

“Looking Back Now, I Wish I’d Been More Honest with Myself at the Time and Looked at Alternative Careers”



Katharine Askew



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Abstract In this interview with Katie Askew, she shares her transition from academia to working as a research officer in a charity. She highlights the aspects of the academic environment that didn’t fit her professional aspirations and lifestyle, and the factors that led her to change her career trajectory. Katie’s insights offer a new perspective on how the skills gained during academic research can be leveraged in other sectors such as charity funder, and how these positions can provide a fulfilling and rewarding career path. Her advice for individuals contemplating their career paths post-PhD centres around being open to non-traditional academic roles and exploring broader initiatives, like DORA, or going beyond public engagement to patient and public involvement. Katie ends discussing the work-life balance she has achieved in her current role and being honest with yourself about what motivates you.

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

Katie: Sure! I'm a neuroimmunologist by training, which means I really like the brain and its specialised immune system. I'm currently working as a research officer for the UK Multiple Sclerosis (MS) Society. The bread-and-butter of my role is research grants management. I help to manage our active funding portfolio, monitoring the progress of research projects that we fund. I also help manage our response-mode funding opportunities, setting up grant rounds, helping researchers with pre-application enquiries, coordinating peer and lay review, organising panel meetings and then working on contracting and award documentation. Alongside this, I also lead on our Early Career Researcher Network, looking to provide additional support and opportunities for UK-based ECRs working in multiple sclerosis research, and our Open Access program, making sure our open access policy and procedures are in line with the international landscape. And if all that wasn't enough, I also support our Assistant Director of Research in running our Research Strategy Committee, who advise us on the development and implementation of our Research Strategy. I get to work with researchers, but also people affected by MS which is a real privilege. Every day is different and I absolutely love my job!

What was the focus of your PhD?

I started my PhD in 2015 at the School of Biological Sciences at the University of Southampton. I'd done some undergraduate summer research placements with my supervisor, who offered me the position once I'd finished my master's. My project was looking at how microglia, the brain's specialised immune cells, are maintained throughout our lives and as we age. For a long time, it was thought that these cells were replaced by other types of immune cell from outside the brain, but we found

that they ‘self-renew’ – when one microglial cell dies, another nearby would ‘proliferate’ creating two new cells. This happens at a reasonably steady rate from birth through to ageing. I used mouse models for most of this work, but we also confirmed a similar thing happening in human brain tissue which was really exciting! I submitted in November 2018 and moved straight up to Edinburgh to start my post-doctoral research.

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

I wasn’t really sure if I wanted to be in academia forever, but I figured that if I didn’t try at least one postdoc I’d always be wondering. I also had no idea what I would do if I didn’t stay in research! I think if I’d had a better idea of what other options were out there, I might not have done a postdoc, but it definitely helped me develop skills and knowledge I use regularly in my job now. Getting my postdoc position was somewhat serendipitous – I decided to look at jobs.ac.uk one evening to see what was out there and found the ‘perfect’ project. It was based in Edinburgh, where I’d always considered going for a postdoc, and looking at how microglia respond in a mouse model of vascular dementia. I applied and interviewed 6 months before I was due to submit my thesis and was lucky that they were willing to delay the start date for me!

How have your career plans changed as you’ve continued on to your current position?

Before I started this job, I had applied for a few different roles because I wasn’t sure what I wanted to do. One of the first roles I looked at was a Research Themes Project Manager at the UK Dementia Research Institute (UKDRI). I’d worked alongside researchers from the UKDRI at Edinburgh so I had relevant research expertise and knowledge of the organisation but I didn’t have the ‘research management’ experience the role required. So, I set about looking for roles where I could gain research management experience with the aim to go back to the UKDRI if other positions came up in future. I applied for and interviewed for a Research Grants Officer position at the Alzheimer’s Society which I was unsuccessful for. But the interviewing manager gave me some really helpful feedback about how to pitch myself and my expertise for next time. Luckily for me, the next time was a Research Officer at the MS Society and I’ve never looked back! My current career plan is to stay here for a while – I can’t speak highly enough of the MSS Research Team. My managers are so supportive and I’m looking to work my way up within the organisation. We had an internal position come up for a Research Programme Manager,

which would have been similar to the Research Themes Project Manager role at the UKDRI. But now that I've worked in research management for a few years, I've decided that working on the response-mode funding management, rather than managing large programme grants, is something I really enjoy. If I want to stay at the MS Society, that does mean waiting for my line manager to move on for a Research Manager position to come up, but I have enough variety and responsibility in my officer role that I don't mind that too much right now!

