

# Reframing Doctoral Skills

## Articulating Academic Experience for the Non-Academic Workplace

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As more and more PhD graduates struggle to find academic jobs and so increasingly turn towards the private sector, it is becoming evident that there is a disconnection between how academic skills are articulated and the kinds of work experience that are privileged in the non-academic workplace. Yet, rationally, it seems that these workers should be qualified for many jobs. Indeed, over the course of their degrees, many PhDs are responsible for training the undergraduates who will enter the workforce with university qualifications.

The problem, I believe, is one that University of Waterloo Associate Professor Aimée Morrison addressed well in her blog post "The degree *is* the job: a modest proposal for the PhD" ([www.hookandeye.ca/2011/11/degree-is-job-modest-propsoal-for-phd.html](http://www.hookandeye.ca/2011/11/degree-is-job-modest-propsoal-for-phd.html)). To summarize, Morrison argues that the PhD should be treated as a job, not as a path that leads to a job. The PhD is too long a distraction from life and career building if we use it as a time-out, rather than a career stage. This is important advice. Many PhD grads leave their programmes feeling as if they "have no work experience," and are often treated this way in the private sector job market. The truth is that the PhD is a full-time employment and needs to be articulated as such in cover letters and on non-academic resumes. The question is, where do all of those little jobs that make up the PhD feature on a normal resume?

Let us assume that you begin your resume with a list of crucial skills. This needs to somehow be reinforced by your work experience. The problem is, a list of TA-ships and sessional positions does not really account for the design, management and completion of a major research project, the dissemination of multiple, peer-reviewed research papers, the mentoring of undergraduates, the committee work, the grant applications, and the numerous other tasks that you have completed over the past 5-10 years.

This is why translating your skills for a non-academic audience is key to your success in the private sector job market. You cannot simply list intellectual accomplishments and knowledge sets and expect the individual reviewing your resume to equate these abstract skills with the more applied work that they often require. Private sector employment is an important alternative to the sessional and limited term appointment teaching streams that many recent graduates feel pressured into. At the end of the day, being a contract instructor does very little to advance your academic career. For what you get paid as a sessional, you could easily offer your superior research, communication, and mentoring skills to a non-profit or local company. Not only that, but if your job involves research, you may actually continue publishing in academic journals – something that sessionals and LTAs often do not have time to do. This in turn almost guarantees that they will never get back onto the tenure-track.

## Four Key Strategies for Reframing Your Skills

- 1) Work Experience – Find a way to incorporate all of the things that you have accomplished over your graduate career into the Work Experience section of your CV. Employers want to see *evidence* of your skills. Listing "research design" as a skill, then showing an exclusively teaching-based work experience does not convince anyone of this skill. Key terms for describing the dissertation as a job include: *researched and wrote*; *identified research problem*; *developed evaluation criteria*; *developed a timeline*; *public dissemination*; and *public speaking*.
- 2) Skill Terms – Frame your experience according to skills, rather than knowledge. What did you actually do? Also, in describing teaching experience, focus less on what you taught and more on skills such as *training*, *scheduling*, *mentoring*, and *coaching*. Other private sector friendly terms include: *delegate*; *coordinate*; *manage groups*; *provide performance feedback*; *supervision of research team*; *professional communication*; *writing*; and *editing*.
- 3) Titles and Descriptions – Every research contract or project on which you have worked needs to appear as a *job* on your resume. Jobs have titles, durations, responsibilities, employers and supervisors. Research assistant for an unknown professor is *not* a sufficient description. The project needs a title, it needs to be compelling, and the actual work you did (not the knowledge that you helped create) must be described in detail. If you were organized into a lab during your degree, be sure to mention that you *worked* there.
- 4) Translate your skills – Read the job posting carefully and repeat key terms from it in your application. This is especially important for electronic applications which are increasingly fed through a software application which searches for these keywords. If your resume and cover letter do not have them, they will be trashed without ever being seen by an actual human. Also, a resume is only two pages (max) and a cover letter is one.

After many years stretching your accomplishments out into an eight-page CV, a three-page statement of research, and an ever expanding teaching dossier, it is understandably very challenging to reframe yourself and your skills in ways that make sense outside of academic work. Be confident that you do have the requisite skills to succeed in a broad range of jobs. You are ambitious, hardworking, and successful, but you cannot simply expect that these facts will be self-evident to employers because you happen to hold a PhD.

You know that if that small business, non-profit, government department, or big tech company hired *you* with your many years of carefully honed skills – your advanced research, writing, and editing abilities – that that organization would benefit profoundly. But you need to get in the door to prove it. Getting them to give you a chance means making sure that your education, the greatest investment that you have ever made in yourself, does not count against you.

This means communicating your wealth of skills and experience in a language that they actually value and understand. It may be obvious to *you* why someone with your skill set would be a valuable addition to their company, but this is big picture stuff. The manager interviewing applicants probably does not have that kind of long-term, strategic plan in mind. They're just looking to check off boxes in a list of required skills and previous work experience, then make sure you aren't unbearable to work with during your interview. So, don't expect your obvious intelligence to be the key to getting a job. Skills, work experience, and your ability to play well with others are what most organizations are really looking for.