

“Find Something That Is Worthwhile to You”



Veronika Vilgis



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Abstract In our interview with Veronika Vilgis, she tells us about her transition from clinical neuroscience PhD to Head of Insights at Dataprovider.com, a tech company. Veronika initially wanted to stay in academia but later sought out other career paths due to dissatisfaction with the academic system. Here she discusses her journey of career exploration, voluntary work, practicing yoga, and ultimately leaving academia. Veronika emphasizes the need for self-knowledge, the importance of maintaining connections, and the freedom that can come with working outside of academia. Finally, she reassures those considering leaving academia not to feel stigmatized or shamed, as changing priorities and desires are a part of life’s growth.

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

Veronika: I am currently Head of Insights at a company called Dataprovider.com. The company indexes nearly every single website on the internet and then organizes the data collected from and about the website into a structured database. My work is part data analytics, part data storytelling and data quality checking. Additionally, I spend considerable time liaising between different teams. With skills and knowledge about data, writing and programming I am uniquely suited to communicate and coordinate their activities. I have also taken over responsibility for the content of the company’s blog where we give examples of how the data can be used for different purposes. As we serve a lot of different industries, it can sometimes be hard to understand exactly what type of insights you can gain from web data. The blog provides a range of different analytical approaches to answer questions around web security, technology innovation, investment opportunities and also socio-political happenings.

What was the focus of your PhD?

I completed my PhD in 2015 at the University of Melbourne, Australia. For my thesis I looked at attention difficulties in children with ADHD and children with chronic depression and whether underlying brain function, measured by fMRI, is disorder-specific or comparable across the two. The results suggested that attention difficulties in depression mostly are associated with distraction from internal thoughts while in ADHD the distraction is commonly externally driven by environmental stimuli. This pattern was supported by differing neural mechanisms. As part of my PhD I was responsible for all parts of the research project, including the recruitment of participants, data collection (behavioural and MRI), data pre-processing, statistical analysis and write-up.

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

I knew I wanted to stay in academia, eventually becoming a professor and leading my own research group, so I actively sought out postdoc opportunities. Towards the end of my PhD I visited several labs and presented my research. One group was very enthusiastic and it was a great fit, but they weren't sure if they would have sufficient funding. They asked me to stay in touch. Initially it looked very promising, but when I finally handed in my thesis 6 months later, the postdoc I had hoped for fell through. What followed were several months of applying to advertised postdoc positions and reaching out to research groups all over the world. I had many interviews and very diverse interview experiences – from very casual to very structured. In the end I made it into the final rounds with two US-based research groups and I decided on a position at the UC Davis Center for Mind and Brain.

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

Towards the end of my PhD and increasingly throughout my postdoc, I grew more and more dissatisfied with the academic system and how science was conducted. On top of that I also never really felt good about my own research; it often did not live up to my own standards. Additionally, I did not enjoy the day-to-day work of my postdoc; most of my time was just data analysis, often spending hours trying to find solutions to coding problems. Increasingly it affected my mental health, so in the end I decided to explore alternative career paths.

How did you go about exploring different career paths?

My first point of call was the university's career service. They had a program for people to transition into industry and several advisors who specifically worked with postdocs to help with alternative career exploration. I had several one-on-one consultations and participated in a few group workshops. I really had no idea what I wanted to do instead and I came up with the most obscure jobs and career paths that I thought would spark my interest. Quite a few of the things I came up with had little to do with my background in psychology, neuroscience and research.

One day I discovered a company called IDEO, a global design and consultancy firm that specializes in design thinking, a concept I wasn't familiar with then but found fascinating. That was the first time that I genuinely got excited about an alternative career. When I mentioned that to my contact at the Careers Service she reached out to someone at IDEO asking for an informational interview. A month

later I had coffee with an employee at the IDEO office in San Francisco. Even though they didn't offer me a job, I ended up volunteering as a reviewer and mentor for the OpenIDEO platform. I think, from there things went into a more positive direction. I saw that I had knowledge and skills that are valuable beyond academia and new opportunities to apply them. Around the same time I started practicing yoga intensely; it was a way to deal with the stress of the postdoc and to look after myself. I enjoyed it so much that I signed up for yoga teacher training. Even though I had no intention of becoming a full-time yoga teacher, acquiring these extra skills provided additional security to leave the academic path. This whole process took well over a year from reaching out to the career service to finally deciding to leave my postdoc.

When I informed my PI that I would be leaving the postdoc at the end of the year, I had no other job lined up. My plan was to go to Costa Rica for a few months, learning to surf and teach yoga on the side, then return to Europe and find a more permanent job. That was the plan and then life threw a curve ball and I ended up in Chile for a three-month data-science project for the United Nations and 3 months turned into 3 years.

In yoga we talk about letting go and trusting the universe. Until I left the postdoc I always had a plan, a goal, it didn't always work out exactly the way I hoped (see the postdoc application) but I was always pursuing something. Then, I finally let go for the first time and the opportunity to work for the UN presented itself. It's weird, but it really made me question what would have happened if I had let go earlier or more often in life.

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

I currently work for a tech company that sells data. I am bridging the work between the data analytics team and the marketing team, ensuring that any data and statistics we publish is correct and adheres to quality standards. This work also includes coming up with research questions and ideas on how our data – in this case, web data – can be used for different purposes and to gain insights into different industries. With this kind of data you can answer questions about cybersecurity, technological advancement and social or economic happenings on the web. As part of my work I often run analyses and then write about it for our blog or for industry reports. Other aspects include monitoring data quality and contributing to content planning. Any 1 day can be quite diverse, as I often am included in other aspects such as customer support, preparing other content, e.g. videos or webinars, creating data visualizations or discussing product developments with the data science and backend operations team.