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

No two days are the same really! The one thing I will do every day is log on to Grant Tracker, our online grants management software. We use this for pretty much every aspect of managing our grants programme. We have an annual funding round cycle so that determines my business-as-usual work each day. Setting up new funding rounds takes a fair bit of time as we like to make sure we've tested all aspects of our application forms, review processes and panel meeting admin. When applications are open, we support prospective applicants with any queries – ranging from whether a project is eligible for a particular round to technical questions if Grant Tracker is playing up. We also support our funded researchers with any questions relating to active grants; these could be about grant finance, or scientific progress, or if a project needs an extension due to reasons outside the researcher's control. If we've just closed a funding round, the other Research Officer and I will read all the applications we've received to make sure they fit the remit of the funding round. We'll then send these out for peer review, by other researchers and clinicians, and lay review, by people affected by MS from our research network. Finding peer reviewers and monitoring reviews is usually a daily activity for a few months and takes up quite a lot of time! Around these, I organise and administer meetings for various committees and panels – our research funding panels meet four times a year once the review period for each round is over and our Research Strategy Committee meet three times a year, so we have at least one 'big' meeting every couple of months. Organising these involves coordinating our panel members – checking availability, making sure everyone has access to relevant documents – and other members of the research team, collating slide decks and written papers, testing any online tools we'll be using for meetings (I consider myself a Zoom Pro these days) and hoping there aren't any last-minute changes! Outside of this, I may also be working on some career development activities for our ECR Network or collating data about our active grants portfolio, like how many papers have been published by our funded researchers. There's a fair bit of tea-drinking sprinkled about in there too!

What do you like most about your work?

I really thrive on routine so I like knowing what my next few months are going to look like and having broad outlines of what needs to be done and when. But I also really enjoy that if I’m not enjoying working on a certain thing at a certain time, I can pick something else from my to-do list and get stuck into that instead. I tend to plan out my week but shuffle around what I’m doing when depending on how I’m feeling. I work much more effectively that way, rather than forcing myself to work on something if my brain just isn’t in it! There’s also a lot of autonomy, I’m trusted to get on with what I need to do and report back when it’s done or if I have questions. I also work with a great team of people who bring so much joy to every day!

And what do you like least about your work?

I think I say ‘I love my job’ at least once a week so this is a hard one! The thing I miss most about being in the lab is that I didn’t spend a lot of time at my desk. I was usually running round doing various experiments. I still have the variety of things I can dip in and out of, but working a purely desk-based job isn’t something I saw myself doing. That being said, I’ve got myself a standing desk so I try not to spend all day sitting. Working from home full-time also means I can move around the house if I get bored in my office and I can take the dog out for 2–3 walks a day which we both love!

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

I definitely don’t think you *need* a PhD to do my job. The main thing I think that’s helped is being able to spin many, many plates and meet competing deadlines. I like to say I have a ‘limitless capacity to say yes’, because my workload never feels as high as it was during my PhD and postdoc. But there’s always lots going on! On a more practical level, having an understanding of the research funding process and demands of a research career comes in really useful when working with researchers. My neuroimmunology expertise and lab experience also come in handy when reading funding applications or progress reports. I have more of a grasp of whether things may be feasible or if they’re on the right track. But I think if you have relevant research experience (not necessarily lab-based!), even if that’s not a PhD, that would be helpful.

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

The thing I always enjoyed the most about my research was planning all my experiments and reading cool science. I just didn't really want to be **DOING** the cool science. I've really struggled answering this one without making it sound really dull! If you enjoy the 'admin' part of your PhD and need a varied working environment where you can still be in touch with research, then research management is definitely worth considering. I wasn't sure if I was a good fit when I started the role, but even if a Research Officer/Grants Officer position isn't right, there are loads of other charity sector roles that might be!

