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THE CAREER PROFILES COLUMN

Providing Job-Hunting Options and Insights for Five Years and Counting



Oceanography published its first “Career Profiles” column in the June 2010 issue, with the aim of providing graduate students with a window into the array of job possibilities outside of academia. Over the past five years, “Career Profiles” has become one of the most popular pages on The Oceanography Society website (<http://tos.org/career-profiles>). To date, we’ve published 47 profiles (counting the two in this issue on pages 102 and 103).

To produce these career profiles, we ask people to answer a series of questions:

1. Degree: When, where, what, and what in?
2. Did you stay in academia at all, and if so, for how long?
3. How did you go about searching for a job outside of the university setting?
4. Is this the only job (post-academia) that you’ve had? If not, what else did you do?
5. What is your current job? What path did you take to get there?
6. What did your oceanographic education (or academic career) give you that is useful in your current job?
7. Is the job satisfying? What aspects of the job do you like best/least?
8. Do you have any recommendations for new grads looking for jobs?

As part of the “Career Profiles” fifth anniversary celebration, this column assembles some of the most useful and interesting recommendations for job seekers. By far the most common piece of advice concerns the importance of networking.

In addition, many of the people we’ve profiled stressed that the skills gained in earning a PhD in the ocean sciences qualifies students for an unexpectedly large variety of rewarding positions outside of academia—but that students need to be open to learning about and applying for those positions.

GENERAL RECOMMENDATIONS

It is important to keep your eyes and mind open to positions you might not have considered, while keeping sight of the kind of work you enjoy and the kind of lifestyle you would like to lead. — Kara Lavender Law

Think about what your best skills and special talents are. If you focus on those areas, you are most likely to find (or create) opportunities for personal excellence. — Ellen Lettvin

Know that transitioning from your specialty to something different or with a broader scope than what you have been accustomed to in school can be disorienting at times, but can also lead to rewarding new opportunities. — Kris Ludwig

Be open to nontraditional opportunities. Your academic training and related activities have provided basic skills that can be applied to a variety of non-academic positions. — Mitchell Malone

Have confidence in your abilities, but more importantly, in your ability to learn on the job. After all, that is what your training

as a scientist has prepared you for—to work independently and figure things out for yourself. — Cheryl Peach

Think about what truly floats your boat, talk to people to better understand what opportunities exist, and don’t expect to go from point A to point B in one shot. Be flexible and take a few chances! — Audrey Rogerson

NETWORK, NETWORK, NETWORK

The best jobs, the best opportunities, and the best future all lie in the people you know and what they can do for you. Ask your friends, colleagues and mentors for help...they will give it. — Paul Bunje

Don’t be afraid to email someone you don’t know who has a job that seems interesting to you and ask them to spend a few minutes talking with you. — Heather Deese

Use the alumni communities to meet folks who have the jobs you want. Take them to lunch, ask all the questions above, and listen closely. Stay in touch with them even after you find a job. — Nick Drenzek

Go to as many interviews and job fairs as possible to see what’s available. — John A. Farre

Devote significant time and energy to the care and feeding of your professional network—both peers and senior-level mentors... A really critical aspect of networking is to give as much as you get—in other words, be on the lookout for

opportunities for your colleagues, and provide support when they need it. Don't be that guy or gal who is only in touch when they need something. — Maria G. Honeycutt

Feel free to set up informational interviews with organizations that interest you—you'll be amazed at what you can learn in a half hour. — Jon Kaye

Talk with as many people from as diverse a network as possible. After each informational interview, a good practice is to ask the person you spoke with to recommend a few others with whom you can speak...It is a great way to learn about jobs and career paths that you may not have known about, to establish a professional network, and even to find your potential job.— WinnieLau

SKILLS

Practice public speaking, learn to write, and, ideally, take an improvisational acting course—or do all three. I cannot over-emphasize the importance of being able to persuasively make an argument or present a compelling story around a set of data in person or through writing. These skills are absolutely essential to success as a researcher or in most nontraditional career paths for scientists that I know. — Heather Deese

If you think you might be interested in operational oceanography, realize that we do not do everything in Matlab. Shell scripting, command-line-based packages such as GMT, languages like Perl or Python, C or Fortran, familiarity with formats like NetCDF, HDF, and relational databases, services like OPeNDAP and revision control systems like CVS, RCS, or git—these are all valuable skills and well within the grasp of someone getting a PhD in a quantitative science. — Deirdre Byrne

THE RESUME AND INTERVIEW

I've reviewed enough applications for various positions to feel the need to include the following: when applying for a position, be absolutely certain that your application is

well written, clear, and to the point. Make certain that there are no typos or grammatical errors in your CV and especially in your cover letter. It's astounding to me how many one-page cover letters have glaring errors that reflect a lack of care and will nearly always disqualify any application.

Finally, if you reach the interview stage, go in with the attitude that the job is yours to lose, because, really, it is. Be engaging and interested, and arrive having done your homework on the position. Most importantly, have a very good answer ready as to why you're interested in the position, because that's one question you're sure to be asked. Being interested and personable are critical to a successful interview—always remember that those interviewing you are not only assessing your qualifications for the position but are also evaluating you as a potential colleague. In my opinion, the key to a successful interview is not only to show why you are the most qualified person for the position but also to come across as someone with whom the interviewers would want to work. — Robert L. Burger

Keep an online version of your professional self up to date and easily accessible...If you are seeking a nonacademic position, do not circulate a CV. Instead, write a resume with sections detailing your executive/leadership, scientific, and technical qualifications... When you present your work to a potential nonacademic employer, be careful to mention not only the scientific results, but how you got there—did you have to collaborate widely, strategize a fallback plan when your original experiments fell through, manage a budget, organize a cruise? — Deirdre A. Byrne

Because employers look for people who know how to work and who demonstrate that they can get along with others, sometimes in stressful work environments, your references become one of the most important parts of any job application. — Carol Janzen

Every time I submit a job application, I refine my resume to make sure it is aligned with the job description. The same is true

for cover letters. This step takes time, but it's critical in demonstrating that you are qualified for the position. — Kelly A. Kryc

FELLOWSHIPS

If you are looking to move outside of academia, there are a few fellowship programs similar to the AAAS Science and Technology Fellowship I received that can help open doors—such as the Knauss Fellowship (also known as the Sea Grant Fellowship), the Presidential Management Fellowship, and ORISE (Oak Ridge Institute for Science and Education) Fellowship with the Environmental Protection Agency. Even if you are not directly interested in policy, it might be worthwhile to spend a year or two in one of these fellowship programs because it can lead to many non-policy opportunities, such as working for a nonprofit organization on conservation science, for a consulting firm, or for a government agency doing analysis. — Winnie Lau

In the next issue of *Oceanography*, I'll summarize some of the most helpful answers provided by the people we've profiled to the question about what aspects of their oceanographic education have been useful in their jobs.

As a final note, remember that the "Career Profiles" column requires a steady stream of new and interesting people to profile. Please send me suggestions and email contact information (at ekappel@geo-prose.com) for colleagues who work "outside of academia" and who might be willing to submit a profile. Self-nominations are welcome. If the contributions over the past five years are any indication, we have not yet covered the full range of job possibilities nor closed the book on the wisdom of how to successfully seek employment.


Ellen S. Kappel, Editor