

CHAPTER 1

SHOULD I STAY, OR SHOULD I GO?

Leave Academia?

First, let's make one thing clear. The expression "to leave academia" sounds pejorative—as if you were jumping ship, giving up, or something along those lines. If you are in the process of transitioning to industry, you *do* leave the system which you grew up in behind—but it might also be the start of something beautiful, and a chance to bring a lot of value to society (and much more wealth for yourself).

And, as I will attempt to convince you in this book, it's even more likely that in industry your overall impact will *grow* rather than drop. However, for now, let's avoid using the expression "leaving academia," and refer to "transitioning to industry" instead.

The Right and Wrong Reasons to Make the Transition

Can you be happy in academia? Of course! I know many people who are happy as professional academic researchers. Academic success comes from a combination of a few factors: finding a topic you are passionate about, a healthy environment, people whom you enjoy working with, and the place that offers you good lifestyle and working conditions.

If all these stars align, you can become a happy academic and stay around for a lifetime. However, most researchers lose balance in their academic life at some point. And then, they start asking themselves, "Should I stay, or should I go?"

This book is addressed both to those who have already decided to transition to industry and those who are still hesitating. So, if you happen to be a member of the latter group, this chapter might be of particular interest to you. My personal experience

is that many researchers consider the transition for all the wrong reasons. This results in a high risk of disappointment in the future. In this chapter, I'd like to discuss the five most common wrong and right reasons why you might consider a career switch to industry.

To my mind, the main wrong reason to move to industry is an attempt to avoid *games* or *politics*. We all know this slow process of turning from an idealistic, fresh PhD candidate obsessed with science to a calculated player who always thinks about possible returns before taking on any new research project.

In the first year of a PhD program, most of the lunch discussions with your peers concern your new projects, courses, summer schools, conferences, other new scientific events, and new opportunities. In the last year of your PhD however, you spend your lunch breaks gossiping about your boss, talking about whose contract is ending next, and discussing how to secure enough money to stay around for one more year.

One day you realize that the senior researchers spend their whole life like this: hustling, making deals, establishing formal and informal coalitions, managing money. Some early career researchers are disgusted by academia at this point—and to many, this is the ultimate deal-breaker that persuades them to move towards industry.

Is this a valid reason to say “No” to academia? Let's see. If you decide to enter a corporation, you'll soon learn that there are internal fractions—cliques whose members help each other career-wise and back each other up in trouble. In the stereotypical view, corporate cliques are groups of few individuals who habitually smoke together on the balcony and secretly gossiping behind the glass door. In reality, those mutual admiration societies are much harder to notice.

If you move towards an environment like this, you'll be astonished that those who get promoted are not necessarily the best employees but rather, the most skilled and ruthless corporate rats (Schrijvers, 2002). And, fighting for positions in corporations can be even more cut-throat than it is in academia. It is because the disproportion between salaries at the top and the bottom of the pay scale is way higher in corporations. Fighting for money can trigger the worst in people.

If you decide to go to a startup for a change, you'll soon notice that the startup structure is not as flat. Namely, those who happened to find themselves in the right place at the right time—who joined the company in the early stages—now have a lot of shares and power in the company. These individuals will get more responsible tasks than you, and their opinion will be more trusted—even though you might be much more skilled and hard-working than them.

If you start working as a freelancer, you'll soon find out that it's better to select projects that give maximum returns at the minimum effort and pass more energy-consuming or tedious projects to others—befriended freelancers or subcontractors. You'll also find out that you get at least 80% of your contracts through skillful networking and salesmanship and not because the quality of your services speaks for itself.

As it turns out, the best-paid people are those who are in the spotlight and not those who are the most competent. Thus, you will need to invest an incredible amount of time and effort in constant self-promotion and making thousands of new connections.

Lastly, if you choose to become an entrepreneur, you'll be surrounded by con artists all the time. You'll need to quickly learn how to find the right people, stick to them, and negotiate good deals for yourself, or otherwise, you'll starve.

