

BEYOND THE  
TENURE TRACK



## To Launch Your Nonacademic Career Transition



Fatimah Williams Castro, Ph.D.

Hi there, Nonac Career Changer!

Thanks for signing up to receive “30 Reasons Your Nonacademic Job Search Isn’t Working– and What to do About It!”

I created this guide from years of experience coaching hundreds of graduate students, postdocs, and faculty in the social sciences, humanities, and STEM fields in their transition from academia to nonacademic careers.

It struck me that no matter what field my clients were in, they shared a number of assumptions and misconceptions about the job search that was hindering their ability to secure a good job – quickly!

You may be like them.

Do any of these statements sound familiar to you?

*I’m not finding many job openings that require a PhD.*

*Networking feels so sleazy and inauthentic. Why would people I don’t know want to talk to me or help me find a job?*

*I’m applying for jobs but employers don’t understand how my experience as an instructor and researcher is relevant to their openings.*

*I’m concerned I won’t be intellectually stimulated in a nonacademic job.*

*I have a doctorate, but I’ll be competing with undergrads for jobs!*

You may be having a hard time figuring out how to start your nonacademic job search. You may be unclear about where you’re going wrong, and you may not be sure how to present your skills or talk about yourself powerfully.

**Never fear.**

I created this guide just for you. “30 Reasons Your Nonacademic Job Search Isn’t Working– and What to do About It!” identifies common areas that may be hindering your job search and career transition. As a result of reviewing this list and making some adjustments in your job search, I am certain that you’ll get more traction in your career transition.

Once you've started into the **"30 Reasons Your Nonacademic Job Search Isn't Working- and What to do About It!"** I'd love to hear from you.

You can also share your thoughts on the guide with me and the Beyond the Tenure Track community on Facebook, LinkedIn or Twitter.

Welcome to this awesome community of academics in career transition beyond the tenure track!

*Dr. Fatimah*

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## 30 Reasons Your Nonacademic Job Search Isn't Working- and What to do About It!

1. You believe that exploring your career options means you've turned your back on academia or have "given up" on your chances in academia. Keep your options open and continue to develop your professional profile.
2. You see yourself as a "failed academic" or, as one of my recent client called herself, "an academic defector." Instead of this negative self-talk, describe yourself as a **career changer**.
3. You believe that prospective employers are as burdened by your transition out of academia as you or your academic colleagues may be.

When transitioning from grad school to academia, you may feel the need to explain why you're leaving academia. The trouble with this line of thinking is that you may come across as justifying your degree and your career direction, which puts you on the offensive. Instead, shift your thinking to tell employers how your skills and experience match up with their needs and how you'll help them meet their strategic goals.

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*Leave the weight of expectations in the past so you can focus on securing the job and life you want for now and for your future.*

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4. PhD job seekers have the misconception that the nonacademic jobs and academic jobs are on two opposite sides of the spectrum. Yes, these career paths require different skills and value very different approaches and outcomes. However, **building professional skills beyond the classroom makes you an attractive candidate for either path**. The key is to be focused in the skills you build so you direct your time and resources towards the career you want.
5. You begin your job search by looking at job openings for which a PhD is a requirement. There are many jobs that you can do and will enjoy, and many of them will not require doctoral level expertise.
6. You focus on what you know (content), rather than what you can do (skills). Depending on your target job, your knowledge area may

be more or less important to the work that you are applying to do. **You'll get more traction in job offers when you focus on what you know how to do, rather than simply what you know.**

For example, you may be a science researcher interested in science policy jobs. Your target employer is not hiring you to **DO** science research, rather they want a highly trained scientist who can translate between science and policy as well as fulfill the functions of the job such as holding meetings, writing briefs, advocating in writing and speaking, and so on.

7. In your job applications and networking, you focus on yourself more so than the job or the employer.

I believe this is a holdover from academia. From day one in your graduate department, everyone asks, "What do you research?" They want to know about your research, how you came to it and why it matters. In this arena, who you are is very closely related to the type of work you do.

**Nonacademic employers want to know about you, but they are first interested in your skills and your experience.** Employers want to know how these are relevant to them and the specific job they're hiring for, and how your skills and experience will help them achieve team and company goals.

8. You ask yourself "Is this job worthy of a me -- a PhD?"

You see a job that looks interesting and that you have the skills to do, but you get distracted wondering if it's prestigious enough for a doctoral degree holder. This is a surefire way to miss out on opportunities that can be a great launching point to your new career.

