

“A PhD Is a Substantial Training Opportunity, Not Just a Sprint to the Finish”



Katie Riddoch



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Abstract In our interview, Katie Riddoch shares their journey from their doctoral studies (exploring human-robot attachment) to a role as a User Experience Designer at an aerospace company. Realising in their second PhD year that they loved qualitative research and creativity, Katie explored user research roles through internships. Though not in her dream sector, Katie notes that her industry role allows her greater flexibility of working, improved financial stability, and greater potential for impact in the real world – all things they value highly. To those considering a role outside of academia, Katie encourages others to undertake informal interviews with people already working in the career, and trying out roles through internships. First and foremost however, they advise taking time to reflect on personal “must haves”, before leaping into a new role/sector.

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K. Riddoch (✉)

User Centered Designer, Human Factors Centre of Expertise, Preston, UK

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

Katie: Sure! My name is Katie Riddoch – a 29 year old living in Preston (North West England). I'm currently employed as a User-Centred Designer at a large aerospace company. In a nutshell, my role involves conducting research to understand the needs of product users – for example, interviewing pilots to determine what they need from a new cockpit display... or administering a survey to understand what finance managers need from a new website portal! After collecting and analysing the data, it's then my job to relay the results to the wider development team (e.g., software developers, business analysts, and the project manager) in an accessible and compelling way. From there, we all work together to develop an service or product (e.g. app, website, or dashboard) which meets the needs of the end users and the business.

The relationship with my employer feels mutually beneficial – they benefit from my enthusiasm and transferable PhD skills (research, communication, organisation, writing...), and I get to carry on learning – specifically, developing my design and business skills. That is one great thing about working for a large business; there is funding to support continued professional development such as training courses and professional accreditation. Don't get me wrong though – finding time for training and learning can be tough, as 'time is money' in the business world. I love working as part of an interdisciplinary team though, and learning from their different perspectives.

What was the focus of your PhD?

My PhD (Psychology with Social Robotics) focussed on exploring human-robot companionship – whether it's possible to get attached to a robot, whether that's something we want to encourage in the future, and the associated ethical

implications. Some of the work was done in a lab (e.g. experiments which attempted to measure and manipulate attachment and empathy for a robot), but when COVID hit, we* had to change tact. Specifically, we moved from lab-based experiments to online studies, and adapted the topic accordingly.

**As an aside – to this day, I instinctively still use “we” when referring to my PhD work. It was a habit built during the PhD, but I think it is lovely that the tendency remains – recognising the effort and support that my supervisor and collaborators offered during that time.*

My masters and doctoral studies were originally intended to take place at Bangor University (as part of a 1+3 Doctoral Studentship) however my lab moved to Glasgow (Scotland) at just prior to my PhD starting. In terms of the collaborators I met, and the training opportunities that opened up, I am grateful for my time at the University of Glasgow. I must admit though, I found the transition to a larger university and city difficult. The experience taught me a lot about myself though – first and foremost, that in the near future I don’t want to live in a built-up and hectic place!

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

During my PhD I realised that I loved speaking to people, being creative, and doing qualitative research. In Academia however, I didn’t have a huge amount of time to spend on those things. Instead, a lot of my time was spent trying to churn out publications – preparing manuscripts, responding to reviewer comments, etc.

I was lucky* that I realised my passions relatively early in the process – in the second year of the PhD – and I started googling “researcher” “qualitative” “design”. I came across the “User Researcher” “UX Researcher” and “UCD Design Roles” pretty quickly, and I realised that the salary was feasible. (Bonus!)

**I say I was lucky... but it was probably the result of a lot of self reflection – fuelled by worry about my future, and the impending feeling that I wasn’t doing what made me really happy.*

Rapidly, I started asking around local companies and colleagues if they needed “user research” help, and I racked up experience through paid internships. For me, it was important that I tried the role out before I went down the career route... and for the companies, it was relatively cheap labour. Win-win all round.

What kind of activities did you do in these early stages? How similar was it to what you were doing in your PhD?

During my internship, I was surprised to find how similar the work was to that of my PhD. I was planning research, doing interviews, gathering facts online, and reading around journals for information. There were major differences compared to my PhD work however – people didn't want lengthy reports about what I had found. Instead, they wanted to know the most important information only – and they wanted it in a quick and easy-to-digest way. In a way it was refreshing – to have people really listening to your insights – but on the other hand, it was sometimes difficult to capture the complexity of the topic in these very concise outputs! Another difference was that everything had to be real – considered carefully in the context of the real world. As a result, my internship work involved speaking to everyday people, opposed to reading the words of scientists. This was a very refreshing and interesting part of the experience – as you experience a wealth of personalities that you wouldn't be exposed to in a journal!