Wherever you go, there will always be fewer seats at the top than the number of contenders interested in these seats. Only people with strong interpersonal and adaptive skills will be able to get there.

Also, isn't this true that in some way, every job sooner or later becomes a game? In every working environment, there are some written and unwritten rules that decide about the ultimate professional success. Once you learn these rules, you have a choice: you can follow the rules, or you can go your own way and risk that you won't be as appreciated as deserved given all your competencies.

Perhaps, it's better to accept the reality—namely, to accept the fact that politics is prevalent in the job market—and start building a strong personal network rather than deny it and try to run from it. Therefore, if politics in academia is the main reason why you are thinking of quitting, please think twice.

The second wrong reason to make a career switch towards industry is the *uncertainty* associated with a research career. Most academics are uncomfortable with constantly being compared with others, and with the necessity to think many steps ahead and secure the next contract before the current contract comes to the end. This is a tricky one. Especially for researchers who already have families, *safety* is the factor that has a major influence on the general well-being.

However, we live in uncertain times in which the job market morphs quickly. You'll need to follow this development and keep on learning, or otherwise, you'll stay behind. These days, large corporations actively stimulate their employees to grow by shifting them from one department to another every 2-3 years. This effectively means that even with a permanent contract within a large company, you are expected to effectively change your occupation every 2-3 years.

Furthermore, many new professions appear on the market while other professions become obsolete and disappear. For instance, nowadays, crowds of PhDs go towards data science and machine learning since this field is developing and the offered working conditions are great. Is this still going to be the case in 10 or 20 years? What if the most machine learning jobs will be taken over by machines—as the name suggests?

Furthermore, wherever you go, you'll need to make someone happy: either your boss or your clients. For this reason, you will always be evaluated in one way or another. In fact, in industry, you are much more often compared to others than in academia—and in much more quantifiable ways. For instance, if you are a consultant, a salesman, or a manager in sales, the sales made by you and/or your people will always be compared to the results of other employees or to your results from the past.

Marketing is all about the numbers: bad results for a prolonged period won't go unnoticed, this is for sure. In academia, on the other hand, everyone has their own, individual project with its own limitations. For this reason, differing amounts of output between researchers within the same research group usually meet with understanding. In academia, it is also much more accepted to go on sick leave if you are in a bad mental condition. In industry, your boss might take such an occurrence as a financial loss to the company, and this might jeopardize your future career plans in that place.

To sum up, there will always be a degree of uncertainty and pressure wherever you go. So, if your main reason for switching jobs to industry is to minimize your discomfort, you might be massively disappointed with what you find in the open job market.

The third reason I would like to discuss here is *finances*. In academia, there is a common belief that somewhere out there, *they are paid much better than us*. It might be true that in certain fields of the market, industry jobs will guarantee you a starting salary higher than your current earnings. But this is only true in some areas of the market, and it very much depends on the current market demand in your area.

Moreover, bad salaries in science is a myth. In most countries in the world, even if Postdoc salaries are not as high as counterpart salaries in the industry, they are still much higher than the *average* salary. If you don't have any savings as a Postdoc, this might indicate that you suffer from so-called lifestyle inflation (more about this topic in chapter 7: *Work on Your Personal Freedom*). This means that you are so good at spending your money that even if your salary is doubled, you'll still spend it all. In such a case, what difference does your salary make anyway? In such a situation, you should concentrate on cutting your monthly expenses rather than searching for a better-paid job.

Besides, money should never be the main driver to choose the job. If you are looking for personal satisfaction from work, high income won't guarantee you that feeling. It usually works the other way around: good income will naturally become a side effect of doing something you enjoy, something you are good at, and something that creates high value to other people. So again, if you want to jump to industry with the sole purpose of finding a better-paid job, you may become disappointed discovering that your perceived quality-of-life didn't increase as expected.

