



European Association of Geochemistry



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ACADEMIA-INDUSTRY TRANSITIONS: Q & A WITH GEOCHEMISTS WHO MADE THE MOVE!

Many geochemists have transitioned from academic to non-academic jobs, or vice-versa, during their careers, and sometimes back again or more than once. The EAG Communications Committee recently interviewed geochemists who made the move, to find out how they made the transition and to ask their advice for other scientists in the community who may be considering a similar change. Read their responses below and visit the EAG Blogosphere at <https://blog.eag.eu.com/> to find out more and to hear from geochemists working in other industries.

Ye Zhao – Senior Product Specialist & Business Development Manager, Nu Instruments, Ametek Inc.



What is your job?

I work for Nu Instruments, AMETEK Inc., a multinational corporation manufacturing high-precision analytical instrumentation, serving the Earth, environmental, nuclear, and life sciences sectors. As a Senior Product Specialist & Asia Pacific Business Development Manager, I'm responsible for the product management, new business development, and collaborations with academia.

How did you get your job?

While doing my first post-doc, I was considering a career change to the instrumentation industry. After uploading my CV to recruitment websites, an opportunity arose as I was approached by a headhunter for an Application Scientist position at Nu Instruments. I went to North Wales for an interview and got the job. And here I am, still working for Nu 9 years later.

Did you initially plan on this career at the onset of your PhD?

It wasn't something I had planned for at the beginning. I started my PhD in hopes of becoming an academic. But as much as I enjoyed my own research topic and the guidance from my then supervisor, with time, I gradually woke up to the idea that I preferred width over depth in knowledge, which makes a career outside of academia, at the interface between science and business, something involving multi-disciplines, more appealing.

What advice do you have for PhD students who are thinking of leaving academia?

Do your research and make a list of bullet points of the pros and cons of leaving academia to help determine what's best for you. Do you know the outside world well enough to be sure this is the right step? Don't leave academia just because it asks for commitments—academia or industry, hard work will always be a key to success. You may no longer be under pressure of publishing in industry, but you will need to learn to adapt to a fast-paced work environment, be target-driven, be able to work with different people, and deliver strong results. It's a change of life style. Make sure you know what you are about to dive into.

And if you still believe this is the right path for you, then create a LinkedIn account and connect to alumni in your dream industry, try and gather as much background information as you can. Go to career services at the university, as they can be quite helpful. Go to conferences in your field and talk to the exhibitors, most of them will be happy to give advice. It's a big step, so be prepared. Above all, finish your PhD, if possible. You made a commitment; complete it before moving on—it will serve you well in the long run.

Hauke Vollstaedt – Product Manager, Thermo Fisher Scientific (Bremen) GmbH



What is your job?

I am a Product Manager at Thermo Fisher Scientific and cover the Triton Thermal Ionization Mass Spectrometer (TIMS), Element High Resolution ICP-MS, and Element Glow Discharge MS. My primary responsibility is to drive, strategize, and communicate the vision for these products. This includes management of the planning, forecasting, production, launching, and marketing of products at all stages of the product life cycle.

I started at Thermo Fisher Scientific as a Product Specialist, being responsible for demonstrating our instruments to prospective customers, producing application data reports and marketing materials, presenting data at scientific conferences, and forming collaborations with customers.

How did you get your job?

A sales representative from the company pointed me towards an open position at the factory in Bremen, Germany. I simply applied for the position.

Did you initially plan on this career at the onset of your PhD?

Not at all. My initial plan was to go for a career in academia. Although I enjoyed working in academia a lot, pursuing a scientific career requires a lot of flexibility in terms of residence and uncertainty in the early stages due to short-term temporary contracts. Additionally, I was stressed by feeling required to publish and apply for funding while researching and teaching at the same time. Therefore, I made the personal decision to apply for a position in industry. In industry, I can combine career and family much better.

What advice do you have for PhD students who are thinking of leaving academia?

Try to be open to explore new things beyond what you are doing currently. The change from academia to industry helped me a lot to find out what I like and dislike in each of my positions.

While academia offers work in interesting and challenging scientific projects, as well as a high degree of freedom regarding the how and on what you are working, industry can offer as ambitious jobs, team spirit, and job security due to permanent positions.

Starting a job in industry is not a definitive step to turn your back on academia, but enables you to gain competencies that are useful in both fields.

Dr. Kim Nicole Dalby – Principal Scientist, Topsoe A/S



What is your job?

My job title changed from Associate Professor to Principal Scientist four years ago, but my job remains largely the same—I use scanning electron microscopy to probe the chemical and physical properties of solids to help understand reaction pathways. Now I am part of a team, with several microscopes, who support the R&D side of the company. I also have collaborations with universities and am still able to publish science

(not that I think publications should be used as a metric for a successful academic career, but that is a whole other conversation...).

How did you get your job?

This is a fun little story. I used to say I was “lucky” but after confronting my imposter syndrome, I realise that it all happened because I was qualified. I had been in academia my entire career (since 2002), and I became interested in industry later on (ca. 2010), specifically how industry and academia communicated. So when a one-year maternity-leave position in microscopy came up at a private company, I asked if I could take a sabbatical and applied and landed the position. During my sabbatical, my entire research section was fired from the university. With a couple of months to go on my one-year contract, the company offered me a full-time position. I accepted and have never looked back.

Did you initially plan on this career at the onset of your PhD?

Absolutely not. I wanted to be that old, grey-haired professor in a giant wing-back chair with leather elbow patches and a pipe. I now have the pipe, and the knowledge that you can also have a very rewarding scientific career in a private company.


What advice do you have for PhD students who are thinking of leaving academia?

It is a myth that leaving university is a one-way street. The door between industry and academia swings both ways and is more open (in my opinion) than ever before. But the transition can be messy, and I would lie if I said I didn't have days in the beginning where I felt like a failure because I didn't make it to full professor. But my cheer squad and my experience have shown that academia is like any other job and (if you are privileged enough) you should leave if it is not treating you well.

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