



SOS Page

**SHORT DISCUSSIONS
FOR STUDENTS PAGE**

WHAT YOU DIDN'T KNOW YOU WERE LEARNING FROM YOUR PHD

You did it! You got your PhD and now it is time to look for work in the real world and start preparing for job interviews. All those years of hard work living with very little money will finally pay off once you get a PAYING job, right? But then you start looking at job advertisements and you can't seem to find anything in your area. During your PhD you become a specialist within a specialisation, so the chances of finding something that exactly matches your skill set are small, even within your chosen field. What graduate students don't always realise is that they have acquired a range of valuable, transferable skills that are highly sought after by employers not only in research but also other fields. Here are a few examples of transferable skills that you would have developed during your PhD that make you a very attractive employee.

1. Critical thinking

What can really make a PhD graduate stand out from other potential employees is their ability to think critically and innovate. One of the most valuable lessons I learnt during my PhD was how to approach problems and troubleshoot when the answers are not so obvious. You think about the best way to address a question, how you can adapt approaches to solve your problem and how to interpret results to get an answer.

2. Project management

PhD students often manage multiple research projects simultaneously, whilst meeting a number of deadlines, including deadlines for literature reviews, progress reports, presentations, thesis and paper drafts etc. You must also be able to identify problems in advance, prioritise these problems, and find the right solutions to the problems.

3. Team work

Very rarely these days you get to work alone in a project. Multidisciplinary projects involving researchers with complementary skills are a great way to get your work published in a highly-ranked journal. In order to successfully complete a project that involves multiple researchers, you will need to have developed communication and diplomatic skills. You would probably have had to deal with lab politics and to get through both good and bad days with your research team. Failure to be a team player can seriously hinder your chances of career progression and should be a top priority for any PhD looking for academic and non-academic roles.

4. Teaching and training

Think of all the Honours, summer scholarship, volunteer and junior PhD students you would have 'supervised' over the years. You may also have had the opportunity to help with laboratory classes, tutoring or even lecturing. As your career progresses, it is more than likely that you will be asked to teach, train or mentor younger colleagues so your experience with training students is likely to come in very handy.

5. Communication skills

A lot of people dread standing in front of a room and presenting their ideas and work. But as a PhD graduate, you would have had plenty of practice with public speaking whilst presenting at conferences and lab/departmental seminars. Being able to communicate your complex findings in layman's terms is also an important part of PhD life. For example, events such as the 'Three Minute Thesis' are being heavily promoted throughout institutes and universities.

Apart from your oral communication skills, you also get to write A LOT! Your thesis alone is a huge achievement. You have to write succinctly in journal articles and use logical argument to persuade others in your grant and fellowship proposals. Even writing an important email requires some attention and skills! If you like science communication, you may also be heavily involved in writing blogs, promoting your research to the general public through social media, radio and TV.

The key to effective communication is being able to adapt your presentation to fit the audience so that your ideas are clearly understood.



Tatiana practicing her communication skills during an interview to 3RRR's Einstein A Go-Go.

6. Networking

Networking is not just attending a conference, getting a few business cards and not remembering anything about those people on the cards. It is important to set a realistic goal. As a PhD student attending a conference or networking event, you would have had a look at the people attending an event and think about who you would like to connect with and follow up after the event. Chasing up the people afterwards is what networking is all about. When preparing for a job interview, think about the people you would have met over the years who would have a connection with the organisation or position you are applying for. The networks you have set up will allow you to put yourself ahead of the competition.

7. Budget

Managing to live on a PhD scholarship requires great budgeting skill! You may have also had experience managing the lab budget, where you had to choose between two different techniques by developing a cost-benefit analysis. Writing grant budgets and justifications is also a great way to exemplify your budgeting skills.

8. Organisation and time management skills

As a PhD graduate, you are used to planning your working hours and managing your research project. Getting your PhD over the line is really up to you and is a great testament to your organisation and time management skills.

So next time you are at a job interview, don't just mention that the output from your PhD was the publication of three papers. Also mention all the teamwork, critical thinking, project management, organisation, communication and the years of hard work involved in producing those publications. Realising you have all these amazing skills that are not necessarily related to the number of papers you have published will make you feel much more confident going for a job interview as it helps you 'sell' yourself as a professional, not just an academic specialist.

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