The fourth reason I would like to mention here is a *personal conflict*. Some researchers are so tired of their current superiors that they step outside academia to "take a break for a while." It often happens that they never come back. People often have incompatible working styles, and perhaps you currently experience such a mismatch.

If you happen to have a personality clash with your advisor or some other senior researcher in your team, extrapolating this situation to possible future collaborations and resigning from the academic career might not be the right choice—especially if you are still in love with your research topic. Personal issues can take a lot of life energy, but at the end of the day, it's all about whether *you* believe that your research is

valuable. The opinion of other people (especially if this is a single opinion) should not matter to you as much as your own gut feeling.

Also, the judgment of people is a subjective topic. If one person finds you difficult to work with, it doesn't mean that the person next door won't find you to be a nice and collaborative person. If you feel unappreciated in your current working environment, but you still feel excited about your research, you might consider giving yourself another chance, and going for another research project somewhere else before you make the ultimate decision to switch careers.

There are thousands of successful PIs who had personal conflicts with their superiors in the past but never lost drive and passion for science—and eventually, they made it to the top. Almost every PI had some form of a bottleneck in the past, and these bottlenecks made them stronger in the process. If you don't believe this is the case, you might casually ask some fellow PIs about their career path over drinks. If after a few beers you ask them, “What went wrong in your own career?” I am sure they'll have plenty of stories to tell.

Lastly, one clearly wrong reason for switching to industry is the *bandwagon effect*. This psychological phenomenon happens when people blindly follow the decisions of people around them without any valid reasons to do so (e.g., when everyone around you buys the newest and the most expensive model of an *iPhone* and you feel a strong urge to do the same, or otherwise, you wouldn't be cool anymore).

In some areas of the market, it's so easy to find good industry jobs with a PhD that this the transition becomes the default choice. For instance, PhD students in computer science studying at top universities usually get approached by IT companies a long time before they finish their PhD contracts—and typically, they are offered good working conditions. I've got some questions from befriended researchers who highly enjoy their academic jobs yet experience the fear of missing out (a.k.a., the FOMO). “All my colleagues transfer to industry, and they all seem happy. Should I join them? Am I insane to stay where I am?”

Well, not necessarily. There is no point in following the majority if you are not deeply convinced that this is the right way for you. Besides, people often get overexcited about a new job in the initial phase after signing the contract. And, they might also seem happier on their *LinkedIn* profiles than they are in reality. *LinkedIn* is a self-promotion platform and not a diary.

So, what are the *right* reasons to move out of academia? The first situation is when your love for your research topic is gone for good. You no longer feel the excitement that you felt at the very beginning of your academic adventure while getting new ideas or discovering new findings in your research projects. You no longer feel a rush of adrenaline while presenting your research to other people. You become quite indifferent to reading about new findings. All becomes *just a job*. This can happen for many reasons, and sometimes it is hard to tell *why* it happens in a particular situation.

It's a bit like waking up next to someone you have been with for many, many years, and discovering that you feel nothing now. Can you expect a happy end once

this happens? This is rarely the case. To my mind, if you find yourself in such a situation and you are fairly sure that the love is gone with no chance of coming back, this is a valid reason to think about making a career switch and giving yourself a chance to fall in love again.

The second valid reason to look for a job outside of academia is a desire to work in a real team. Of course, academic projects most often are team projects (at least officially), and most researchers are team players by nature. However, there is a huge *systemic* problem in academia: at the end of the day, everyone who aims to build their academic career needs to take care of their own CV and their own publication record.

This causes that people highly prioritize projects in which they are leading researchers, and delay or even ignore the projects in which they are minor contributors; they may even block each other at work. Again, this is not a problem with people per se; this is a problem with the *system of evaluating* them. Anyway, this results in low synergy between researchers—in fact, they slow each other down instead of helping each other to successfully complete the project in time.

