

# Careers in Business: An Alternative for the Family Researcher

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During my academic career as a student and as a faculty member at the various professorial and administrative ranks, I had maintained the academic bias about the "dirty" world of business, its profit motive, and its lack of values, excepting, of course, the almighty buck. However, after making friends in the private sector and becoming somewhat more informed about the darker side of life in the Ivory Tower, I began to reevaluate my own views of the private-public dichotomy. I also began to wonder what working in the private sector would be like.

Being one who is inclined to try new experiences and who enjoys risk, when an opportunity came along through previous contacts to work in a private corporation, I seriously entertained the idea. Moreover, I was at a career juncture of having obtained the career goals which I had set for myself as a graduate student, namely being a Full Professor and having published 50 articles. The job offer was for a position as Director of Research with a successful land development company, its success being evident in multimillion dollar sales volume. The company had been expanding rapidly and was taking on several sizeable projects, one of which was a totally planned community on 8000 acres in north Scottsdale, Arizona.

The company required accurate information upon which to base decision making and had been spending considerable sums of money on a yearly basis hiring outside consultants to put that information together. The company felt that their information needs were great enough to justify a full-time person who could develop the requisite data from the inside rather than relying on an outsider who would not be as familiar with the company's product or market segment.

I had some sideline interests in real estate and loved working with the Land, the Earth and all things natural. The company had a solid reputation, had done a number of excellent projects, and had a real concern for doing things right. I also respected the executives, many of whom themselves had joined the firm from successful careers in other areas, including law and city management.

I offered the company a solid research background with interdisciplinary experience, a familiarity with the region, a knowledge of university functioning, and an undergraduate degree in Environmental Design/Regional Planning. In addition, the developments were geared toward an upper-end buyer. My sociological background helped fit the social class implications of deriving market profiles.

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### *Into the Fray*

I took the job with a degree of trepidation about leaving a tenured, full professorship, but intrigued by the duties listed on my contract. These included developing data on comparable developments, area demographics, area economic trends, and working with the company's funding activities. I also took note of the wording "the duties of the Director of Research are expected to include, but not necessarily limited to: . . ." Orally I was also informed that managerial personnel took on other responsibilities as new situations arose. Further, I was told to feel free to come up with other ideas as to useful projects.

There was a certain excitement about facing a changing world where new problems would arise and require real solutions to real problems. If the solutions worked, there would be measurable success. If the solutions did not work, there would be real failure in terms of a real bottom line -- the company would lose, and so could I.

Once onboard I began to gain a sense for the mode of operating. Tasks were project-oriented -- Here was something that needs to be done. Do it well, quickly, and efficiently. If there are justifiable costs, spend the money. It takes outlays in order to realize a profit. This contrasted sharply with the often stodgy and regressive system of allocation of resources in academia.

### *Water*

One of my initial assignments involved water usage. Flexibility of skills developed in other areas of expertise was clearly required. Working with one of the state's top water lawyers I helped develop a scientific critique of pending water regulations. Our attempt to understand the water usage literature was a classical academic review of the literature. Another component of the task involved dissecting studies conducted by other parties to the debate. I found myself putting on the familiar hat of a journal reviewer and eagerly tearing apart opposing briefs. With statistical and methodological texts in hand, I nearly cavorted upon finding violations of assumptions, multiple t-tests without consideration of experimentwise error, faulty sampling, and the like.

### *The Other Side*

There were other aspects of the water issue which the Company did not have either the resources or expertise to pursue. My experience as a former academic allowed me solicit and monitor the services of faculty members in the state universities. Because I knew the in's and out's of university procedures, I knew where to push and where funding requests were padded, as well as where to hold back and where requests were authentic. Having consulted as an academician, it was fascinating to see things from the other side.

### *Research in Business*

I gradually learned that market research itself can mean several different and sometimes opposing things. On the one hand, research-derived information can be useful in decision making. For example, we collected questionnaire data on product choices and interests. That information helped us know at least two things: (1) what type of buyers we attract; and (2) what our buyers want. The first piece of information pinpointed our marketing efforts. The second helped us develop saleable products.

Frequently, however, the research based information was to be used in marketing efforts, i.e., as part of the sales pitch to help sell products. I found myself having to forego the mindset of testing the validity of a hypothesis. Instead the assignment required me to sort through alternative formulations of data in order to find the one which made the best case for the desired outcome.

The point is not a small one, given that the term research had different meanings for an academic as opposed to someone in business. My personal experience has been that research in the world of business typically refers to information collection in a very general sense of the term. Given the quick time frames in business, the information request usually comes in the form, "Give me some information to show that...." There is little time to collect your own data. Rather, one has to develop an extensive data bank of secondary information. Reports from university research centers, articles in newspapers, publications by banks, and the like must be collected and scanned on an ongoing basis. Data are required today for decisions to be made tomorrow.

It should also be pointed out that highpowered statistics seldom come into play. They are simply not understood. Instead there is a fine art of being able to show complex points using relatively simple statistical tabulations. In this sense a lot more mileage is obtained from a few carefully selected crosstabulations or t-tests than can be garnered with fancy regression models.

My particular experiences with the Company led to an expansion of my duties from that of research into the additional areas of market administration and services. Although I now handle other managerial assignments and may delegate more activities, the fundamental skills of a researcher are behind good management of broader marketing issues. As my odyssey unfolds, my reflexive examination of the process of which I am a part leads me to the following generalizations regarding the fit of academicians into the world of business.

