

# “Working in Academia Was Great But I Missed the Work-Life Balance”



Chinmaya Sadangi



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**Abstract** In our interview with Dr. Chinmaya Sadangi, he shares his journey from epilepsy research to a digital marketing specialist in biotech. Initially planning an academic career, Chinmaya realised the need for better work-life balance with a newborn. He values the creativity, problem-solving, and collaboration in marketing. Chinmaya continues applying analytical abilities and communication skills from his PhD. Though sometimes fast-paced, he notes freedom to explore interests and making an impact. Chinmaya encourages building a portfolio showcasing skills through guest blogs or social media management. Chinmaya advises planning ahead, seeking support, and considering alternative careers before thesis submission.

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## **Chris: Can you introduce yourself and tell me a bit about your current position?**

Chinmaya: I moved to Sweden in 2011 to do my Master's from Uppsala University in Cell and Molecular Biology and Neuroscience. Post that I did two research assistant positions at the Charite University, Berlin, and Innsbruck Medical University, Austria. After gaining these experiences, I moved to Phillips University, Marburg, Germany, to complete my PhD.

After that I moved to Canada to start my first postdoc position at the University of Toronto for 2 years followed by 1 year of postdoc at the University of Manitoba. Both these positions gave me an insight to the Canadian education system and the Canadian job market. After completing my second postdoc, I decided to move to the industry and I joined Benchsci as a part-time Biomedical data analyst. My biggest breakthrough came when I joined Cyclica as a Marketing and Communications specialist. I am currently working at PSC Biotech, where I am the Marketing Specialist – Biopharmaceuticals. My role involves multiple work related to communication, public relations, website design, SEO, social media, and so on.

## **What was the focus of your PhD?**

I did my PhD from Phillips University, Marburg from Germany and I completed my PhD in September 2017. My PhD focused on studying the role of endosomal toll-like receptors (eTLRs) in epilepsy. Epilepsy is a neurological disorder that affects the brain and causes seizures. Seizures occur when there is a sudden surge of electrical activity in the brain, which can cause changes in behaviour, movements, sensations, or consciousness. On the other hand, TLRs are a type of protein that play an important role in the immune system by recognizing and responding to foreign substances like bacteria, viruses, and other pathogens. eTLRs are a specific group of TLRs that are located within the endosome, a specialized compartment within cells.

## **As you were finishing your PhD, what were you thinking about your career plans?**

During my PhD, I always thought of going the traditional academic career path, i.e. following the tenure-track pathway. I saw the efforts PI's were making, the changes they were bringing to the scientific world as they progressed in the field of science.

## **How have your career plans changed as you've continued on to your current position?**

My career plan changed when I was towards the end of my PhD. My academic journey gave me an insight into the tenure-track position. As mentioned previously, I always wanted to follow this path and wanted to become a PI and have my own lab and funding to conduct research on neurodegenerative and neuropsychiatric disorders.

## **What made you change from wanting to take the academic career path?**

Working in academia was great, but I missed the work-life balance which I needed as I had a newborn. I tried my best to do that in an academic setting but failed to achieve it because of reasons like changing the media for the cells, animal breeding, and so on. Apart from finding a work-life balance, some other reasons were:

- *Shift in Interests:* I discovered new interests and passions outside of academia that I found more fulfilling or aligned with my personal goals. I realized that my interests lie in a different field that offers different opportunities for growth and impact.
- *Work-Life Balance:* Pursuing an academic career often involves long hours, extensive research, and a heavy workload. I prioritized a better work-life balance and seek career paths that offer more flexibility, stability, or time for personal commitments and relationships.
- *Job Market Challenges:* The academic job market is highly competitive, with limited positions available and a lengthy path to tenure. I choose to explore other career options that offer more immediate employment prospects or better financial stability.
- *Desire for a Broader Impact:* While academia allows for in-depth research and scholarly contributions, I had a desire to make a more immediate and tangible impact on a larger scale. I opted for marketing, where I can apply my knowledge and skills to address real-world challenges.