One of the most common comments made by those who transfer to industry is that they are positively surprised with the quality of teamwork in their new workplace and with how well-supported they feel at work. Indeed, teamwork in industry is at a whole new level. Typically, the whole team has exactly the same goal: to beat the competition and to win the market—together.

Since there are no names of single contributors on the final product, there are no elbows in use and no internal conflicts. It sounds like a paradox: since no one is acknowledged, everyone is happy. Therefore, if the main source of your frustration is the lack of synergy in academia and if you have a strong desire to experience more teamwork in daily life, this is a good reason to try something new somewhere else.

To my mind, the third good scenario is when you are *curious* about what is out there. You feel young at heart, and you don't feel the need to settle on one career path just yet. You have acquired a rare skillset during your academic career and you have a strong desire to challenge yourself and to explore the job market. You are asking yourself, "How far can I get with the skills I already have? What can I change in this world?" In this case, you'll probably regret it if you don't try. You can commit to spending one year outside of academia and examine whether you enjoy this new life—if you are a proactive, driven person, academia will most probably still welcome you back after this period.

The next good scenario is when you got a great research idea, you met the right people at the right time, and it might be the opportunity of a lifetime for you. For instance, imagine that during your PhD, you made a discovery that might lead to the development of a new drug, a new online platform that solves a big societal problem, or any other product that might potentially hit it big in the market. You are not sure about the potential of the project, so you knock on the door of the local incubator and ask professionals for their opinion. They are excited about your achievement and pass you through to their network of investors.

And then, you find yourself at the crucial decision point: shall I pursue this commercial project—which probably means that I will no longer have time for my research for at least a few years, and commit a sort of research career suicide—or should I forget about this? Many early career researchers encounter this situation but don't have the grit to go for the opportunity—yet most of those who took the challenge, are happy with their decision and never regret it.

Importantly, such opportunities often happen not only while you are in graduate school but also when you are experienced as a researcher—as this is when you are proficient enough to create or recognize a real innovation. For many researchers in the age range of 35-60, it becomes hard to make the ultimate decision to leave their current lifestyle on behalf of a risky adventure. They often have preschool-aged children at this point—and for that reason, they are afraid to dump a stable income for entrepreneurship.

For people who are older than 60 and close to retirement, this decision becomes easier again; they usually feel accomplished enough in their careers: they are wealthy, they are done with paying back their mortgage, and their kids are already independent. The message is: if you get a million-dollar idea during your PhD and some investors are willing to supply this idea with cash, you should consider going for it—with age, this decision will only become harder. With age, people usually make better decisions as they have more knowledge. But at the same time, they are less willing to take risks and have less energy. Thus, if you are not willing to wait until you are 60, the time is now.

One last good reason for why you might be willing to transfer to industry is probably the most important factor among all: *intuition*. If you cannot help the recurring thoughts, “What if...” If you cannot help listening to the stories of friends who switched careers, and you keep on wondering how you would do in this new, unknown land, it might be an indication that you should try.

Intuition is a powerful tool. Especially if you work at a prestigious institution, you produce good results, your boss is satisfied with your progress, your family is proud of you, you like your coworkers, yet still, you cannot help the itch that something is missing in your life and that there might be some other, dream job out there waiting for you behind the horizon—you probably should try. If you don't try in such a situation, there is a high chance that one day, you might regret it. I would even say that you are most likely to regret it.

I summarized the aforementioned reasons in Table 1. Again, these reasons are my own, personal insights—however, after conducting hundreds of conversations with researchers before and after a career switch, I'm quite confident about this list.

As a summary, there are two main types of motivation to leave the academic system. Firstly, your motivation can be *reactive*: you can think about leaving academia primarily because you want to *run from* certain aspects of the academic system that you don't enjoy—either your toxic boss, politics in academia, the feeling of being constantly overworked, the feeling of being undervalued in financial terms, or the feeling of abandonment after all your colleagues left for industry.

