

Student Notebook: Considering Life on the “Other Side”

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If you’ve spent any time reading about or discussing the academic job market recently, then you already know how the story goes — tenure-track jobs are scarce, and the numbers seem only to be getting bleaker. As might be expected, the reasons for this trend are complex. But as long as competition for tenure-track jobs increases, so, too, will graduates continue to find meaningful work elsewhere, particularly as industry demand for behavioral science PhDs increases. User experience (UX) research and related careers in the tech industry represent one alternative to the traditional academic route.

This past summer I interned as a UX researcher at a tech company and got a taste of what postgraduate life might look like outside academia. Many doctoral students seems to be curious about this world, and I hope that communicating what I learned can provide value to those in search of answers. I’m far from an expert on the machinations of industry — I never intended to do an internship and, in total, I spent only 12 weeks in this position — but the experience recontextualized everything I’ve learned as a doctoral student thus far.

Effectively plotting one’s course toward a career in UX likely merits its own article, and there is an abundance of material on preparing for the interviews themselves. But in brief, three pieces of advice seem especially appropriate.

- Become conversant in the basic principles and terminology of human-centered design, the assumptions surrounding research for business decision-making, and the typical problems encountered therein (e.g., usability research, A/B testing). This will help immensely when it comes to framing your interviewing skills.
- Consider your research identity and double down on it. Regardless of what research methods you enjoy, try to develop them as much as possible and decide whether you aspire to be a qualitative, quantitative, or mixed-methods researcher — all are valued in industry.
- If you know industry is of interest to you, communicate this to your academic support system as early as possible. While talking about your career aspirations with a mentor can be daunting, it will ultimately pay huge dividends. Mentors want their students to succeed and will be best equipped to provide support if they know what training you want and what opportunities will appeal to you.

My UX internship constituted a period of immense learning and growth, some of which felt familiar to my life as a graduate student. For example, the company where I interned had a strong culture of learning and mentorship on par with or exceeding the academic world. Everyone — not just interns — was encouraged to develop new skills ranging from methods to statistical packages, and beyond. I was also excited to see that there are opportunities to teach (in the form of in-house workshops) and mentor more junior researchers. We even had research summits for researchers to disseminate their work to others around the business.

However, many aspects of industry operate very differently from academia. I found it especially challenging to orient myself to the radically different assumptions of industry research. While the standard for quality was rigorous, the purpose of research is different. Often, the research process begins with a decision to be made, and that subsequently dictates the kind of research to be conducted. Everything that follows from the initial decision to be made is based on priorities and strategies that are completely foreign in academic research. Generalizability only matters insofar as the decision is concerned, and theory building is irrelevant unless it makes for better decisions. Because business decisions are highly time sensitive, research needs to be conducted at an equally blistering speed, sometimes at the expense of producing polished work. That means you will need to communicate work in progress clearly and effectively to diverse stakeholders, on a moment's notice.

Working as a UX researcher — unlike an academic scholar — is a job and nothing more. Of course, many people I encountered were deeply passionate about their work and even dedicated long hours to their research (though this wasn't the norm). Generally speaking, though, you are merely an employee doing work to make your employer successful. The implications of this are two-fold. There is something *truly* liberating about leaving work at the office — no more waking up in the middle of the night to jot down study ideas, and no more equating the success of your research with your success as a *person*. But what made UX work easy to walk away from is precisely what made me begin to miss my academic research, too. As is the case for many academics, I feel a profound connection to my research, and by the end of my internship, I felt ready to continue doing work that added social value to the world, above and beyond the (admittedly, much larger) immediate impact I had on the business during my internship. How you handle these dynamics will likely bear heavily on whether UX research is for you.

This brings up a related point. At the end of the day, tech companies are businesses — and in business, generating impact means your research (whether indirectly or directly) needs to help the company grow.

In contrast, academics are ostensibly free to pursue whatever research they deem meaningful, unhindered by profit margins. On the one hand, this means that UX research's impact is direct, sizeable, and measurable. On the other, the nature of that impact is necessarily bound by profit. I found myself questioning whether I was comfortable with using my research skills to these ends, especially in light of the serious ethical issues in which many tech companies are embroiled.

The internship was a beneficial source of professional development for me. In academia, we work for years before being able to tangibly measure our success. Often, I was the only person in a given room with my skillset, and my team regularly made a point of recognizing this, justifying my decision to pursue doctoral education. Of course, doing a full-time summer internship — and shirking nonessential academic responsibilities — was not without its challenges. Reacclimating to academic life took months. But when I finally returned to campus, I felt reinvigorated by my research, found my writing to be clearer than ever, and had newfound clarity in what I value in a career.

In many academic circles, there seems to be a pervasive impulse to dichotomize graduates into those who “made it” by persisting in academia and those who “failed” by pursuing a career elsewhere. This attitude serves only to curb the advancement of our field and the intellectual development of our brightest graduate students. Like most who pursue doctoral study, landing a tenure-track professorship remains a dream of mine. Yet the odds of this actually happening are slim. Completing a UX internship validated and expanded the skill set I've spent years developing and showed me a future wherein I can have a meaningful career, even if it happens to be in one of the many viable industries outside of higher education. I'm not sure a career in UX research is the perfect fit for me, but it might be for you, and our field should continue to encourage such exploration.

Related Reading

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