- *Personal Growth and Variety:* Academic careers can be highly focused on a specific research area, which may not provide individuals with the variety and diversity of experiences I desired. I seek career paths that offer opportunities to explore multiple interests, work on different projects, collaborate with diverse teams, or take on leadership roles.

## **Can you tell us a bit about what day-to-day life is like in your current position?**

My work is completely digital. My work involves a lot of analytical skills and strategy building skills which I acquired during my PhD. As a digital marketing specialist, I start my day by going through the social media channels to see how the posts are doing (that I posted the previous day or during the week). I check for analytics and if any comment needs my attention. Post that, I move to make my post for the day and cross post it to different social media platforms. I also have a look at the web analytics to see where the website traffic, to see if there are any interesting visits from countries, and to see if we have any leads on our forms. I also write blog posts and whitepapers so that's where I spend sometime. Apart from that, I am responsible for ad management, some graphic designs, and addressing the management queries (if they have any queries related to digital marketing). Our team is also responsible for event management, so we plan for events which include everything from registration of attendees, to managing the booth and logistics.

## **What do you like most about your work?**

The opportunity to learn new things, the creativity and innovation involved, the satisfaction of solving problems and helping others, and the diversity and collaboration of my team are somethings that I enjoy a lot about my work. Some other aspects include the following:

- *Creativity:* Digital marketing allows professionals to exercise their creativity in designing campaigns, developing content strategies, and crafting engaging messages that resonate with the target audience. This creative aspect of the work can be fulfilling and exciting.
- *Continuous Learning:* The digital marketing landscape is constantly evolving, with new technologies, platforms, and strategies emerging regularly. This dynamic nature of the field offers opportunities for learning and growth, keeping digital marketing specialists engaged and motivated.
- *Impact and Results:* A successful digital marketing campaign can have a significant impact on a business or organization. Seeing the results of their efforts, such as increased website traffic, improved conversion rates, or higher brand awareness, can be rewarding for digital marketing specialists.

- *Collaboration and Networking:* Digital marketing often involves working with cross-functional teams, such as designers, developers, content creators, and social media managers. Collaborating with diverse professionals can be enjoyable, and networking opportunities can arise through interactions with clients, industry experts, and fellow marketers.

## And what do you like least about your work?

If I say I thoroughly enjoy my work and I don’t have anything that I dislike, then it would be a lie. Digital marketing, biotechnology, and pharmaceuticals are a constantly evolving field, and they change everyday and we have to keep up with it.

- *Rapidly Changing Landscape:* The digital marketing field is constantly evolving, with new technologies, algorithms, and trends emerging regularly. Keeping up with these changes and staying ahead of the curve can be a challenge and require continuous learning and adaptation.
- *High Expectations and Pressure:* Digital marketing often involves setting and achieving ambitious goals and targets. There can be pressure to deliver measurable results within tight deadlines, which can sometimes be stressful.
- *Data Overload:* While data is a valuable asset in digital marketing, it can also be overwhelming. Collecting, analyzing, and interpreting large amounts of data can be time-consuming and complex. Making sense of the data and deriving actionable insights can be a challenge.
- *Balancing Creativity and Strategy:* Digital marketing requires both creativity and strategic thinking. Finding the right balance between creative ideas and data-driven strategies can sometimes be a delicate process, and reconciling conflicting priorities can be a challenge.
- *Technical Challenges:* Digital marketing often involves working with various tools, platforms, and technologies. Technical issues or limitations can arise, such as website glitches, ad platform changes, or compatibility issues, which can be frustrating and time-consuming to address.

## How do you think having a PhD has helped you succeed in your current position?

A PhD can offer a unique perspective and skill set. But, success in digital marketing also requires proficiency in other areas, such as strategic thinking, creativity, data analysis, communication, and adaptability to evolving trends in the digital landscape. My PhD helped me better understand some aspect of marketing like the following:

- *Understanding (Consumer) Behaviour*: Neuroscience involves studying the brain and behaviour, which can provide valuable insights into consumer psychology. A deeper understanding of how individuals perceive, process, and respond to marketing stimuli can help in creating more effective and targeted marketing campaigns.
- *Data Analysis and Research Skills*: PhD research often involves rigorous data analysis and research methodologies. These skills can be valuable in digital marketing, where data-driven decision-making and conducting research experiments to optimize campaigns are essential.
- *Cognitive Science and User Experience*: A background in neuroscience can contribute to a better understanding of human cognition, attention, and memory. This knowledge can be applied to improve user experience (UX) in digital marketing by designing websites, apps, and advertisements that align with users' cognitive processes and enhance engagement.