Was it hard to manage doing the internship at the same time as your PhD? Did you discuss this with your supervisor?

As my PhD was funded by a UK Research Council (ESRC), there were restrictions around the hours I could work outside of the PhD. As a result, when I wanted to do my internship, I had to run my internship ideas by my supervisor and my funding body. I was surprised to find that both were very supportive, and excited about the prospect of me undertaking an internship. My supervisor and funding body emphasised that a PhD is a substantial training opportunity, not just a sprint to the finish, and they were supportive throughout the paperwork process. Collectively, we decided that the best thing all round (for me, the company, and the PhD research) to pause the PhD for 3 months while I undertook a substantial full-time internship. So, in answer to your original question, it was very easy to manage the internship and PhD at the same time – because my PhD was “paused” at the time! With regard to finances, I was also really fortunate – my PhD funder and the company funded the internship, and my PhD extension was funded too. That is something I do miss about academia – the funding pots that you can apply for and the opportunities you can access as a result! (e.g. internships, lab visits, summer schools, training workshops...). I know peers also enjoyed similar opportunities, and found the experiences valuable (for their PhD, and their understanding of wider careers!).

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

With regard to my day-to-day User-Centred Design work, I’m juggling a few pieces of work. The first is to design some questionnaires, to assess user thoughts about a new product. The second is to elevate the design of a newsletter – because it’s a bit overcrowded at the moment (not great from an engagement or accessibility point of view!). The final piece of work is to assist with the design of a new website. As part of all these pieces of work, I’m speaking to people who will eventually use the products/resources. I’ll gather their thoughts (e.g. via interview online) and try to figure out what people need (opposed to want). In addition to speaking to end users, I also have lots of meetings with different members of staff (e.g. people who will build the website, people funding the website creation) to check if there are requirements/restrictions I need to be aware of. It’s not so simple as designing to suit user’s needs – you have to balance their needs with the technical restrictions and the business’ requirements.

As I have just started working for a large organisation, a lot of my time is also spent introducing myself to people within the company and speaking to people about the scope of my work (so they know what they can expect from me, and what is out of my remit!). These interactions tend to be through virtual meetings, as lots of people work from home over the summer holidays (so they can look after their kids). On the day to day, I’m also learning the company-specific etiquette – e.g. when to schedule meetings to improve engagement, what to wear in the office, the importance of small talk, etc.! I’m really keen to make a good first impression, and I think it’ll help to nail these little touches. Perhaps I’m overthinking it though! (Classic academic!)

What do you like most about your work?

There are a lot of things that I like about my role (e.g. independence of working, freedom to propose new ways of working, the opportunities to be creative...), but really, what I love are aspects of the work more broadly. Specifically, that it’s super flexible hours, the office is a tiny commute away, and that I can choose to work from home a few days a week. The cherry on top of the job is that my colleagues and manager are extremely supportive.

Those might seem like very dull reasons, but having flexible working, and kind colleagues, makes me happy!

And what do you like least about your work?

Ideally, I'd love to be using my skills to help causes closer to my heart (e.g. animal rights, climate change, healthcare), but I haven't found the right position for me in that sector. The good thing is, however, that I can satisfy that need in my spare time – by volunteering for a local homeless charity and organising vegan gatherings!

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

By really getting stuck into the PhD (picking my supervisor's brain, managing multiple responsibilities, assisting friends with their projects...), I gained so many transferable skills: how to manage my time, juggle multiple projects, and think critically, to name a few. Recently, my boss mentioned that they appreciate these skills, because they can trust me to work independently on a few things at once. They're definitely getting their money's worth out of me! Haha.

