

80,000 Hours Feedback for Jeff Alstott

November 8, 2013

I. Background

Jeff Alstott will complete a PhD in computational neuroscience (complex systems analysis) at the University of Cambridge in early 2014. Jeff holds an MBA in entrepreneurship and is interested in identifying career opportunities that would take advantage of both his business education and advanced scientific training (while accounting for a lack of non-academic work experience). He is primarily interested in researching brain emulation and other transhumanist technologies and is considering earning to give to advance those ends. He has applied to several post-doc positions, all of which should send accept/reject notices by February. He is considering other career options in industry or startups.

II. Causes

Jeff is primarily interested in advancing brain emulation (and other transhumanist technologies), which, if successful, would improve the human condition. He has identified two main avenues for doing so: conducting original research or pursuing earning to give. He notes that his commitment to technology development hinges on feasibility—should he become convinced that certain technologies cannot be developed within 50-100 years, he would change his focus. The career options listed below shed light on the immediate possibilities Jeff is considering.

III. Career Options

Jeff rates the current probability of continuing in academia at 40%, entering a job in (established) industry at 40%, and working for a startup at 20%. Jeff identified the following career options, ranked roughly in order of likelihood:

1. Post-doc in technology development research. Completing a post-doc would take two to three years and is necessary to continue in academia, but it could also open up other opportunities outside of academia. Working as a researcher seems strong in terms of learning and option value, since he could go in a different direction after a few years. Jeff expects his marginal impact to be greatest in technology development research on brain emulation because only a small number of people conduct research in this area, he is a strong researcher, and his research questions are understudied.
2. Technology development within industry (e.g., developing medical devices). Jeff believes his marginal influence would be lower in industry but recognizes the high earnings potential.
3. Among other industry jobs, he is considering consulting (e.g., McKinsey, BCG) and has largely ruled out investment banking. He considered investment banking due to high earnings (earning to give), but considers consulting to be a better option for building skills and career capital more generally.
4. Data scientist. Working as a data scientist in industry is another possibility given Jeff's research background.
5. Startup. Jeff believes his marginal impact may be low in a startup but recognizes the high earnings potential.

IV. Feedback from 80,000 Hours

- 80,000 Hours has not researched brain emulation and related technologies as a cause, but Nick Beckstead, Research Fellow at the Future of Humanity Institute and an 80,000 Hours trustee, is interested in speaking with you about causes and career opportunities. Please contact him at nbeckstead@gmail.com.
- In terms of earning to give (EtG) to support research versus conducting original research oneself, 80,000 Hours will soon release a case study about an individual interested in medical research. In that instance, we found that labs appear to need strong researchers more than they need additional funding—grants are generally available to support cutting-edge research, but outstanding researchers are in limited supply. Of course, the research and funding landscapes for brain emulation and related technologies are likely much different than those of medical research, but reading through our report may highlight some new considerations when weighing EtG against research. We will share the report with you when it is published.
- 80,000 Hours is not well-positioned to suggest career options that take advantage of both an MBA in entrepreneurship and a PhD in computational neuroscience. Nonetheless, it seems that quantitative finance (e.g., quant hedge funds, [trading firms](#) like Jane Street) is a potentially strong fit. If you are interested in discussing this option in more detail, please let us know and we will connect you to one of our members who is most knowledgeable about finance.