



RESEARCH ARTICLE

# How to Thrive Beyond Academia with a Humanities PhD

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## Abstract

Navigating a career beyond the traditional academic path can be both exciting and daunting for humanities professionals, often leaving them eager to explore new opportunities but unsure where to start. This article addresses five common challenges faced by those venturing outside academia and offers practical strategies for overcoming these obstacles. By tackling key issues such as translating academic expertise into broader contexts, expanding skill perceptions, and building professional networks, it provides actionable advice to help humanities graduates thrive in diverse career environments. Whether you are struggling with imposter syndrome or looking to leverage your unique skills, this guide aims to empower you to unlock new career possibilities and achieve success beyond academia.

**Keywords:** academia; career transition; humanities; professional development

Hope was an advanced humanities PhD student focused on indigenous beading practices – a fascinating but niche area of study. After six years of focused work things started to unravel. Her advisor retired, a close family member fell ill, and her job search revealed just a handful of scholarly roles that even remotely aligned with her expertise. The existential dread kicked in. “*Writing the dissertation felt like hitting a wall – I was overwhelmed to the point of ‘Find me a therapist and take me to my mother.’*”

Hope did not begin her PhD with a clear post-graduation plan. An instinctive curiosity for her field of study guided her decisions, but she often relied on academic mentors to outline her next steps – whether joining a research lab, undertaking fieldwork, or pursuing a doctorate. When the traditional academic path no longer felt right, she found herself at the crossroads that many PhD students encounter.<sup>1</sup> You know the feeling – deeply invested in your field, with everyone telling you that academia is your path, yet questioning your next steps. What would it mean if, after all these years, Hope did not finish her dissertation? It was time to explore other options, but she did not know where to begin. *Is a career beyond the academy for me? Would I even be a competitive candidate?*

<sup>1</sup> Seo and Yeo 2020; McAlpine 2024; Cassuto and Weisbuch 2021

Many doctoral students feel their training is heavily focused on academia, making it challenging to envision careers outside of it.<sup>2</sup> Though this is changing, universities have traditionally focused PhD career resources on academic pathways, with mentoring naturally geared toward faculty roles.<sup>3</sup> If you are considering careers beyond this option, you might feel like you are navigating that path on your own. We are here to join you, offering guidance and resources as you explore new directions.

With our shared knowledge, we have been able to help PhDs shape rewarding careers in a variety of fields. As Assistant Dean for Professional Development and a former graduate fellowships manager, Abby has over fifteen years of experience supporting career preparation both within and beyond the professoriate. Fatimah, founder of *Professional Pathways* and creator of the *Options for Success* career exploration program, has coached PhDs at all stages in advancing their careers. Our goal is to help you approach your career journey with confidence by identifying key challenges, outlining actionable steps, and translating your academic experience into language that resonates in fields beyond the professoriate. Here is the good news: you already have the skills you need – you just need to learn how to communicate them more effectively.

## 1. Hyperfocus: a double-edged sword

As scholars, we possess a unique ability to pose challenging questions and dive deep into theories, methodologies, and debates to uncover viable answers. This skill – often coupled with a natural inclination toward hyperfocus and critical analysis – is what distinguishes scholarly work.<sup>4</sup> However, it can also become a barrier when transitioning to a professional environment, where the focus is often outcomes-driven rather than knowledge-driven.<sup>5</sup>

Hyperfocus can hinder career prospects in two key ways: (1) difficulty in translating one's work during professional networking – specifically, the ability to communicate its relevance in broader terms and using language that resonates outside of a specialist's concern – and (2) a narrow assessment of one's skill set, leading to a limited view of potential job opportunities.

Breaking through this barrier requires developing the ability to zoom out from the hyper-focused perspective that academia often demands. It is about recognizing the broader ecosystem surrounding your skills and research topics and understanding how these relate to a wider business or decision-making context. In her career-transition program and forthcoming book *Options for Success*, Fatimah refers to this network of actors and related trends as your *research ecosystem*. There are dynamic discussions happening every day within this ecosystem – about social, economic, health, political, scientific, and other critical topics, innovations, and challenges. Too often, we filter out these discussions because we are entrenched in our academic routines or fail to recognize their potential for gathering valuable information.