#### *What Businesses are Looking For*

Two items fairly routinely expected of university faculty members are highly valued in business and merit special note. First, and I beg the reader to excuse my personal weaknesses in this area, anyone who can write a grammatically correct sentence will stand out in the world of business. Our educational system truly is failing in training individuals to write. Somehow all of those poorly written term papers we academicians joked about have become very real to me.

A second trait in short supply is competence in analytic and organized problem solving. Anyone who can clearly think through an issue, noting antecedents and consequences of alternative courses of action, may find corporate doors opening to them.

Furthermore, businesses look for individuals who possess skills which can be applied across a variety of topic areas. It is less important to be a specialist as it is to be flexible in your application of problem solving strategies to whatever issue is assigned to you. Few companies have such specialization that they hire an expert in every area. Instead businesses tend to call upon people who have been competent in one area to handle a new issue when it arises.

#### *Unique Features of Business Life*

Businesses exist to make money. Competence and success are evaluated against that fundamental truism. While academicians occasionally tend to be prima donnas who

dictate their own priorities, research interests, and the like, businesses clearly dictate what they wish to support or not to support. While academicians may tend to act as if they are working for themselves, there is no doubt in business that employees of all ranks work for the good of the company. A good employee like a good soldier takes orders.

A caveat on the priority of business objectives over personal ones is that businesses are not looking for crusaders. Leaving aside the issue of whether or not college faculty should be free to pursue their own political agenda while on "company" time, such political activism has no part in the world of business. I, for one, like the separation of personal from professional agenda.

A further distinction, applicable at least to smaller businesses, is that they are relatively unencumbered by problems of hiring and firing. If someone is working out, you keep him or her. If they are doing great, you help them move up as quickly as they can handle the responsibilities. On the other hand, if someone is not working out and turning them around does not seem to be a possibility, they are gone. In fact, one of the more attractive aspects of business life is the reality of it all. Consequences for oneself and the company are direct and measurable.

### *Preparation*

College students and graduate students who would like to keep a business career option open should adjust their curriculum to fit that possibility. A minor in business would be very appropriate, but accounting and legal operations are usually handled by specialists and probably do not deserve coursework. General business administration and marketing courses should be considered. From a research perspective, I would have found more foundation in economic forecasting particularly helpful. Statistics are statistics and be picked up anywhere. On the other hand, substantive courses in one's discipline carry less significance.

Prior to a move anticipatory socialization activities could also be helpful. I did this unintentionally by developing a circle of friends and acquaintances who eventually helped me into the position I now hold. In order to understand the thought processes and social norms of business people, it is necessary to begin rubbing shoulders with those in the private sector. Joining a business club, attending Chamber of Commerce functions, and the like tend to help reorienting one's thinking.

Personal networking stands out as the primary mode of finding private sector jobs. Perhaps the best strategy for faculty members involves consulting activities, activities which may directly lead to job offers.

### *Why Choose Business*

I take no issue with the argument that university life provides many and varied rewards, from intellectual stimulation to the pride in seeing a student grow under your tutelage. It is my experience, however, that for those coveting greater levels of challenge, activity, risk, and reward, business careers can be exciting. The downside is that "tenurized" safety nets seldom are apparent.

Perhaps the sharpest distinction between academia and business is the immediacy of the consequences and the clarity of the actions. A product sells or not -- simple. An activity leads to greater or lesser sales. The criterion for success is clean and direct -- did the company make money?

This is not to suggest that all of the rewards or concerns of businesses are financial. We have a genuine concern for the lifestyle needs of our buyers. Of course this helps us attract more buyers, but it is more than a marketing ploy. I can recall one company executive remarking that perhaps his biggest reward from the job was seeing people actively enjoying the lifestyle we had so meticulously planned for them.

#### *Why a Family Researcher*

A family scientist brings to the business world a breadth of perspective as to research issues. Families are ultimately the consumer of the business's product. Perhaps because family scientists deal with complex phenomenon like social behavior we tend to feel comfortable dealing with a level of ambiguity that makes hard scientists and engineers nervous. We also tend not to rely on just one research methodology and design. This allows us to be flexible when approaching a problem.

Our company's water lawyer once reflected that he appreciated a generalist researcher, someone who was able to cross interdisciplinary lines and could evaluate a wide range of data. Every lawyer can hire outside expert testimony. In court it becomes one expert against another. Experts are hired guns. In contrast, law firms may be interested in having someone on their staff who has sufficiently generalized research skills to work with the lawyer from the inside. This allows the lawyer to take the information on as his or her own. Lawyers can work wonders when they are working with information they know to be correct. At the least, the lawyer's scientist can evaluate expert testimony and provide an insider critique as to its strengths and weaknesses.

#### *The Challenge*

The challenge for the family scientists is to be able to do a quick study of new topic areas, some invariably involving new disciplines. An academician in business should be able to feel comfortable bridging disciplines and asking questions of university colleagues in those disciplines. If those colleagues are former acquaintances, so much the better.

There are positions in the business world for those who care to go out and get them. The work atmosphere may be different and the problem formulation unfamiliar. However, if one is willing to be flexible, the feeling of immediate and tangible success can be addictive.