**If someone currently finishing their PhD was considering a position similar to yours, how might they decide if it would be a good fit?**

If you have an interest in writing, social media, and designing, then moving into digital marketing might be a good fit for you. However, you should remember to adapt to changes. When I say interest in writing, it doesn't mean academic writing. It is more of corporate writing and writing blogs which you can learn by reading press releases blog posts, and whitepapers published by companies. Keeping up with the social media platforms and the algorithm changes is also important.

**If someone was interested in pursuing a similar career path, what would you suggest they do to better prepare themselves?**

Start by building a portfolio. When you apply for positions in a similar field, one thing they would like to look is into your portfolio. And building a portfolio can take a lot of time. Digital marketing is an umbrella term which covers many aspects of marketing. Find areas that you are interested in and build your portfolio around that. For example, if you are interested in writing, approach companies like Hello Bio, CCRM, AbCellera, etc. to write guest blogs for them. Start a blogging website where you can write and showcase your skills. If you are interested in social media, you can approach small companies to manage their social media by creating posts, posting them, and helping the company keeping up with the latest social media trends and their social media analytics. You can also start your own social media channel by creating posts. For example, I started The Addictive Brain, a science communication platform to do science communication. This helped me understand Instagram,

Facebook, TikTok, LinkedIn, and Twitter which further helped me land up clients in managing their social media platforms.

## **Can you tell us more about why you decided to start The Addictive Brain?**

I started The Addictive Brain (TAB) in 2017. In parallel, I started my first postdoc too. The reason for starting TAB was because I saw a lot of communication gap between scientists, science, and the public. When I mentioned that I am a neuroscientist, they would ask me questions about medication, but I had to clarify that I am not a doctor but a scientist. TAB bridged this gap between scientist and the common man by telling science stories in a simple manner so that everyone can understand. For example, if I had to explain qPCR to a scientific audience, I can use complex jargons to explain but the same is not applicable for common man. We need to explain it in such a way that they can understand the basics of qPCR, how it works, and why do scientists use this. TAB not only helped me bridge this gap but also helped me hone my marketing skills as I used social media, web design, interviewing skills, SEO, and much more.

## **A lot of people like academia because they feel it gives them an opportunity to work on a topic that they deeply care about. Do you think this is also true in your current position?**

I was very passionate about my research topic and I enjoyed working on it. I think academia gave me the opportunity to explore new ideas, discover new knowledge, and contribute to the advancement of science and society. I also liked the intellectual stimulation and challenge that academia provides, as well as the freedom and autonomy to pursue my own interests and goals. Of course, there are also some drawbacks and difficulties in academia, such as the pressure to publish, the competition for funding, the uncertainty of the job market, and the work-life balance issues. But overall, I think academia is a rewarding and fulfilling career choice for me.

On the other hand, I find my current position interesting – I find it meaningful and satisfying. I think this job gives me the opportunity to apply my skills and knowledge to solve real-world problems, create innovative products and services, and make a positive impact on the customers and the society. I also like the practical and collaborative nature, as well as the clear and measurable goals and outcomes. Of course, there are also some challenges and trade-offs, such as the fast pace and changing demands, the limited scope and depth of research, the intellectual property, and the confidentiality issues. But overall, I think a job in the industry is a rewarding and enjoyable career choice for me.

**Another reason many like academia is that they feel it provides them with more freedom than they think they would get in other positions. How much freedom do you feel you have to work on what you think is interesting?**

That's an interesting question. I think freedom is a relative term that depends on many factors, such as the field of study, the funding sources, the expectations of the institution, the collaborators, and the personal goals and preferences of the researcher. In general, I would say that academia provides more freedom to choose the topics and methods of research than other positions, but it also comes with more responsibilities and challenges, such as securing grants, publishing papers, teaching students, reviewing manuscripts, and serving the academic community. So, the amount of freedom that one feels in academia is a balance between the opportunities and the constraints that one faces in their career. Some people may find this balance rewarding and stimulating, while others may find it stressful and limiting.