Take a step back to explore the larger debates and emerging trends related to your research topic. Identify what piques your interest and use these insights to better translate and

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<sup>2</sup> Heflinger and Doykos 2016.

<sup>3</sup> Baker and Pifer 2011; Feldon et al. 2021; Gardner and Mendoza 2010; Sharmini Spronken-Smith 2020.

<sup>4</sup> Mowbray and Halse 2010.

<sup>5</sup> Berdahl and Malloy 2018.

present yourself and your work when networking and applying for jobs. For example, if you are researching medieval literature, you might notice broader discussions about digital humanities and archival preservation. In Hope's case, her focus in academia had always been on extreme specificity – drilling down to minute details, like studying jewelry-making in a small, defined region over a specific period. But to be successful in a new role required a completely different approach. She had to shift from narrowing her focus to broadening it, considering a diverse population and thinking about how more diverse users might interact with a product. This change in perspective did not mean abandoning the theoretical rigor she honed during her PhD; rather, it involved applying rigor on a different scale.

## 2. Language: communicating your research outside the field

When considering a transition from academe, one of the biggest challenges is learning to translate your scholarship into language that resonates outside your field. You already have the skills and knowledge – what is needed is a shift in how you understand your skills and how you present them.

Academics often describe their work in ways that do not immediately align with industry terminology.<sup>6</sup> For instance, what you might call “conducting an experimental study” in academia could be reframed as “executing a usability study” in a business context. The work remains the same; it is the description that changes. Take project management as an example. You might not think of yourself as a project manager, but think about what you have accomplished during your PhD: securing visas, coordinating with museums, managing relationships with labs, and juggling multiple deadlines. Each of these tasks is a project management feat. In industry, these are highly valued skills, and naming this value can help you reframe your experience in terms that hiring managers understand.

Hope, for instance, applied her analytical skills to user experience research. In academia, her work involved studying the relationship between people and objects – how materials were used in the past, informed by discipline-specific methods. When considering other roles, she realized that her skills were directly transferable. Instead of looking backward to understand historical context, as a user experience researcher, she began looking forward to understanding how people might use new technologies. The shift was not in her abilities but in how she conceptualized, applied, and articulated them.

The key is to understand the sector's terminology and see how it aligns with what you already know.<sup>7</sup> A common mistake and source of overwhelm is to believe you have to build an entirely new skill set to be a competitive candidate for roles in other sectors. You do not need to build something new; instead, simply reframe your existing experience in this new language. This not only makes your skills more accessible to employers but also helps you see the value of your academic training in new ways.

When you begin to see these connections, you can confidently enter conversations with professionals, clearly articulating how your background equips you to tackle their challenges. Whether it is project management, research techniques, or analytical thinking, you have what it takes to thrive – you just need a general understanding of the contextual

<sup>6</sup> Rogers 2020.

<sup>7</sup> Denicolo and Reeves 2013.

overlap between your academic skills and your target role to help you speak the right language.

### 3. Exposure: bridging the gap between academia and other sectors

While academic expertise forms the foundation of your knowledge, supplementing it with practical exposure is crucial for transitioning out of the academy.<sup>8</sup> This can be achieved through additional training, certifications, internships, or volunteer work. But it is essential to approach this exposure strategically. Resist the urge to pursue training or certifications arbitrarily. The key is to understand how these certifications are valued and utilized in industry and to select those that align with your career goals. Certifications and training require both time and financial investment, so it is important to make choices that will genuinely enhance your professional profile and career outcomes.

We have worked with PhD students who, in moments of panic and desperation to become more competitive job candidates, enrolled in random certifications, believing these would make them stand out. However, when asked why they chose those particular certifications or how they aligned with their career interests, they struggled to justify their decisions. This approach often leads to frustration, wasted resources, and missed opportunities. Instead, focus on training that not only adds value to your skill set but also aligns with your long-term career aspirations.

