

“The Idea of a More Immediate Impact of My Work Was Very Appealing”



Sebastian Similä



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Abstract In our interview with Sebastian Similä, he shares his career journey from his doctorate studies in psychology to his work in product management. He now works at a company in the area of anti-money laundering and counter-terrorism financing. Seb reflects on the realization during his PhD that he didn’t want to commit to an academic career indefinitely. Instead, he was drawn to a field where he could have an immediate impact and harness the skills he had developed during his studies. The transition was challenging but rewarding, leading him first into user experience and later into product management. He highlights that there are more career paths available than one might initially perceive, encouraging those in academia to explore alternatives that align with their passions and skills.

Contents

Chris: Can you introduce yourself and tell me a bit about your current position?.....	194
What was the focus of your PhD?.....	194
As you were finishing your PhD, what were you thinking about your career plans?.....	195
How did you find these initial roles? Did you do them at the same time as finishing your PhD, or after you had submitted?.....	195
Was it hard to manage doing these positions at the same time as your PhD?	
Did you discuss this with your supervisor?.....	195
How have your career plans changed as you’ve continued on to your current position?.....	196
Can you tell us a bit about what day-to-day life is like in your current position?.....	196

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What do you like most about your work?.....	197
And what do you like least about your work?.....	197
How do you think having a PhD has helped you succeed in your current position?.....	197
Were there some benefits to doing a PhD that you still think were useful, even if they were not directly relevant to your current position?.....	198
If someone currently finishing their PhD was considering a position similar to yours, how might they decide if it would be a good fit?.....	198
If someone was interested in pursuing a similar career path, what would you suggest they do to better prepare themselves?.....	198
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?.....	199
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?.....	199
Have you thought about returning to academia?.....	199
Based on your journey, what advice or suggestions do you want to pass on to someone who's currently finishing their PhD?.....	200
Is there anything else you'd like to tell someone reading this interview?.....	200

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

Seb: I am Seb (or Sebastian). I am half-Finnish and half-Peruvian, and although I currently live in Berlin, I've spent most of my life in Rome and Edinburgh. I work as a product manager at Klarna in the area of anti-money laundering and counter-terrorism financing, and more specifically in their sanctions screening. Eight years in, this is now my third role as a product manager.

What was the focus of your PhD?

I have a PhD in psychology, and I investigated how movement planning influences the allocation of attention. This involved carrying out a series of movement – and eye-tracking experiments. There is a close relationship between saccades (i.e. an eye movement) and attention. One example of this is how covert attention has been shown to be increased at the target location of an upcoming saccade, and this is believed to be necessary for accurate planning of the motor execution of said saccade. Manual movements have also been shown to be influenced by attention, and I was investigating how changing the predictability of the upcoming manual movement influenced attentional allocation, as well as whether this could result in parallel splits of attention. This was between 2011 and 2015 at the University of Edinburgh.

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

I realised that although I had enjoyed the PhD, I didn't feel like I loved the idea of staying in academia forever. When you combine that with the challenging job market for academics, I thought it would be a good idea to change track and see if I would find something that I may enjoy (even) more while leveraging my existing skills. I did feel some sense of guilt about that, especially as it felt that no one else was considering and talking about options beyond postdocs. However in the end I thought that statistically speaking there aren't enough positions in academia for everyone, so some proportion of people clearly must be leaving it.

Having spoken with some friends outside academia, some people suggested that perhaps I might be interested in working in the world of user experience (UX), which seemed both interesting and something where I could leverage my own experience. The idea of a more immediate impact of my work was also very appealing. In the last year of my PhD I decided to explore this opportunity by doing some tangential roles, first as an online resource intern at the university and then as a part-time tester at a software company. These were both great experiences to start seeing how the process of building products works.

How did you find these initial roles? Did you do them at the same time as finishing your PhD, or after you had submitted?

I did both of these roles in the final year of my PhD, when I was essentially writing everything up. The first position I found through the university, as they had a program for PhD students to trial other things. The latter I found through a university friend who was working at the company at the time.

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

It wasn't easy, and especially in the latter half of the year it meant working most weekends on writing up. I don't recall if I talked about it with him beforehand, though it would have come up. I didn't ask him for permission. I did not have funding for my last year of PhD, so if I hadn't done these activities, then I probably would have had to find something else.

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

I ended up in my current role a bit by accident. My original plan was to go into UX. I was still a tester at the software company, and when I brought up the subject again to my boss, he asked if I was interested instead in a job as a product manager. I didn't really know what that was at the time, but it sounded interesting, so I went for it! That's definitely a potential advantage of working in a smaller company, which is that you get to try different things.

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

It varies a bit from company to company, but the main focus is always to help prioritise the different potential work of the team. You do this by receiving information from lots of different sources and/or stakeholders, keeping the work in line with your long-term objectives and strategy, collecting the different requirements, and talking to customers and end-users. Sometimes this will also entail coming up with potential wireframes and designs. Communicating the work your team is doing also is important, especially in larger companies. As one can imagine, there is a lot of variety in the work.

A typical day will start with a standup with the engineers in the team, where everyone updates the rest of the team about what they are working on, and I will often have similar meetings also with people in other teams so that I can have a more complete picture. I will often have to deal with feature requests and questions from people from other teams (such as clarifying the existing functionality), and I will strive to be in regular contact with our different users and customers and see how they are using our product. I will use the information I gather to define the different problems our product should be solving and set up the requirements of the use case. The engineers and designers in the team will tend to own the solution, as they will also be the ones that build it, but my job is to try to make sure that we are building something that is worth building, and in an appropriate order.

