

From academia to a career in geoscience consultancy

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What is your current position?

I am currently a geoscientist at the British Geological Survey (BGS), a partly publicly funded body that consults for the British government and industry on all aspects of geoscience. In my role at BGS, I help decarbonise the UK's energy grid by replacing fossil fuels with hydrogen or geothermal energy. Prior to this BGS position, I had a similar consulting role with Arup, a large engineering and professional services company.

Working in consultancy, I have found that no two days are the same; sometimes I may be in meetings all day, and the next I could be writing reports, setting up experiments or reading government policy briefings. At a high level, my work is at an interface between industry, government and academia, meaning a core part of my day-to-day is meeting stakeholders and liaising between these groups. To liaise effectively, I need to understand the latest scientific research in these topics, keep abreast with key policy decisions and be aware of the needs of industry. Often, consulting projects are short and fast-paced 'sprint' ventures with clearly defined objectives and boundaries, which are often in contrast with research projects, where the end goal and means to get there are not always straightforward.

Although now a more minor role compared to while I was a postdoc, conducting research and setting up experiments is also still a part of my job with the British Geological Survey. Having a PhD has been helpful in giving me a detailed technical understanding and a scientific approach to problem solving.

What do you enjoy most about your current role?

Renewable energy, hydrogen and decarbonisation are highly topical areas of science with implications for all of society. Working in this industry, I enjoy seeing my work contribute towards a clearly defined end-goal, Net Zero, and can see the progress and good intentions made by stakeholders in trying to reach this. I also enjoy seeing the different perspectives of each stakeholder group. Often, these groups do not necessarily understand the technical implications of the latest scientific research, and translating and advising on this work can be very insightful and rewarding. Overall, I feel strongly motivated working on this topic and gain satisfaction from whatever small difference my work can make. This clear goal contrasts with my PhD, where I sometimes felt my work was poorly defined and didn't help solve societal issues.

Having said that, there are parts of academia I do miss. Working in academia I had a greater freedom of research, which would allow me to explore new and unexpected outcomes. I also miss teaching and demonstrating; helping undergraduates learn and advance was a highlight of my time as a PhD and postdoc.

What factors influenced your decision to transition to a non-academic career?

I look back fondly on my PhD having met some incredible people along the journey. However, I feel that I made the right decision to leave and have no regrets changing career. I found that working on new research was often lonely, with little teamwork or appreciation. However, my ultimate decision to leave was based on the lack of career progression in academia, as I felt that the chance of getting a permanent position or becoming a successful professor in such a competitive career environment was too low. Without job security, many other personal goals became harder, such as obtaining a mortgage or achieving work-life balance. So to get the stability I wanted, I knew I had to move out of academia.

I first discovered consulting while attending an industrial conference during my postdoc. I remember seeing my future line manager present for a client and thinking “could this be a route out of academia”? I later saw a job advertised on LinkedIn with the same company, applied and was completely surprised when they offered me the position!

How did you prepare for your non-academic career?

I was very fortunate to have had a fantastic supervisor during my postdoc who knew I wanted to eventually leave academia. She made my postdoc output more focused on renewable and hydrogen energy, and helped raise my profile within her network. Together, we developed and highlighted my transferable skills such as project management, presenting, and business acumen. I never quite appreciated it at the time, but academia provides many transferable skills that are highly sought after in the private sector. I also presented at many conferences, both academic and non-academic, which let me meet a whole new network including my future line-managers at both Arup and the BGS. Overall, my postdoc supervisor was very formative for my future career, and I owe much to her help.

What advice do you have for other PhD students interested in a non-academic career?

I was often worried during my PhD that I wasn't advancing my personal development. However, academia develops many transferable skills and forges an inquisitive, scientific mindset that many private companies are interested in. I would recommend using all the opportunities that academia can present, such as project management, budgeting, scientific writing, problem solving, teaching, presenting (the list goes on) to expand your CV. Have confidence that you can achieve the career you want, and understand that transferable skills are key to working in any industry.

Interviewed by Erin Scott

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