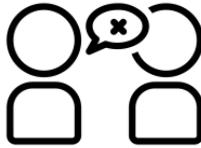
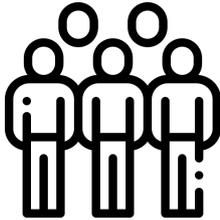
The wrong reasons	Politics in academia 	Looking for a comfort zone 	Money 	Personal conflict 	Bandwagon effect 
The right reasons	Love is gone 	Looking for teamwork 	Curiosity 	The big idea 	Intuition 

Table 1 The main right and the main wrong reasons to transfer beyond academia.

Secondly, your motivation can be *proactive*: you have a gut feeling that somewhere out there, your dream job waits for you, you have a desire to challenge yourself, you have an urge to find your preferred working environment in the job market, or you want to develop your business idea. As a rule of thumb, *proactive* motivation will yield much better results in the long run than *reactive* motivation. Therefore, rather than asking yourself, “Should I leave academia?” it is better to ask, “Is it the right time for me to conquer industry?”

We can also look at the difference between the right and the wrong reasons from a different angle: the right reasons are those associated with *internal* factors, i.e., values, priorities, and creativity, while the wrong reasons are related to *external* factors, e.g., dysfunctional academic system, other people's (seemingly) shiny careers, or a superior hard to manage. Internal motivation works better in any circumstances, navigating in the job market included.

You might have noticed that one aspect is missing in the above list, namely the *personal reasons related to the family situation*. Many PhDs resign from the research career based on the fact that long working hours in academia will not allow them to achieve the work-life balance they desire. Or because their growing family requires financial support that the academic salary cannot provide.

These are, of course, valid reasons to leave! I didn't mention them above primarily because everyone has their way of valuing different aspects of their life. For some people, family always comes first, and they can sacrifice their careers for their family without a blink. Others cannot ever be happy without pursuing their dream at work—even if they have a family next to it. After resigning from a career, their mental health will be affected to such an extent that it will negatively influence the family as

well. Thus, everyone needs to weight the importance of the academic career versus other areas of life by themselves and make the decision upon it.

Now, the question arises, “Should I stay, or should I go?” Obviously, this is a question that only you can answer for yourself. However, one thing I can tell you here is that, if you are highly unsatisfied with your current job, it’s *good* news because it gives you the motivation to change something in your life.

The worst possible scenario is when you are in limbo: not too excited about your job but at the same time, everything seems merely good enough: you have a meh-project, meh-boss, meh-colleagues, meh-salary. When you know deep inside that this is probably not the place where you’ll grow and optimally develop yourself—but at the same time, you don’t have clear reasons to complain. So, you decide to ignore these thoughts and stick to your current lifestyle.

The Stages of Grief

Let’s assume that you eventually decide to go for the big jump and start a new career. What is the scope of your feelings in such a situation? Unfortunately, most people don’t feel like butterflies just leaving their cocoons. Instead, they feel confused, anxious, and go through an almost existential crisis, questioning their role in the world and the meaning of life. Sometimes, they even feel like they have just disappointed the society that invested in them!

First, after the switch, life as we know it will inevitably change. In academia, and especially in graduate school, private/social life is often mixed with professional life to such an extent that you have no friends outside academia. It’s also often the case that you have little to no experience with working in industry. This is scary; it feels like leaving everything you know on behalf of one big question mark, “How will this feel—to become the new kid on the block again? Will I meet nice people out there?”

Most of us started thinking about an academic career many, many years ago—during undergrad studies, or even much earlier: in high school, in times when we were these annoying brainiacs in the classroom. For the vast majority of students starting their PhDs, research is much more than just a job; it is also a way of living. I would even say that academia is a form of a religious movement in which you can—or even should—sacrifice a big piece of yourself. Fresh PhD candidates keep their eyes set on the tenure track.