What do you like most about your work?

I like the diverse tasks I am presented with on a daily basis and I love that I have quite a lot of freedom to decide what I want to work on. Often results can be seen quickly. I also appreciate working in a team where everyone has a different kind of skill set and works together on the same goal. As I have never worked for industry, I enjoy being exposed to different ways of working and to new concepts. Learning something new always keeps me motivated.

And what do you like least about your work?

I can't say that there is one thing that I really dislike. However, I sometimes miss more meaning behind my work, up until I had this job I worked for universities or not-for-profit organizations and there I find it easier to see the meaning or a higher purpose behind the work. The overall goal was always to contribute to improving someone's life or make positive change in society. That is a lot harder to see in a for-profit tech company.

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

It's hard to pinpoint the specifics, the most obvious for me and my current role is working with data. By that I don't only mean processing data but also understanding what you can and can't do with the data, how to extract meaning from numbers and draw the right conclusions. When you work in science, you take these skills for granted but you'd be surprised how many people find it really hard to calculate even basic statistics and then put those into context. On a more abstract level, I think the PhD has taught me to work independently, organized and efficiently.

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

As my path isn't exactly linear, it's hard to imagine someone actively envisioning a similar career. What I would say, though, is that even as you start your PhD you should prepare for a Plan B. Chances are you may change your mind about staying in academia and then it is good to already know your options and have contacts that you can reach out to when you eventually look for work outside of academia. So my advice is to keep your eyes and ears open for alternative careers. Many of the

graduate students and postdocs that you'll meet will leave academia, pay attention to what jobs they get and stay connected. It also helps if you engage in some form with activities that are not academic, such as volunteering, internships or writing. For me yoga turned into something more, for another postdoc I knew at the time, it was improv. So, it can also be a hobby that you take further. If you have some experience outside of the academy, this will not only improve your chances with any future employer but also help you gain confidence and see the value of your skills beyond academia.

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?

It is not true in my case, but I made a conscious decision to accept this position because it fulfilled a lot of other requirements that are important to me right now. Additionally, I have enough time and space to integrate topics I really care about in other parts of my life, outside of my work. Sometimes I do miss working on a topic I really care about, but I also see the benefits of not getting too caught up in my work. I now leave work at the end of the day and I can let it be until I am back at the computer the next day. In academia, I often cared too much and the work never left me, invading my free time and preventing me from enjoying my weekends and sometimes holidays. So caring a lot about your work can be rewarding but can also be a burden.

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 personally feel I have a lot of freedom in how I structure my work as well as what topics I can focus on. Of course, there are certain limitations but in retrospect I feel freer outside of academia than inside. There is also a certain type of freedom, at least in industry, that comes with easier access to financial means. Let's say you have a great idea for a project but perhaps you need an expensive piece of equipment or software. If your idea is supported, you could have that equipment in just a few days and get started on realizing that idea immediately. In academia you'd probably have to write a grant first and it could be months or years before you can even start. In both cases you will need to convince other people that it is indeed an idea worth testing but in industry it could just be one person and a 5-minute conversation rather than pages of grant proposals and several rounds of reviewer comments.

Have you thought about returning to academia?

Yes. I have even applied to a few positions 2 years after I left. I still think about it sometimes although I am aware that too much time has passed now and realistically I don't think it is possible. Having said that, I am convinced that overall I am happier outside of academia. But you never know what life has planned for you. I wouldn't exclude the possibility of returning someday but it might be a different field than psychology or neuroscience.

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

First of all, finish it. I knew several people who were ready to leave during their last year, but you have come so far, so let go of perfectionism and just get it done. Then take time to celebrate your achievement.

The second piece of advice is to really get to know yourself. What exactly is it that you like about academia and the research you do? If you really love working with the data and running experiments but you dislike writing, or the idea of teaching or mentoring isn't exciting to you, then industry is a better option in the long term. If you stay in academia, you will eventually have to do much more of the writing, admin work and teaching than the other parts. On the other hand, if you are someone who doesn't necessarily like the bench work but you like writing grants, teaching and mentoring, then start applying for tenure-track positions as soon as possible, even if you are not ready. Preparing the application documents takes time and they will get better each time, so doing it as early as possible will mean you are ready and prepared for when you want to move on.

The last advice I would like to give has to do with the stigma and shame that comes with leaving academia. Sometimes people experience a lingering feeling that they might not have been good enough or that they have not tried hard enough. First, acknowledge these feelings but realize that it is a story that you are telling yourself and you can change that. Life changes you and your priorities naturally evolve as you get older. If a person valued the exact same things at age 40 as they did at age 20, it probably indicates limited personal growth. It is perfectly reasonable to pursue different goals like a better salary, work-life balance, or more stability as you grow older, signifying a shift in your interests and priorities with more life experiences. At the end of the day, you have to make yourself happy, so find something that is worthwhile to you, and if it isn't, then go and find it somewhere else whether that is inside or outside of academia.

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

There are always more options than you think there are and life will turn out to be different than you expect it, but that is the beauty of it. Embrace it and enjoy the journey.

Thanks so much for sharing your experiences with us, Veronika!