yourself.