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

If you're able to work with a funder as part of your research, you'll be able to gain some insight into what we do 'behind the scenes'. This could be by sitting on or observing a governance panel (e.g. funding panel) or taking part in a steering group for one of their initiatives. Having an awareness of some of the 'big picture' initiatives in the sector also helps, for example DORA or Plan S. Your role may not require an in-depth understanding of these but most funders will consider how research outputs are assessed or have an open access statement or policy. If you're looking to apply to a charity funder, I'd say the most important thing is to get involved with the community the funder is supporting; for us, working *with* the MS community is critical in our research program and we ask all our researchers to involve people affected by MS in all aspects of their research. If you can start working with the relevant community, going beyond public engagement to patient and public involvement (PPI), you'll have a really good basis to bring into a research management position.

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 think yes, particularly working in the charity sector. There are similar roles in most charities that fund medical research, so you don't necessarily need to apply for roles where you have research expertise in that condition. The skills you use will be transferable across different charities; it might just be that you need to do some

background reading when you start to make sure you're developing that subject matter knowledge. In my case, multiple sclerosis isn't something that I'm affected by personally, but my neuroimmunology expertise was relevant. But now I've worked with many people affected by MS and that more than anything has given me the drive to keep doing what I'm doing. I actually feel like I'm making more of a difference now than I ever did in the lab. Something that I have always been fiercely passionate about is research culture. There were lots of things that didn't sit well with me when I was a postdoc, and here I feel like I'm slowly chipping away at 'the system' from the inside. Part of that is through leading on our Early Career Researcher Network and working with ECRs to make sure we're offering relevant funding, training and support where we can. Change is happening, but I think it's slower than anyone would like. But I'd say if you're looking for something outside academia where you can make a change for people who still want to stay in research, research management is a great place to start.

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?

It's definitely a different working environment; we have to work within the MS Society's Organisation and Research Strategies to achieve our goals for people affected by MS. But that doesn't mean there's no scope to do anything new or different. You just need to be able to justify it within those strategies. For example, the ECR Network fits into our Research Strategy as capacity building, but I've been given pretty much free reign to co-develop training and resources with our Steering Group. If anyone in the team has an idea that may be able to improve things for our researchers or the MS community, we work as a team to see how we could fit it into our workload. There's an annual business planning process the organisation goes through where we can try and pursue new things. There is less freedom, but there is flexibility.

Have you thought about returning to academia?

In all honesty, I've not looked back once. Part of that is that I'm now on a permanent contract, and it's taken me a while to stop living like I'm going to have to look for a new job in a year's time. I think the biggest difference for me is that I can switch off when I leave my desk, even if it's at home. I have a work-life balance that just didn't seem possible for me in academia. The 'for me' is really important; others may well be able to have that work-life balance, but I was very much the 'research is

all-consuming' type. I'm in a much better place mental health-wise now, and being able to say that whilst doing a job I really love is great. Working from home full-time has also meant that I could get a dog, and he's the best office buddy.

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

I think my biggest piece of advice is not to feel bad if academia isn't for you. I was terrified to tell my PI that I didn't want to stay in research because it felt like the 'done thing to do' – PhD, postdoc, fellowship, etc. I did my postdoc because I wanted to see if academia was still for me, and if I'm honest, I was scared about what life outside of that sphere was like. Looking back now, I wish I'd been more honest with myself at the time and looked at alternative careers. It's not for everyone, and that's okay!

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

If you're not sure whether something would be the right fit for you, reach out and talk to people from the company/organisation – in similar and in different roles! I've found that people are generally really keen to share their experiences. It's also helpful to have that 'insider information' when you come to applying – if you can show a good understanding of the organisation AND a passion for what they're trying to achieve, it goes down really well. You can find me on Twitter (@KatharineAskew) if you'd like to chat more about research management and/or you'd like to see pictures of my dog.

Thank you for sharing your journey with us, Katie!