

Leaving academia? Look to those who've already made the transition

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BEYOND THE PROFESSORIATE

Having been pioneers in building a career that makes use of their experience as scholars and teachers, they are well-positioned to show you what is possible.

By MAREN WOOD | JUL 19 2018

This is a guest post by Anthony Cantor, PhD. Dr. Cantor earned a PhD in history from the University of Toronto, and is currently a knowledge ambassador and client support at EssayJack Inc. Follow him on Twitter [@AnthonyCantorEJ](#) and find him on [LinkedIn](#).

“Wanted: former academic. Must have PhD in the humanities and at least two years of university teaching experience. Applicant must be conversant in *Chicago Manual of Style*. Familiarity with plagiarism policies and competence in Blackboard a plus.”



I'd be a great candidate for that position. I'd also be an ideal candidate for a job posting that said: “Must love pizza. Experience with Netflix required. Encyclopedic knowledge of the 1989 Philadelphia Phillies preferred.”

When I started to look for a job outside of academia, I thought that the chances of an employer looking for someone with my exact educational and professional experience were about the same as finding a job tailored to my Phillies and pizza expertise.

A search for “historian” on Monster.ca yields no results.

Yet I was fortunate enough to find a position whose description was very close to my hypothetical example above (the PhD one, not the Netflix one). Here's what it said:

“The ideal candidate will have at least two years teaching experience in higher education (college or university), particularly in disciplines involving essay writing. The ideal candidate will have a doctorate in a liberal arts/humanities subject area and a track record of academic excellence.”

Among the additional qualifications and attributes listed were “excellence in academic writing, ability to work with minimal supervision, and excellent verbal and written communication skills.”

This sounds like a dream job for a recent PhD. And that’s no accident. The open position was with EssayJack Inc., an educational-technology company founded by two professors at Canadian universities. The co-founder and CEO, Lindy Ledohowski, was a professor of English before leaving academia and becoming an entrepreneur. (Read Dr. Ledohowski’s Transition Q & A [here](#) and her Transition Update [here](#).)

That job description suggested something about working for former academics that has proven true in the time I’ve been employed as a knowledge ambassador at EssayJack: my skills and experience are valued in ways they might not be by employers without that shared background.

This means that my company appreciates the skills developed in graduate school, including research, synthesising a broad range of information, analysis, working independently on long-term projects, balancing them with short-term goals, and effective written expression. Because she successfully made the transition from academic to entrepreneur, Lindy can see how those skills are transferrable to the educational-technology context, often in ways I wouldn’t think of on my own. Perhaps more importantly, she is also well aware of the pitfalls of bringing an academic mindset to a tech startup. This means that I can learn from her wisdom, gained from experience, and avoid potentially inefficient expenditures of time and energy.

In short, working for ex-academics means that I have the benefit of invaluable mentorship as I set out on my own alt-ac path.

Beyond that, it means that I’m working for people who value education and academic integrity. I don’t have to sacrifice any of my commitments to be successful. On the contrary, those values form the core of our educational-technology business and serve to differentiate us from the competition.

This is a perhaps undervalued dimension of the PhD-turned-entrepreneur phenomenon: they are more likely to hire other people with humanities PhDs and give us the opportunity to stay involved in education and scholarship while making an immediate difference in the lives of students and educators.

A great advantage of working in the field of educational technology is that I have a chance to intervene in the education system and improve instruction as well as students’ learning experience. I can translate my own understanding of — and even frustration with — secondary and postsecondary education into solutions that teachers, departments and institutions can adopt and implement right away. I can also develop approaches to help specific populations with essay writing and put them into practice across Canada and internationally, not just in my own classroom. For example, we are currently rolling out EssayJack for home educators and also making EssayJack available to support writing in Indigenous and minority languages. This is only possible because I work for a company that was built by former academics with documented successes and credibility.

If you recently completed a PhD and are looking for jobs outside of the academy, think about people you know or have read about who have made this transition. Seek out companies founded by the first generation of ex-academic entrepreneurs. As their endeavours meet with success and expand, they may have need of someone who also understands the world of education. They'll know what your CV means in terms of the contribution you could make. And, having been pioneers in making a life and career that makes use of their experience as scholars and teachers, they are well-positioned to show you what is possible. They have the experience to stop you from making some of the mistakes we are all prone to as we adapt to a professional climate different than the one we thought we were preparing for when we began postgraduate study.

I haven't found any professional opportunities to apply my knowledge of how many home runs Von Hayes hit in 1989. (It was 26, a career high.) But working for a company founded by someone who made the leap from professor to entrepreneur has allowed me to make use of my experience and commitments — and to continue to grow—in ways that I didn't think possible when I first began looking for non-university positions.

ABOUT MAREN WOOD

L. Maren Wood earned a PhD in history from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Maren delivers interactive workshops to help graduate students prepare for a non-faculty job search. In addition to her research, Maren provides one-to-one career coaching to PhDs.



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