

Panel Demystifies the Non-academic Job Search

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Canberra, ACT – At the 37th annual Australian Historical Association Conference at the Australian National University (2-6 July 2018), a panel offered advice to post-graduates and early career researchers on transitioning to non-academic fields. According to the panel, the challenges inherent in getting PhDs into non-academic jobs are twofold. First, the job seeker has to learn to think creatively about his/her/their skills and where those skills might fit and then ‘sell’ those skills appropriately. The second challenge is that non-academic employers may not realise they need a person with PhD-level skills.

The latter issue was explored in the opening presentation by Dr. Inger Mewburn, associate professor and director of research training at ANU. Widely known for her blog, [The Thesis Whisperer](#), Mewburn has also been part of teams that have conducted research on both the academic and non-academic job markets for those with PhDs.¹ Most recently, Mewburn, Will Grant, and their team have been developing [PostAc](#)[®], a new kind of job search engine specifically for PhD students and graduates. A search on the most common employment sites for jobs requiring a PhD or jobs seeking an ‘historian’ will return very few matches. However, when Mewburn’s team dug deeper into the job descriptions, they found that many employers were looking for PhD-level skills – writing skills, creativity, data analysis, subject-matter expertise, dealing with uncertainty – but hadn’t made the connection that PhD graduates could give them all the skills they sought. So, Mewburn’s team developed an algorithm to identify those jobs that required high-level research skills. The good news was, according to the algorithm, there were three times as many jobs as available graduates. The bad news: because those jobs are often in fields like management, consulting and strategy, and marketing and communications, it was unlikely that humanities PhDs would find them. Enter [PostAc](#)[®]. The current demonstration system allows job seekers to explore historical job posts sorted by the new algorithm in order to expand their thinking on the types of industries and positions they might consider. A live version – populated with current, open positions – is planned for 2019.

Following the presentation, Mewburn was joined by panellists Evan Smith, Blake Singley, and Melanie Burkett. Currently part of an ARC Discovery Project at Flinders University ('Managing Migrants and Border Control in Britain and Australia, 1901-1981'), Smith has gone back and forth between the academic and non-academic worlds, with stints at the Australian Institute of

¹ For more on her research on the academic job market, see Rachel Pitt and Inger Mewburn, 'Academic Superheroes? A Critical Analysis of Academic Job Descriptions', *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management* 38, no. 1 (2016): 88-101.

Criminology (AIC), the South Australian Office of Crime Statistics and Research (OCSAR), and the Australian Taxation Office (ATO). After completing his PhD, Singley spent some time as a research assistant and sessional teacher before stepping into his role as curator of collections at the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AITSIS). (Note: Singley has since become a senior curator at the Australian War Memorial). A current PhD candidate at Macquarie University, Burkett spent more than a decade in higher education administration in the U.S. in student advising, global education, alumni affairs, and event planning.

The panellists started by explaining what their day-to-day responsibilities entailed. Smith's positions involved much evaluative research – for example, assessing whether proposed legislation would be effective. Singley's work encompasses developing physical and online exhibitions, assessing copyright and the provenance of artefacts, and consulting with communities. In her most recent role as an advisor, Burkett met one-on-one with undergraduates. Such a role did not require the subject-matter knowledge of a position like Singley's, but it did allow for continued involvement with academia. Similar 'professionalised' academic jobs – non-academic jobs that allow for some teaching and/or research – are becoming more common at Australian universities.

Both Smith and Singley assumed they would follow the academic path after graduation. However, Singley quickly realised that the pursuit of the academic career would most likely entail a willingness to move, a difficult proposition when one has three children. He had done some casual work as a research assistant at AITSIS and thus, when the full-time position was announced, he had already made connections with the staff and had built two years of institutional knowledge. Smith described his first non-academic job as an 'accident'. He saw the position at the AIC on a grad student employment list serve and, since he had worked with a criminologist on a research project, was able to market his skills appropriately.

In both cases, networking – knowing the right people – proved invaluable. Ironically, Mewburn pointed out, the academic job search differs here to a degree. Being the casual lecturer whom everyone knows and can depend on might work against you when those elusive full-time positions materialise. You're already there; you're already doing the work; they don't need to hire you again. Plus, if you're still at your degree-granting institution, that institution presumably already has someone with your expertise (your supervisor). By contrast, word of mouth and networking are critical in the non-academic job search. Mewburn went further, recommending that if your post-graduation plans are focused on non-academic jobs, you should stop spending your time teaching and trying to publish in academic journals and instead focus on building networks.

The application processes for academic and non-academic jobs can also be very different. Since Singley's job was looking for someone with an academic background, his application was very similar to an academic one. Smith, however, finds non-academic applications to be much simpler and quicker. Based on her experience serving on search committees, Burkett stressed understanding the difference between the materials required. In the searches she participated in, applicants with a PhD often submitted lengthy CVs when the committee was looking for a two-paged resume. This is exactly where university career offices can be useful, Mewburn noted. They know how to put together resumes and cover letters for non-academic jobs, so don't hesitate to use them.

The panel then took questions from the audience, who were curious to know about the importance of volunteering. While there are concerns about the exploitation inherent in volunteer positions, Singley found volunteering to be a good way to make connections. Burkett had volunteered as an advisor before obtaining a permanent position in the field and she found that experience had provided insight into what the job actually *was* versus what she *thought* it might be, a perspective that was invaluable in crafting her application. Informational interviewing can also help in that regard.

Another audience member wanted to know how many selection criteria one should meet before applying for a job. For every job advert with its lengthy list of criteria, Mewburn observed, there are going to be some criteria that are more important than others. While you might be able to read between the lines to ascertain what is the most important, chances are you won't know; you just have to go for it. Singley encouraged applicants to find the angle that works for them. He hadn't had any curatorial experience when he applied for his current position, but he focused his application on AITSIS's rare book collection and a fellowship he had done at the Mitchell Library. One of the criteria had been for 'organisational skills' which he illustrated through his prior work as a chef, managing a kitchen of fifteen people. Translating previous experience into different contexts is not an easy skill to learn, but it can be developed and university career centres can help develop it.

Burkett had had a similar experience. She had lacked the advising background her last position had wanted, so she instead focused her application on the skills she did have – marketing and communications, strategic planning, program assessment – that would be needed to get this new advising program up and running. The most important thing, she advised, is stay focused on your strengths. Don't apologise for skills you don't have. 'Remember', Mewburn advised, 'they are suffering some kind of pain and you are their pain pill'.

One audience member asked if the PhD would make her *overqualified* for non-academic jobs and should she leave the PhD off of her resume? Mewburn admitted that there does exist some cultural

cringe about the PhD. Employers hold a lot of misconceptions about what that qualification means. But, she thinks that attitude is slowly changing and advised job seekers to find organisations that already employ some PhDs. In her experience, once an office hires a PhD, they want more.

Smith offered a final word of caution to the audience. Within the academic bubble, we talk so much about the discouraging job prospects, but precarity exists outside of academia, too. Public service jobs are often on one- or two-year contracts (or even less); governments and institutional priorities are subject to change. Forging a career outside of academia *is* a viable possibility, but it's not utopia.

Perhaps the most important message of the panel was that our skills as historians *are* needed outside of academia. As Mewburn noted, 'We [society] have more data than we ever have had before, but we can't make sense of it.' Historians, however, can take that data and turn it into stories. 'That's your job', she said, 'That's your superhero power'.