

# Career Self-Advocacy: How I Got a Six-Figure Job In the Private Sector

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## Disclaimer

The views expressed by the speaker are her own and may not necessarily reflect those of her employer.

## A bit about me...

- Background: PhD in physics from Northwestern University, dissertation work completed at Fermilab
- First job after grad school: Consultant role in a predictive modeling group at Travelers insurance company
- Current job: Director role in a predictive modeling group at CNA insurance company

## Why not academia?

Before grad school:

- Really enjoyed the research internships I had in college
- Went to grad school to do in-depth research
- Wanted to do research after grad school

During grad school:

- Hiring freeze at Fermilab, few true research positions
- Reality is different than what I had imagined
- Not interested in becoming a professor
- Started thinking about other careers years before I graduated

## Step 1: Figure out what others have done

- Learned that there are ~1500 physics PhDs per year but only a few hundred faculty jobs per year\*
  - The overwhelming majoring [OR MAJORITY] of physics PhDs don't stay in academia
- Looked for where those physicists went, what successes they had
  - My network was almost all academic physicists
  - Couldn't find much information on physicists working outside academia online
  - Decided to find people and interview them about their experiences – this turned into a resource for FGSA: <http://www.aps.org/units/fgsa/careers/non-traditional/index.cfm>
  - Identified people through the APS directory, alumni directories, searches online
- At the same time, I was applying for graduate grants and fellowships (I was tired of living on a graduate stipend)
  - I was awarded the AFCEA graduate fellowship, leader became a mentor to me

## Step 2: Think about what I want to do

- What are my strengths?
- What do I really enjoy about my work?
- What do I dislike?
- Where am I willing to live?
- What is important to me in the company culture?
- What would my ideal job look like? What would I do all day? Who would I work with?

## Step 3: Figure out what I want to do

- Identified a mentor in industry I could talk to – I went through MentorNet but there are other services
  - LinkedIn, your alumni, APS directory, etc. are other places to look
- Career services at my university
  - Not a lot of experience working with physics PhDs
  - Career path information, Vault career guides, resumes/cover letters/job applications
  - Helped me connect to alumni working in careers where my skills might fit: venture capital, investment banking, “quant” roles at trading firms, science-focused companies, etc. leading to additional informational interviews
  - Later, they worked with me to determine appropriate salary ranges, coached me through job offer and salary negotiations

## Step 4: Identify possible jobs

- Career fairs
  - Company representatives are often from HR or recruiting
  - Good practice describing my skills and what I could offer
- Job boards
  - Learned about what may and may not be a good fit for me
  - Job descriptions helped me understand what was important to the company
- Networking
  - Talked to anyone I knew who worked in an industry I was interested in
  - Let people know I was looking for jobs and what I was interested in doing
  - At the time, my network was narrow – physicists, family, friends



## Step 5: Find a job

- Apply, apply, apply
  - Needed to stay focused – spent time every day on my job search
  - Sometimes very frustrating and overwhelming
- Asked hiring managers and recruiters for feedback (when possible)
  - Recruiters can be great resources for good, honest feedback
- Continued to learn, tweak, try again
- Apply some more
  - Over 6 months: ~300 job applications, ~dozen job fairs, 6 interviews, 2 offers
  - Lots of practice describing the skills I offered and why I would be good for the job

## How I got my first job

- Networking
  - Led to informational interview,
  - Which led to an offer to apply,
  - Which led to an interview (well, 3 interviews),
  - Which led to an offer,
  - Which I negotiated and then accepted
- Never know which connection, which conversation, which application will lead to your next job
- Have to keep working on the job search, learning, and trying again

## Step 6: Become a valued employee

- Learn
- Ask lots of questions – you're new, no one expects you to know everything
- How does the company work? What problems need solving? How does your work help improve the company?
- Network – what are the different functions, how do they work together
- Find ways to contribute early, even if small – show you're there to add value

## What I've learned from the other side of the table

- Help the interviewer understand how your skills relate to the job
- Ask them questions – this is your chance to interview them as well
- Ask for feedback afterwards from the recruiter
- Learn from your job search and adjust as needed
  
- Culture and fit
- Networking and giving back