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*"Is the level of this job worthy of me? After all, I have a PhD." Erase the idea that there are jobs that a PhD "should" be doing.*

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9. You think, "I have a PhD. I'll be competing with undergrads for jobs."

Employers aren't hiring you just for your degree. Aim for the right level of position. Be prepared to begin at an entry level, depending on your experience in relationship to the job you seek. Trust the process that you will move up and be prepared for an expanded role -and salary- not long after beginning your new career. **You are a total package, not just the doctorate or master's degree.**

10. You expect to earn a salary based on having a PhD.

Salaries are set according to industry, job function/position, region and other employees' salaries. I coached a biomed science postdoc who applied for a research position at a scientific research firm. She got pretty far in the interview process, even to the point of hearing the salary range, which was \$80-85K. After the last round of interviews, the company did not offer her that position, but the HR rep asked to consider her for a different position in the company. This position was in data management and grant writing, and the salary was roughly \$70k. My client was offended by this salary offer. She felt that with a PhD and her background as a postdoc she should be able to command more money.

Here's the misconception:

***Salary is based on the position  
and less so on the individual  
person.***

The \$80-85k position was for a researcher, a position that requires a higher level of technical skill than the \$70k grant and data management position.

11. Online job boards are your **first** stop once you've made up your mind to pursue a nonacademic career. These job boards can be a good source for job research, but if you haven't determined a criteria for the positions that are a best fit for you, you will quickly get overwhelmed by all the options on any given job board.

12. You apply to any and every job that looks interesting.

I call this the "spray and pray method." When you take this approach your job search lacks focus. You may find yourself applying to several different types of jobs and spending a lot of time tailoring your application materials to very different industries.

13. You begin your job search without identifying a target job. **Get**

clear on a manageable number of job tracks that you will pursue. I recommend no more than two, at most three, target jobs. It's impossible to become fluent in several careers and industries at once, and fluency is required if you're to convince an employer that they should make the move to hire you.

14. You focus on job titles to make decisions about whether a job is a good fit for you.

"Program Associate" may not sound prestigious or advanced when compared to "Program Director." However, depending on your skill and experience, you may not be able to go straight from academia to "Program Director." And that's okay!

Trust the process. Learn as much as you can, try out new tasks and technologies, and do well with your responsibilities when you secure your first job. You will be ready for promotion in no time!

*Just a quick reminder:*

**In this guide, I'm sharing the 30 Reasons Your Nonacademic Job Search May Not Be Working – and How to Fix It!**

I've been Associate Director of Career Services at an Ivy League university, where I advised and created programming for hundreds of graduate students and postdocs in fields from Engineering and Biomedical Science to English and Linguistics. Now, as speaker and career coach through Beyond the Tenure Track, I also serve academics who are concerned about how to transition to nonacademic careers or maximize their time in graduate school to be prepared to take either an academic or nonacademic job.

I gathered the 30 reasons and strategies listed here from my work with academics just like you who want to know how to do their best work, work that's meaningful to them and that leverages their skills and experience. Keep reading for my tips on how to get the job you want and build a career that you're proud of.

- Dr. Fatimah

15. You misunderstand the job description or job requirements.

Too often graduate students in career transition will read job ads for what they *believe* the ad is saying. Or worse yet, because they are so eager to fit into a career and to secure a job, they read themselves into a job ad. They see themselves as possessing skills that are mentioned in the job ad, even when their skills and experiences are not applicable.

**Read job ads for key job functions and required skills. Search for keywords in the job and then do a little research to understand what these job functions mean to the employer. The meanings of keywords change from employer to employer and from field to field.**

As a career changer, you cannot assume that you fully understand the job description without doing research on the employer and their industry.

16. You underestimate your skills.

When you've been in the academy for quite a while, it may seem like teaching, research, and writing are the only skills you have. Well, these are great skills! Unpack the activities that are embedded in teaching, research and writing to identify your transferable skills.

17. You overestimate your skills and abilities.

Soooo, not to confuse you, but....

I work with clients who feel that they are **overqualified** for work outside the academy. They feel that having a PhD means their skills are beyond the skills needed for nonacademic work.