Typically, they don’t plan to leave this career path in the future. We were all like this at some point. But then, you realize that for some reason (I mentioned some common examples in the previous section), you might need to change your original, sacred plan. Your research portfolio is something you build for many years. You put a lot of heart into this. Thus, terminating your research career and changing to another profession is associated with a deep feeling of loss; most likely, the nuances of your academic achievements won’t be recognized or appreciated in your new working environment.

If you move from academia to industry, you need to *bury* your previous life. Namely, you need to accept that your current way of living is coming to the end, and this change is for good. The more achievement you have acquired in academia, the

more painful this realization will be. Burying your life is a bit like burying a person: you'll need to go through a multistage process of grief. I find Kubler-Ross's model of grief (Kubler-Ross, 1969) helpful to understand what happens to you at the end of your academic career.

The first stage is *denial*. In this stage, the bare thought that you might work outside academia is so surreal that it feels like a movie rather than real life. Then comes *anger*: at some point, it finally reaches your head that you'll need to forget about what you have been building for so many years—and you are not happy about it, not at all! You feel betrayed by the academic system, by your schoolteachers who were telling you to study, by everyone. “What was all this pain for?”—you ask yourself in rage and curse the unfair world.

Then, you calm down and start *bargaining*: you rethink the situation and try to still find the reason why it might be worth staying where you are. You look at *Twitter*; all the people seem happy and successful in there. And you ask yourself, “Am I just being a drama queen? Maybe I should be tougher. Maybe I should be more receptive to my everyday little problems, and accept the downsides of my job, just like everyone else seems to accept it.”

Then, you come back to your own situation, and you realize once again that changing careers is the best option in your case. And then, there comes the *depression*: a deep sadness in reaction to the fact that your professional life, as you know it, is inevitably coming to an end. The last phase is *acceptance*: cheering yourself up, and mentally preparing for the next steps necessary for your transition.

How do you get over grief fast? No one has found an algorithmic approach to this problem yet. First, it is good to realize that you are grieving. Secondly, I suggest you settle on your final decision on whether you are willing to try something new as soon as you can, and start making steps towards that goal. Rather than sitting behind the closed door, thinking about the past and worrying about the future, better to reach out to people who already represent the place where you would like to go, make some new friends, and start making plans for the transition.

The Biggest Challenge

Lastly, what is the hardest part of the transition to industry? Is this finding a new job? I would dare to say: the hardest part is actually to *repurpose yourself*. Most of us academics dreamt about becoming an independent researcher for long years before ever coming to graduate school. We see a purpose in advancing the current state of knowledge in a certain field, and we often make it our mission. When this stage of our life comes to the end, we need to find a new source of motivation that is bigger than just a job.

This process of looking for a new purpose typically takes much longer than the process of getting employed in some new environment. This is because you will need to get through a few stages before defining your new purpose. First, you'll need to secure a position that will give you income and allow you to work on some interesting subject matter.

Then, you'll need to learn everything about the branch of industry and the environment you belong to, to spot some new problems that might be worth solving. You'll need to focus for attention on those problems and eventually, your new purpose will emerge. Of course, some people need to see a higher purpose in their job more than others—for some researchers, the need to find a new inspiration will not be a problem. For most of us, it will be though. If this is the case for you, you need to be patient and trust that the inspiration *will* come at some point.

The Take-home Message

1. There are right and wrong reasons to switch careers from academia to industry.

The wrong reasons are primarily *reactive*:

- a) Running from politics,
- b) Running from the feeling of uncertainty,
- c) Running from the feeling of being undervalued in financial terms,
- d) Running from toxic people and personal conflicts,
- e) Fear of missing out.

The right reasons are primarily *proactive*:

- a) Searching for a new passion,
- b) Searching for real team spirit,
- c) Curiosity about what is out there for you,
- d) Great business idea that someone is willing to fund,
- e) Intuition prompts you to do so.

2. Closing your academic career track can be associated with grief. Healing from grief is a complex, multistage process.

3. The hardest aspect of the transition is not the necessity to find another job, but rather, the need to *repurpose* yourself. This process can last for years.