

It's a matter of decision and persistence



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I have always envied the people who know what they want to do when they “grow up”. It seems so much easier to be aware of what you want for your future. Personally, I always felt more comfortable when I had multiple possibilities lying ahead of my professional future. Even now, as a junior group leader, I always like to think of my future as not fully determined. Thus, I can totally understand graduate students and postdocs that, although they feel academia is the “proper” career choice, they still linger between that and alternative career choices. As I interact with a fair amount of students and postdocs on a daily basis, I see how their agony and frustration on deciding the next career steps hampers their ability to embrace the beauty of what they are actually doing: science... Even though we live in a world of endless information, we often still lack what we need. Everything around us is changing too quickly, making it essential for us to evolve and make accurate decisions quickly. Thinking about this problem, there are some easy -or not so easy- steps that we can take to prepare ourselves for career moves and avoid the agony that lingering brings into our lives. The first and most important step is to **know your personality**. Are you introverted or extroverted? How persistent are you and how curious? How much do you value working on a team and how badly do you want to lead it? Do you have leadership skills- are you able to mediate a negotiation or resolve a conflict? Another important step in the decision making process is to **define your priorities**. How much initiative do you want to have in your new job and how much independence? How much time do you want to spend at work? What is your requirement for job stability? This is a tricky one, since in a fast-paced world jobs become less secure and more competitive. Thus, depending on the topography, job security can vary considerably. In addition to “soul-searching” questions, is it equally important to **consider the practicalities of your choices**. Cultural and language barriers, flexibility of moving or traveling, proximity to friends and family are factors to keep in mind. It can be helpful to simply make an old-fashioned list of your strengths, faults and limits, being sure to be honest with yourself. This soul-searching will provide you with answers about what you think may be your best career move, but, as already mentioned, you might not be aware of all the possibilities. For example, a professorship or group leader position is not the only option out there for those who love academia and its unique environment. A staff scientist position permits you to keep your independence, but relieves you from other managerial or teaching duties. Alternatively, teaching could keep you in an academic environment without the stress of running a laboratory. If reading and writing about science fits your skills and passions, scientific writing is also an option that permits a tight connection with academia. Many universities employ scientific grant writers or you could work for a scientific journal as a freelance writer or an editor. It is equally possible that the academic environment is not really ideal for your personality or needs. For those in this position, a career in industry is

often the next step. Many universities and research institutes don't provide enough appropriate information concerning making a transition to industry, as they are mostly oriented toward preparing scientists for an academic track. Therefore, you need to identify the proper sources of information and ask the "right" people. There are a lot of jobs for life scientists out there. If you really want to leave academia, you can become a research scientist in industry at a pharmaceutical or related type of company. You can also be employed in other sectors of industry, such as sales, marketing, quality control, and formulation management. It is true that job descriptions are constantly changing; thus, try to remain informed and continuously acquire new skills. A lucrative way to expand your options and open avenues into other alternative career paths is to acquire another degree and combine knowledge from life sciences with other specialties. Some of the best examples that come to mind are patent officers or attorneys, but also executive managers, consultants, financial analysts and many others. For those with a good idea and high tolerance for risk, entrepreneurship is a fulfilling and thrilling way to turn your idea into reality. To sum up, I think that the best approach to a career decision is to know what you want, who you are and what options are available. However, it is equally important to keep in mind that no decision is necessarily meant to be a commitment for life. If we are determined and self-aware, we can always change. To this end, I asked Dominic Grün, a friend and fellow group leader at Max Planck Institute of Immunobiology and Epigenetics in Freiburg who has made diverse career choices, for his opinion about change and career choice experiences.

How did you find information about your next career move?

When I left academia shortly after completion of my PhD in theoretical physics (even though I did interdisciplinary work in population genetics and computational biology), it was more of a coincidence how I learned about the job that I finally took on. I actually went to a big job fair and gave my CV to a number of companies. Among those were big industrial companies and a few consulting companies, most of them in the IT business. I actually got invited to some interviews and finally received a number of offers. However, at the same time a friend told me about a financial risk management consulting company. I applied and found out that risk management for banks requires a skill set that I had and which I liked to work with: mathematical modeling, analytical skills, IT implementation, but also project management and negotiations with customers. Moreover, the salary was exceptionally good and increased substantially every year.

Why did you come back to academia?

Although I liked many aspects of my work in financial consulting, it didn't really make me happy. I would miss working on something that I was deeply interested in, something that I would do out of curiosity, even if I wasn't paid for it. I often remembered the times during my PhD at New York University with Nikolaus Rajewsky, when we were among the pioneering researchers in the field of microRNAs. During my time in industry, I always felt deep down that it was my destination to do scientific research and to investigate the complexity of life. Hoping that I could find my niche in academia by applying my quantitative skills to questions in the realm of molecular biology, I decided to do a postdoc with Nikolaus Rajewsky at the Max Delbrück Center. I learned a lot during this time and did a second postdoc in a different field before I finally became a group leader at the Max Planck Institute in Freiburg. I never regretted my move back to academia for a second.

After this inspiring story, one message is clear to me: don't be afraid to build your career based on your personal "gut feeling" If you really want it, you will find your way to success.



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