**Have you thought about returning to academia?**

I have thought about returning to academia, and I still have some academic interests and connections that I would like to pursue or maintain, and I also miss some aspects of academic life, such as the freedom to choose my own research topics and methods, the intellectual diversity and exchange of ideas, and the opportunity to teach and mentor students.

However, I enjoy my current job and I appreciate the benefits and advantages that it offers, such as the practical and relevant impact of my work, the collaborative and supportive work environment, the clear and achievable goals and rewards, and the stability and security of my career. So, I think returning to academia would be a difficult and complex decision for me, and I would have to weigh the pros and cons carefully before making any changes.

**Based on your journey, what advice or suggestions do you want to pass on to someone who's currently finishing their PhD?**

I think finishing a PhD is a challenging but rewarding process that requires a lot of dedication, perseverance, and creativity. Some of the advice or suggestions that I would like to pass on to someone who's currently finishing their PhD are the following:



Plan ahead and set realistic goals and deadlines for yourself. Finishing a PhD involves many tasks, such as writing your dissertation, preparing for your defence, applying for jobs or postdocs, and wrapping up your projects. It can be overwhelming and stressful if you don’t have a clear plan and timeline for each task. Try to break down your work into manageable chunks and prioritize the most important and urgent ones. Also, be flexible and adaptable to any changes or challenges that may arise along the way.

- Seek feedback and support from your supervisor, committee members, peers, and mentors. Finishing a PhD is not something that you can do alone. You need to communicate regularly with your supervisor and committee members about your progress, challenges, and expectations. They can provide you with valuable guidance, feedback, and resources to help you improve your work and overcome any difficulties. You also need to network and collaborate with your peers and mentors, who can offer you different perspectives, insights, and opportunities for your research and career development. Don’t be afraid to ask for help or advice when you need it.
- Celebrate your achievements and take care of yourself. Finishing a PhD is a huge accomplishment that deserves recognition and celebration. You should be proud of yourself for all the hard work and contributions that you have made to your field of study. You should also reward yourself for reaching each milestone and completing each task. Moreover, you should take care of yourself physically, mentally, and emotionally. Finishing a PhD can be exhausting and stressful, so you need to find ways to relax and recharge your energy. You can do this by engaging in hobbies, activities, or hobbies that you enjoy, spending time with your friends and family, or seeking professional help if needed.
- Look for alternative career path or postdoc positions before submitting your thesis. It is advisable to start exploring your possibilities before you finish your thesis, so that you have more time and flexibility to make informed decisions. One way to do this is to conduct informational interviews with people who have followed different paths after their PhD. You can ask them about their experiences, challenges, and advice and learn more about the opportunities and expectations in various fields and sectors. You can also use online platforms such as LinkedIn, ResearchGate, or Twitter to network with potential employers, mentors, or collaborators. Another way to explore your options is to attend career fairs, workshops, or webinars that are relevant to your interests and skills. You can learn about the latest trends, developments, and demands in different industries and domains and get a sense of the skills and qualifications that are required or valued. You can also use these events to showcase your work, get feedback, and make connections.

## **Is there anything else you'd like to tell someone reading this interview?**

I would like to tell anyone reading this interview that pursuing an alternative career after a PhD is not a failure or a betrayal of your academic training. It is a valid and valuable choice that can open up many doors and possibilities for you. You have many skills and experiences that are transferable and applicable to different contexts and domains. You also have the curiosity, creativity, and resilience that are essential for any career path.

Don't be afraid to explore your options and interests and to seek out mentors, peers, and resources that can support you along the way. Don't be discouraged by the challenges or uncertainties that you may face, but see them as opportunities to learn and grow. And don't forget to celebrate your achievements and contributions, no matter how big or small they may seem.

You have a lot to offer to the world, and the world has a lot to offer to you. I wish you all the best in your journey!

**Thank you for sharing your journey with us, Chinmaya!**