What to do with your PhD in Philosophy — Outside of Academia

by Mike Steiner

Pursuing a career in academic philosophy after finishing your PhD is not always possible, and perhaps not even desirable in some circumstances. For instance, the job market for teaching when you graduate may be almost non-existent, you may highly value living in a specific location because of family, or you may wish to make an impact in some other sector. Important factors in my life meant that I would not be able to travel to wherever a job in philosophy might happen to become available, and so I mentally prepared to make the jump from instructor to non-academic employee as I neared the end of my PhD. What follows are some tips and lessons I learned on the way to finding my first real career job after graduating. Since there are many good general resources for being successful on the job hunt, I will try to restrict most of my comments to those specifically relevant to those with a <u>background in philosophy</u>.

First of all: the good news. You have valuable skills that you've developed doing a PhD in philosophy, and you <u>can</u> and <u>will</u> find a job outside of academia. There are great companies or organizations out there that are interested in your particular abilities and will pay you well to help them get things done. You will be a brain for hire! Not only that, but you can find work that is rewarding. Although you won't be able to spend the day working on the philosophical puzzle of your choice or even teaching philosophy, there are many upsides to getting a job outside academia. One advantage is that you have much more freedom as to where and in which industry you wish to work. Further, you get to work on new challenges on a monthly, weekly, or even a daily basis that put your mind to work. Finally, there is no upper limit on what you can achieve, and what you can earn.

Now the bad part. Be prepared to spend 3 to 6 months to find a good job, and be prepared to work hard, be humble, and stay positive. My search took just over 6 months, and was filled with many ups and downs. In all honesty it was a hard time; something that I would not want to go through again. This is partly why I wrote this article – it is designed to help you get through it as fast as possible. What follows is just a smattering of ideas and tips in no particular order.

1. You will need to ditch your academic CV, and create a resume more suited to non-academic jobs. The graduate career counsellors at the university will help you with this, as well as help you with your interview skills. But here is a rather crucial point for both your resume and especially your cover letters:

   Highlight your TRANSFERRABLE SKILLS.

   Coming out of philosophy, you probably won't have the specific content or knowledge about the industry in which you are applying. Don't let this get you down: most employers know that there will be a steep learning curve for almost anyone they hire anyway, since so much of the information you will need to know is company specific. The key is to stress that you have the

<u>underlying skills needed for success in the job</u>. You may not have ever perceived your abilities in the following ways, but this is (in part) what recruiters care about:

a. CRITICAL THINKING/ANALYTICAL SKILLS: philosophy is all about critical thinking, and the recruiters may not be aware of this. This is one of those very transferrable skills, and my advice is to just come right out and say that you have extensively honed these skills doing philosophy in grad school. You can mention logic, of course, but be prepared in interviews to give concrete examples of how you deployed your analytical/critical thinking skills.

b. RESEARCH SKILLS: some jobs need this skill. Perhaps you may not be interested in jobs that don't, but either way, you have the ability to perform copious amounts of research, analyze qualitative data, and synthesize the results. Since most of the specific content will be learned once you're on the job, it is this underlying skill that is crucial to have.

c. COMMUNICATION SKILLS: you have the ability to take complex information and present it clearly to target audiences. This is very important for many jobs. Here you can highlight any teaching experience you have, or any publications or writings. At the very least, discuss your dissertation and defence.

d. ABILITY TO LEARN QUICKLY: a PhD in philosophy requires you to prove competence in multiple areas within a fairly short time frame, and this may not be obvious to those looking at your resume. So just make this clear: you have the proven ability to learn about many different subjects and display competency in them very quickly. This is a very transferrable skill, crucial in your case since you will inevitably need to learn a lot of stuff when you start your job.