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*Unpack the tasks  
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skills.*

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To see where you fit vis-à-vis a job of interest, take a look at the job announcement. It will give the information you need to see where your skills fit into the scheme of the job. That way you're not making judgements about a job just because it's inside or outside of the academy, but based on the actual job requirements and your skills and experiences.



18. In networking and interviews, you lead with your research topic.

Instead, **talk about your interests and skills as they relate to the job you want, not the job you had.** I'm not suggesting that you hide your background as a researcher and graduate student, postdoc or faculty member. Leverage that past experience in a way that's relevant for a powerful introduction in your new career field.

19. When applying to jobs, you mostly just submit applications online.

In today's job market, this is a passive approach at best. Rather than simply submit materials to an online portal, **reach out directly to hiring managers and professional contacts in organizations of interest.** Use LinkedIn, Facebook (business pages, not people's personal pages), Twitter, and your school's alumni association to establish contact.

20. You submit generic resumes.

**Tailor your resume and cover letter to the position** using keywords from the job ad. This isn't misrepresentation, if it's done right. Discuss your transferable skills and experiences in language that is relevant to your target employer.

21. "I'm applying for jobs but employers don't seem to understand how my work as an instructor and researcher is relevant to their openings."

The onus is on you, the job seeker, to make it clear why you're the right fit. You do this by understanding the job skills required for the position and the goals of the employer, and by understanding how your skills fit their work. Then reflect that back to the employer in your application materials and in your networking and informational interview discussions.

22. You believe that critical thinking, great writing skills, and the ability to sort through large amounts of data are your **only** job skills. While these transferable skills are important, you will also need to demonstrate job- or industry-specific skills. One way to do this is to show how these skills can be applied in your new career of interest.

23. You don't include academic jobs on your list of job targets. Sounds contradictory right? Many of you plan to continue to pursue an academic career or postdoc alongside searching for nonacademic jobs.

Both academic or nonacademic take time to nurture and pursue.

24. Related to that, you may believe that a job will not be intellectually stimulating or challenging if there aren't a lot of other PhDs around.

***Academia does not have the monopoly on intelligent thinking and stimulating work.***

Your challenge will come from learning a new field, finding your professional identity, learning how to influence and persuade, and practicing new communication styles.

You will also find intellectual stimulation and challenge in understanding the context and topic of your new field, it's language, culture, work dynamics, and organizational structure. If you need a more familiar type of stimulation, read academic books/journals, teach a course, or attend academic conferences.

25. **You believe that networking is sleazy.**

Getting to know people in your desired career opens doors for you and brings you into a community of professionals that you will interact with and collaborate with in the future. Networking is about building relationships, trust, and opportunity for yourself, others and the projects that are important to you. If you want to be successful in your career, academic or nonacademic, you will have to embrace this practice.

26. You are surprised to hear nothing from an employer even weeks after applying.

Rejection is part of any process that requires putting yourself out there. You may hear no, or worse yet, nothing at all, more often that you hear "yes." That's why I recommend batching your job applications. By that I mean, apply to a healthy number of relevant positions in a compressed timeframe. You may get no's, but there will also be offers to interview in that bunch.

27. You look for the "perfect" job.

**First jobs matter, but where you start is not where you finish.** Instead, ask yourself "what do I need in my professional life and personal life right now?"

28. You want to figure out your whole career trajectory before you've even made the first move. You want to see how your career will unfold and where it will go in the future so badly that you overlook what you need right now. If this sounds like you, go back to #27 for insight.
29. You underestimate the psychological and emotional toll that career transition can take.

*Career choices are just as much personal choices about your identity, lifestyle, and family as they are about your professional goals.*

Career choices are not just about how you spend your time from 9-5. They are just as much personal choices about your identity, lifestyle, and family as they are about your professional goals. For my career transition clients, especially those who did not receive tenure as they'd

anticipated, I often recommend they consult with a qualified therapist for necessary emotional and psychological support.

30. You go at this transition process alone.

A community of support, quality job search tools, and an experienced career coach can help you effectively navigate this new way of thinking, present yourself professionally, and remain confident in yourself and your abilities.

Now that you've taken a dive into the "30 Reasons Your Nonacademic Job Search Isn't Working- and What to do About It!" I'd love to hear from you.

Share with me which tip was most helpful for you and how you'll use it in your search. Connect with me and the Beyond the Tenure Track community on [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#), [Instagram](#), or [LinkedIn](#) @fatimahphd.

Talk soon –

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