Practical exposure also offers another critical advantage: it helps you learn the unspoken cultural norms of the professional world, understand industry expectations, and prepare for effective networking and interviews. Being open to entry-level positions in a new field can provide a valuable foothold, allowing you to leverage your academic background to advance quickly. Hope, for example, decided to take on a part-time role in market research. In a similar case, let us take a PhD student in history who transitioned into project management. Rather than immediately aiming for high-level roles, he started with an internship at a nonprofit organization. This not only gave him insight into project management practices but also allowed him to network within the industry. Over time, he used his research and organizational skills to advance into a full-time project management position, where his academic background became an asset.

To make time for these opportunities, consider integrating them into your existing schedule. For example, you might take on a part-time internship or volunteer in a role that complements your research interests. This approach allows you to gain practical experience without compromising your progress toward completing your degree. Practical exposure is not just about adding bullet points to your resume – it is about strategically positioning yourself to transition smoothly into your desired career.

Initially unfamiliar with software products, Hope quickly realized that the specific content was less important than the techniques and methods she had developed. When confronted with a new technology for her role in user experience, she found that her real strength lay in her ability to figure things out and apply her research skills. The processes she had mastered during her PhD – determining what information was needed, selecting the right study methods, and effectively executing them – proved to be highly adaptable and transferable. Her experience highlights the importance of mastering processes over content.

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<sup>8</sup> Hardy 2023.

#### 4. Brand: telling your story

The idea of having a personal brand is growing in academic circles as more scholars seek to write for the public, expand the audiences for their work, and engage in supplemental income-generating activities, as observed in blog headlines and chat groups and in our career coaching practices. Still, there are questions about what exactly is a personal brand, how to develop one with authenticity, and how to authentically engage others in the brand and their ideas without seeming sleazy or boastful.

Your personal brand is a brief professional narrative that communicates who you are, including what you value, what topics or skills define your core expertise, and where you are focused or going professionally.<sup>9</sup> A clearly articulated personal brand allows professional contacts and employers to know who you are and what you can be relied on to know and do with competency. It also gives you an anchoring way to introduce yourself in networking, interviews, and on your LinkedIn and other social media profiles.

Begin your personal brand by developing your *professional profile pillars*, a concept Fatimah created to help her PhD clients zoom out from their hyper-niche expertise for relevance when engaging with the public and the professional labor market. Professional profile pillars are a collection of no more than five keywords or short phrases that describe your core areas of expertise and core skills – what you know and what you know how to do. Consider your primary skill- and knowledge-areas you want to be consulted about, invited to participate in, or hired to do. Your professional profile pillars are a tool designed to spark interest and start conversations so they need not describe all of your brilliance and all that you can do.

PhD alumni often use their self-concept to shape their personal brand or identity, which is crucial for career advancement.<sup>10</sup> The basis of this is derived from Self-Concept Theory, a psychological framework that explores how individuals perceive themselves and how these self-perceptions influence their behaviors, including career behaviors. It is most commonly utilized in marketing and consumer psychology, as it helps explain why people choose certain products, brands, or services over others based on their self-identity. Academic Self-Concept can impact career aspirations and choices, as individuals may pursue paths aligned with their perceived academic strengths and interests.<sup>11</sup> By understanding their strengths, values, and professional goals, they can craft a personal brand that aligns with their desired career trajectory.<sup>12</sup> This personal branding can be reflected in their resumes, online profiles, and professional interactions, enhancing their visibility and attractiveness to potential employers.

When transitioning to a career beyond the professoriate, it is essential to let go of the need for constant approval from traditional academic authorities. Instead, focus on building confidence in your ability to contribute meaningfully in new environments. This shift in mindset is crucial for developing a personal brand that is both authentic and effective in the job market.

When Hope transitioned into user experience research, she realized that her job was not just about gathering data; it was about crafting a story that resonated with a wide audience. Half

<sup>9</sup> Slim 2013.

