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What You Need to Know

A Post-PhD Career in Research: Jack of all Trades, Master of Some

By Sanchayan Nath and Arjan Wardekker

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Our favorite caricature of a post-doctoral researcher: a frail man (or woman) with unkempt hair, hunched in front of a computer screen, with a half-filled cup of coffee by his side. As the coffee gets colder and time flies by, he appears oblivious to his surroundings – he is happy spending long hours at his desk conceptualizing

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arcane theory on obscure topics the real world does not care about. He is in a state of eternal tapasya – meditating on his eternal love-affair with knowledge... because, life is an eternal quest for knowledge! Or, so the world believes... This is because once the PhD has been completed, and freshly-minted researchers decide that research is what they would like to do for the rest of their lives, their friends and family might start assuming that a Doctor of Philosophy is just another armchair intellectual.

It is indeed true that researchers like us (post-docs, research fellows, senior researchers, and so on), working in academia or in public/private/non-profit institutes, spend a lot of time at their desks: writing articles, among other things. We maybe Doctors of Philosophy, but in reality, we are Masters in Writing and a few other things. This is because the demands of a researcher's role requires us to be Jacks of a lot of trades and Masters in some.

Writing is intrinsically connected to communication: as researchers we need to be good at communicating our thinking – what we study, why and how, and what we can (and cannot) conclude from the results – to diverse audiences: fellow scientists, policymakers, university administrators, and the wider public. It requires us to be as creative as the advertising professional next door. We need to learn how to crisply frame catchy titles so that articles promptly capture the attention of editors. We seek creative answers to questions such as: how do we in 200 words summarize a complex research idea that took us six months to conceptualize, test and execute? What is the next big research idea, and how will it get us a zillion citations in a few months?

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In addition, we also start playing managerial roles: First, we need to hone our skills in people management. Supervising students, research assistants, doctoral scholars, and entry-level post-docs is a daily activity. This throws up new challenges: how do we find a good balance between our research interests and nurturing those of our junior researchers? How do we encourage them to work hard while also ensuring that they do not get burnt out? How do we find research assistants who care as much about our research as we do? How do we incentivize the masters' students to put in their very best in executing the research plans they have drawn up? Second, we need to develop good project management skills: for instance, we need to ensure that our research assistants set realistic deadlines. However, even well-planned deadlines may sometimes turn out to be unrealistic. In such cases, contingency actions needs to be taken to ensure that promises to external stakeholders are kept.



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Third, budgeting: we need to pay our research assistants at market rates and budget accordingly, while also reserving funds for travel, lab equipment, subcontractor expenses and organization of workshops & other project events. However, research funds are never enough for all the fancy research we aspire to conduct, especially if we recruit a research assistant who is so good that we want to retain him or her. In such cases, we need answers to an added list of troubling questions: for instance, should we pay her more than the market rates by reallocating funds from some of the other research plans?

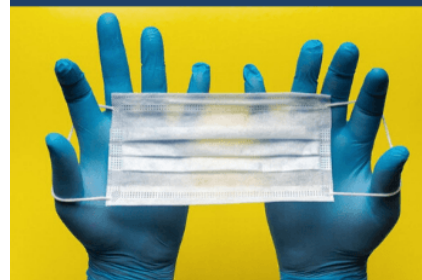
Ambitious researchers like us soon encounter our Matrix moment. We soon realize that all that we have been taught during our graduate studies was only partly true. We soon realize that, we are part-researchers and part-entrepreneurs. Organizations such as the National Science Foundation (NSF) in the US and the Dutch Research Council (NWO) are our private equity firms. In order to entice them to grant us huge bags of research money, we have to tap into our inner entrepreneurial self, polish our managerial skills, hone our creative juices and write-up grant proposals. If we are good entrepreneurs, we will be blessed with money, resources, talented PhD students, and hopefully a few well-cited academic articles in high-impact journals.

However, being entrepreneurial isn't enough. We also have to develop organizational skills for planning stakeholder meetings. These stakeholder meetings ensure that our research is grounded: that we are not wasting our hard-earned grant-money in proposing arcane theory on obscure topics. Good research takes into account the costs and benefits to all stakeholders who are involved with or affected by the research.

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Planning such events is a tough job – it requires answering questions such as: how do we make stakeholder meetings truly participatory in nature? How do we develop seating arrangements so that power imbalances between stakeholders don't impede communication? How do we goad them to open their minds and tell us what they truly think of our research? What kind of catering preparation need to be made? Are the expectations of participants, regarding both catering and other organizational aspects, influenced by country-specific cultural practices?

And that brings us to the most important and least talked-about role that a researcher has to play: knowledge-brokering, with its fine balance of advice and advocacy. Good research is necessary for solving societal challenges, whether in the short term (in the case of the applied sciences) or on the long term (in the case of the fundamental sciences). Societal challenges can be solved only if researchers seek to bridge the gaps that exist across varied scientific disciplines, policy and society. This requires us to be reflexive about our work. It also means that we have to advocate the implications of our research (and its associated uncertainties) with policy makers, grass-roots activists, private firms, funding agencies, students and society in general.

In other words, a good researcher is not only a Master in Research and Writing; but also a Jack of many other trades: a good researcher is a good manager, a self-motivated entrepreneur, an event planner, a creative communicator and a passionate-but-reflexive advocate of the role of science in solving societal challenges.



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A doctoral program teaches a prospective researcher to be good at framing research questions, at identifying appropriate research methodology for answering these questions and at implementing research plans using such methodology. Over time researchers also become good in writing. However, many of the other skillsets discussed above are often less well-developed during graduate education. This is a missed opportunity. Drawing on our own experiences, we wrote this article to highlight this oversight. This is because we believe that doctoral students need to be equipped with skillsets in management, planning, creative communication and knowledge-brokering. Only then can they function as effective solvers of societal challenges.

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