Let's take an example, and assume that there is a requirement to send alerts when documents are uploaded into a shared online workspace. This seems initially like a simple request, but you have to understand the context in which these notifications would be used to know how to best craft them. Are people typically uploading individual documents at a time, or several? In the former use case, you might want to send an email after each document gets uploaded, but otherwise you do not want to flood a person's inbox with an avalanche of emails. Furthermore different potential aspects of the feature will provide different amounts of value. The basic need is to send an email alert when new documents have been added. But there is more. You may want to say how many were added, what they are called and perhaps add a link,

either to the folder or individual documents themselves. There may also be some other constraints. Perhaps the documents are sensitive in nature and you therefore do not want to include too much information in the emails themselves. Additionally, not everyone will want to receive email notifications for this, or maybe just sporadically. Others may not want to receive emails at all, and rather be notified in Slack.

As a product manager your job is to help the team navigate through these different options, armed with knowledge of the issue and the user. Of course there is more to the role than that, such as aligning the customer needs with the potential business impact and your product strategy, but understanding the user problems is really at the core of everything.

What do you like most about your work?

It is hard to pick one thing, so I will go with my top two. The first is the potential impact. It is very rewarding to see the impact that building and improving a product has on the everyday life of the people using our product. The second is that it is a great way to learn about different domains in the world. For instance, at the moment I am learning about the world of sanction screening for my work, and though it may appear dry on the surface, there is a lot to uncover there! It's a great job for someone who is curious.

And what do you like least about your work?

There usually is more to do than can be done at one point in time, which is why prioritising is such an important part of the job. This means that some things will have to wait more than others, and this means you always have some disappointed (and sometimes even irate) stakeholders.

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

I don't work in my field of study, but it is easy to take all the skills and knowledge you acquire for granted. The most concrete thing is that it has trained me to think how different systems fit together, and the consequences that may ensue. This is useful for better understanding the architecture of a product I am working on and what effect different improvements would have on this. Furthermore, the PhD provided me with ample chances to hone my writing skills, and clarity is very important in my line of work. The tutoring I did alongside my PhD has also been very

helpful, as it has improved the feedback I give others, and I often still need to be able to present complex topics in an accessible way.

Were there some benefits to doing a PhD that you still think were useful, even if they were not directly relevant to your current position?

Doing a PhD is such an all-encompassing experience that it is hard to untangle some of the benefits as you take the things you learn for granted. As I mentioned above, you end up acquiring a lot of transferable skills. If that wasn't enough, your field of study is also going to have an impact on the way you see the world and tackle your work. In my case, my background in experimental psychology has helped me form mental models on how the products that I work on are put together, which in turn helps in debugging issues as well as learning how they work. Learning about cognitive biases has also been very useful, and the general awareness of human fallibility has ironically helped me cut people some slack and be more understanding towards some slip ups.

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

I found listening to podcasts and reading books on the subject a good start, as it allowed me to see if it appeared interesting. I also talked with people in the industry, some of which worked at the university, who recommended other resources I could use. Then the internship and part-time job seemed like a good way of experimenting further without having to make long-term commitments.

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

Find out about the potential role in different ways, and if possible find different ways of trying it beforehand and getting exposed to it. I used a lot of books and podcasts to learn about the domain, even if only to get familiar with the terminology. There are a lot of resources out there, and as far as free resources go, there is a podcast for everything these days. Also, start exposing yourself to your domain of interest early, so you can still pivot to a different path if you find out you want to instead try something else.

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?

That’s absolutely possible. I am lucky that I have discovered what I really care about, working on products that solve a user problem and that work well. Of course if the product is one that makes the world a better place, then all the better. At the moment I am working in the domain of sanctions and anti-money laundering controls. I would be lying if I said that it was a topic that I had always been really passionate about, but I am discovering that it is a rich and deep area, with a lot of interesting challenges, and a good way of improving my skills and experience further.

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?

This will depend on where you work, but so far I have been lucky in having relatively high levels of flexibility. One can work from home; no one is checking your hours and so on. However I can’t pick things exclusively because they are interesting, and that is a driver that I sometimes miss. Also working with more people will definitely curtail your freedom more than being an individual researcher. You will need to be available to your team and beyond. My calendar certainly has filled up a lot since I first entered the field. I have started to have to put focus time on there to make sure I keep some time just for me.

That being said, I am also in a role where I can influence what the thing being worked on should be, and the work environment is also very flexible. I now need to work on the problems that will provide the most value to the user, and for me that is a more rewarding incentive. Also I think the freedom you get in academia is somewhat oversold. Yes, you have freedom and flexibility, provided that you are happy to work all the time. Also the more you climb the ranks, the more non-research responsibilities end up on your lap. When I left academia, I actually felt that I got my weekends back!

Have you thought about returning to academia?

Yes, and that is probably something that everyone who leaves it considers from time to time. There are aspects of it that I miss, especially when I read the odd popular science book or watch an interesting documentary. Still, I don’t regret my choice,

and I imagine if I ever returned, it would be within something to do in my professional competence. Some business schools, for instance, have started offering modules in product management.

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

Whether you stay in academia or not, you have more options available than you may think. However, don't feel that you have to stay in academia if you aren't convinced, and it is not a failure to decide to change things. I also know several people from my PhD cohort who ended up leaving academia, even after a postdoc or two.

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

When it comes to your career, there aren't right or wrong choices, and you can also decide to try something else later on if you want. If you decide to switch away, your initial salary may also not start as the highest, but getting the initial experience will stand you in good stead, and your salary can increase significantly within a few years. Those first experiences are a gateway to a new world that will allow you to explore what your options are. Whether you stay in academia or not, the most important thing is to be aware that the choice is there.

Thank you for your advice, Seb!