e. COMPUTER SKILLS: think about all the programs you've used while doing your PhD. First of all, you probably used Word or something similar to write your dissertation and many, many papers. Further, you've had to stick to specific style guidelines and use add-ons for bibliography tracking like Endnote. You've kept and analyzed grade sheets in Excel. You prepared dozens of PowerPoint presentations for your classes. You had to use your University's corporate "Enterprise resource management" systems to get registered for classes, get paid, and file reports for writing and presentations, plus those that involved administration of expenses and funding as a grad student. These are all important to show that <u>you have computer skills, and can quickly learn any new programs they may want you to know</u>. If you learned any other particular programs in your undergrad or elsewhere, make sure to include them as well. In my job search, many recruiters wanted applicants to be competent in at least a few of the MS Office programs, most notably Word and Excel.

f.   PROJECT MANAGEMENT EXPERIENCE: this can be a big one. Recruiters want to know if you can handle multiple aspects of a project and still accomplish something within a specified time frame. If nothing else, sell your PhD dissertation, or perhaps the PhD in its entirety, as one giant project. Think about it: you were responsible for planning the project, getting funding, achieving milestones, as well as reporting – these are all things that people do when they work on projects outside of academia. So don't be shy; come right out and say that you can do these things all at once, and that you were (more importantly) *successful* at it.

g.   CONCEPTUAL/ABSTRACT ANALYSIS: although I've mentioned critical thinking/analytical skills already, this pertains specifically to your ability to analyse very abstract and complex concepts. You've spent much of your time doing this as a philosopher, to the point (at least with respect to your dissertation, if not publications/presentations) where you have made an actual scholarly contribution. This may be more or less of a selling point, depending on the job; if you want to highlight this skill, be prepared to give an example that interviewers will understand and appreciate.

2.   If you have any preconceived notion that your work in philosophy, including your PhD, will speak for itself, and that getting a job outside of academia is all about merit, get rid of it. You have to sell yourself, and you have to network. Get used to emailing and then phoning people you don't know, just to have an 'information interview' with them. Approach them as a humble newcomer who is genuinely interested in learning about their field, and they will often reward you with suggestions and contacts that, in my case, led to many good interviews. Go above and beyond when applying for jobs: find out who the recruiter is (be resourceful!), send inquiry emails for more information, etc. Make yourself stand out as an intelligent, motivated person. Network, network, network.

3.   As mentioned earlier, be humble. You don't want to let your PhD in philosophy make you arrogant. If instead you feel insecure, don't apologize for or lament the fact that your PhD is in philosophy rather than something more obviously appropriate; you are moving from one field of specialty to another, which illustrates that you are a highly adaptive professional. So you can stress that you possess many good skills thanks to your PhD, while acknowledging you will also face a steep learning curve once in the job (good thing you are a quick learner, right?).

4.   You may have a burning question about which industry to target. My answer won't be a big help here. Here's the thing: 99% of the cool jobs that exist you aren't even aware of, so my recommendation is to not prematurely restrict yourself to a particular industry. Since you are leaving philosophy, you are already going to be doing something different for a living; the key is to find a job that deploys those transferrable skills you've developed, and such jobs exist in almost any industry. So, I suppose my advice is to just not worry too much about where to look; look everywhere! You can't know a priori where the job is that will not only make you happy, but will also be offered to you. Keep your perspective broad and your options open. The right

job for you may be called 'analyst,' 'researcher,' 'writer,' 'lead,' or 'decision support,' just to name a few. As a personal aside, my initial focus was on the health care sector, but this focus only wound up <u>wasting my time and energy</u>. I never did get a job of interest to me in this sector, despite many promising leads and interviews. Instead I was offered a job in oil and gas. I never thought an oil pipeline company would offer an interesting opportunity, or be interested in me. But I couldn't have been more wrong. I now have an 'analyst' job where I am applying critical thinking on a daily basis, applying my researching and investigative skills, and in general helping the company get things done. I work with intelligent professionals who are curious about the world, and love to talk philosophy with me whenever they get the chance. <u>Don't overlook these kinds of opportunities</u>.

That's it. For all the finer details about resumes, interview techniques and practice, etc., contact people who can help, or do appropriate research. Finding a good job will be one of the hardest things you do, and you've already done a PhD! So keep positive. You will come out of the process with a job, and hopefully a good one that gives you everything important that a job in academia would: fulfillment and a good living!