Also by throwing myself into networking opportunities (e.g. summer schools, conferences, and attending additional training), I developed the ability to hold my own in social settings. This skill really helped me during interviews (as I wasn't a complete anxious mess) and helps me to generally thrive in work. For example, as a user researcher I need participants to quickly open up and be honest... and that happens much faster now that I'm more socially comfortable. Don't get me wrong though, feeling comfortable in such artificial social settings wasn't a quick or easy process – during my PhD days I was incredibly nervous in the lead-up to networking events... to the point where I felt grey and sick. I had to literally drag myself to those events, give myself lots of breaks, and occasionally leave early (if the social battery had completely ran out). By pushing myself to dip in and out of networking though, it did get easier over time. So to those who are worried about the social side of moving into industry, I would say "sign up for the opportunity, try your best, and go for it!". You'll probably surprise yourself with how much you can achieve, and you might even meet an interesting or life-changing person along the way.

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

My advice to those considering a similar position would be (1) speak to people who have the position that you're considering and (2) enquire with your university and funder, as to whether you can take a break from the PhD to get some internship experience.

The former is incredibly important, as it can give you honest insights about what the job is like (opposed to the glamorised version on a job advert). Reaching out to people and asking questions is also something that you’d be doing a lot as a User Researcher/User-Centred Designer... so it’s good experience – to see if you are able to build rapport and ask the right questions.

The latter advice (undertaking an internship) is another way to gauge if the position seems a good fit for you. It may seem daunting, to pause the PhD, but it’s an amazing opportunity to learn about yourself and potentially gain contacts which lead to employment post-PhD. I was surprised how open and supportive my university and funders were, when I suggested I wanted to do an internship... although I appreciate that all universities, supervisors, and funders, are different!

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

On top of speaking to professionals and trying to get some experience, a good way to prepare yourself for a job is to consider learning some relevant skills in your spare time. There are a ton of free courses out there – so see what resonates with you! Within the user research/user-focussed design space, you could consider courses/YouTube tutorials in creative software (Adobe XD, Figma...), time management tools (Trello, Jira...), or Microsoft products (Excel, Teams...).

In the various positions I’ve been in, those tools have come in handy... and it impressed my interviewers that I had a genuine interest in learning and my development!

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?

In my current position, I’m not working on something that I DEEPLY care about... but it *is* work that I find very interesting. That was a conscious choice though, on my part – to sacrifice “the dream topic” for other elements which would make me happy.

I could probably find my burning passion somewhere else (academia or industry) but right now I love having job security, a short commute, a wonderful team, and flexibility of working. All those things (perhaps even more than working on my deep passion) are so good for mind, body, and relationships!

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?

I remember when I first started at the company I found myself on a project which was very challenging and frustrating at times. I felt trapped and worried I would be stuck on a piece of work that I didn't find interesting. However, upon speaking to my manager, I realised that I had more freedom than I thought. As I work for a large company, she explained, there is the opportunity to move around, explore new areas, and even try new roles.

Of course there are limits, as the business is within a specific sector and needs to make money; however, I was pleasantly surprised by the variety of aspects I could become involved in (accessibility, sustainability, ergonomics...). The perks of working for a large organisation, I suppose!

In some ways, I find my current role gives me more freedom than academia did. In academia I was funded to explore a certain topic (a "hot topics" at the time), and I had to spend a lot of time preparing publications. That pressure and restriction isn't present in my current role.

Have you thought about returning to academia?

In the first year after leaving, I thought about it quite a few times! Unsurprising really – as Academia was my comfort zone. It was a system that I knew extremely well and that I excelled in. However, when I sat down and really thought about it (with my logical hat on), I knew that I shouldn't go back. In its current state, academia can't offer me the job security and flexibility that I can get in my current role – both of which are important for my mental health.

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

My main piece of advice would be something that was said to me, as I was finishing my PhD. I was told that I should sit and write down a list of what I would love from a job... and what I really need.

Refreshingly, the person told me that it is okay to be selfish – prioritising what I need for me and my family (e.g. money, stability, flexibility). The advice closed with the comment that when looking for a job, there will be lots of possibilities...

but, to be satisfied, I should focus my attention on those which hit the priorities on my list.

This advice has served me well over the years, and I enjoy making my lists and re-prioritising as time goes by.

Is there anything else you’d like to tell someone reading this interview?

In the final year of my PhD, I pursued therapy and medication to support my mental health, and it was such a game changer. I could actually enjoy the experience of the PhD and had a wonderful examination experience.

My parting words would be – if you’re struggling with your mental health (as SO MANY academics do), please reach out to your GP or a charity like MindsMatter. In doing so, you may be able to massively reduce the suffering that you’re experiencing... and make the most of what is an incredible opportunity.

Thank you so much for your advice, Katie!