<sup>10</sup> Seo, Ahn, Huang, Makela, and Yeo 2021, 968.

<sup>11</sup> Marsh, 2014.

<sup>12</sup> Gorbato, Khapova, and Lysova 2019, 10–11.

of her work involved getting answers, while the other half was about socializing those findings – making them relevant and compelling to stakeholders such as coders and product developers who were not specialists in her academic field. By reframing her skills – recognizing that her ability to construct well-supported, nuanced arguments was directly applicable to creating persuasive presentations and influencing decision-makers – Hope began to see the value of her academic training in a new light. She realized that the high stakes and rigorous expectations of academia had prepared her well for the fast-paced, results-driven world of tech.

The takeaway from Hope's experience is that you do not need to reinvent yourself completely when moving from academia to industry. The tools and skills you have developed are already in your toolkit; it is just a matter of translating them into a format that resonates in your new environment. By doing so, you can build a personal brand that not only reflects your academic achievements but also positions you as a valuable asset in any professional context.

## 5. Network: expanding beyond academe

Academics often find themselves surrounded by a network primarily composed of fellow scholars – individuals who, while deeply knowledgeable, may have limited experience or connections outside of the academic world.<sup>13</sup> This network can be a tremendous asset when considering career moves within the academy, but it often proves less effective when exploring opportunities beyond it. The challenge here is threefold: relying solely on academic contacts can constrain your ability to discover potential job options, prepare compelling application materials for roles in other sectors, and interpret feedback from industries unfamiliar to you.

This insularity is understandable. The academic system is designed as a mentorship-driven environment, where junior scholars are guided by senior academics who impart their methodologies, approaches, and often, their networks.<sup>14</sup> As a result, advancement within the academy tends to occur within this closed loop – among scholars in the same discipline, at similarly ranked institutions, both nationally and internationally.<sup>15</sup> This cyclical nature can make it difficult to step outside these familiar circles when seeking new professional avenues.

To navigate this transition effectively, it is essential to cultivate a strategic network beyond the confines of academia.<sup>16</sup> Start by connecting with industry professionals through networking events, conferences, and professional associations. These connections can offer fresh perspectives and invaluable advice on how to translate your academic skills into industry roles. Informational interviews with professionals in your target field are particularly beneficial, providing insights into how your expertise aligns with industry needs while helping you expand your network in meaningful ways. It might also be worth considering practical steps like updating your LinkedIn profile or getting a professional headshot to enhance your visibility in these new circles.

<sup>13</sup> Feldon et al. 2021; Gould 2015; Main et al. 2019; Oretaga & Kent 2018.

<sup>14</sup> St. Clair, Hutto, MacBeth, Newstetter, McCarty, and Melkers 2017.

<sup>15</sup> Wapman, Zhang, Clauset, and Larremore 2022.

<sup>16</sup> McCarthy 2017.

Hope initially struggled to see how her skills would translate to roles outside her field. However, by broadening her network and exploring opportunities beyond the traditional academic path, she began to see her potential in new, unexpected ways. Instead of confining herself to roles directly aligned with her academic training, she identified industries in user experience research – an obvious fit for her expertise – and also looked at Big Tech companies that, though outside her specific field, aligned with her broader interests and skills. This exploration allowed her to recognize that her ability to contribute meaningfully to society extended far beyond the boundaries of academia, and it encouraged her to embrace opportunities that she might have otherwise overlooked.

## 6. Charting your path forward

Start by creating a plan with small, actionable steps. Even dedicating just a few minutes each day to industry research or updating your LinkedIn profile can make a significant difference.<sup>17</sup> Make career exploration a consistent part of your routine, turning it from an overwhelming task into a manageable habit. Reach out to your network – both inside and outside of academia – for advice, and remain open to adjusting your approach as you learn more about what is out there. The important thing is to keep moving forward.

The good news? You are not starting from scratch. Your academic training has equipped you with a valuable set of skills that are highly transferable across industries. The key is in strategically reframing these skills to resonate beyond academia.

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<sup>17</sup> Mewburn et al. 2020.



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