

“People Are More Often Willing to Connect and Have a Conversation Than You Might Think”



Yashoda Gopi



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Abstract In our interview with Yashoda Gopi, she shares her journey from a PhD focused on memory rehabilitation after stroke to a lead research consultant at an executive search firm. Initially open-minded about career paths, through a process of elimination Yashoda realised academia was not the right fit long term. She advises starting the career exploration process early, attending relevant seminars, and connecting with people on LinkedIn. Yashoda values the variety of tasks and sectors she works with, though she notes the faster pace compared to academia. She continues to apply research skills like presenting information, taking feedback, and designing processes. Yashoda sees direct impact through placements, while staying connected to topics like education technology.

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

Yashoda: My background is in academia, having completed a BA in neuroscience, and a master's in cognitive psychology, I recently completed my PhD in psychology at the University of Nottingham which was focused on memory rehabilitation after stroke. During my PhD, I realised that although I enjoyed all of my academic pursuits, I was ready to move into a different field to take on new challenges.

I am now a lead research consultant at the Spencer Group, an executive search organisation focused on two sectors, clinical technology (e.g., software that is essential in conducting clinical trials) and commercial education (e.g., edtech and pathway programmes), and I am currently looking at branching out into innovation in higher education (e.g., emerging tech in higher education). My role at the Spencer Group involves market intel research, scoping and engaging with potential candidates, and working closely with clients to understand their organisation values, interests, and needs to find the right candidates. I have also recently been involved in various initiatives within the organisation, such as sourcing and evaluating software that can improve team efficiency, developing a process for business development lead generation, and implementing a related company-wide incentive programme. My position involves a different approach to research compared to academia but I find it quite challenging and exciting because my day-to-day work is constantly changing and I get to take on various responsibilities within the organisation.

What was the focus of your PhD?

I started my PhD in 2018 at the University of Nottingham School of Psychology. The focus of my PhD was memory rehabilitation after stroke. The interest in this topic came from my master's where I examined language comprehension rehabilitation using non-invasive brain stimulation with stroke patients combined with an

interest in memory from working at an assisted living facility with Alzheimer’s patients. From this, I became interested in finding out what happens with memory after stroke and how we can improve the daily lives of stroke patients and perhaps alleviate some of the memory problems.

My PhD then evolved into three strands of research, the first was subjective memory evaluation, where I examined three types of metamemory questionnaires through a literature review. The second strand was memory rehabilitation, where I conducted a literature review of memory rehabilitation strategies and also examined practices of assessment to treatment of memory after stroke in current clinical practice from the perspective of healthcare professionals through an online survey. Finally, the third strand involved examining mnemonic strategies that can be used in daily life, where I explored face-name mnemonic strategies across several experiments with adults.

As I started in 2018, the COVID pandemic occurred in the second year of my PhD and there was a major shift to online working. This meant I had to stop in-person data collection and refocus some aspects of my PhD; for example, the stroke survey was initially intended to be in-person focus groups with healthcare professionals. Additionally, several experiments had to be reconfigured to be conducted online. This required a lot of considerations to shift the research online and finish the PhD as close to the original timeframe as possible. Along with my supervisor, Chris, and a colleague in the same lab, we shared some benefits and challenges to pivoting to online research in a Sage Research Methods Case Study. While writing this case study and in discussions with my supervisor and colleague, I started to consider how the skills I developed during the PhD could be applicable outside of academia.

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

When I started the PhD, I did not have concrete intention about either continuing in academia or not; but towards the end of my second year, I realised I was happy with the work I had done in academia and was ready to move on to a different challenge. However I was unsure about where I would go next in terms of sectors and career path, so I was quite open to various opportunities. This also involved a process of elimination where I ruled out the potential career paths that were not of interest. At times this meant that while there seemed to be a wide range of opportunities available, they were not the right ones. This led to discussions with career advisors at the university as well as my supervisor regarding potential opportunities and sectors to explore. Additionally, Chris shared several of the interviews with our lab group from the first book in this series, *Academia and the World Beyond: Navigating Life after a PhD*, which helped me to see that there isn’t a singular path after academia and starting from ‘scratch’ in a new field isn’t as daunting as it may seem when

trying to determine where you fit. This further led me to applying to a wide range of opportunities, including administrative, project management, and research-based opportunities across different sectors. Ultimately I ended up finding an organisation that was at the intersection of all three sectors, where I still felt engaged with topics of interest to me and also had the opportunity to develop research skills in a different capacity.

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

My career plans are still relatively flexible, and while I am happy with my position at the moment, I don't feel the need to restrict my options. There are two reasons behind this, the first being that working in recruitment has allowed me to see the career trajectory of hundreds of potential candidates that have pivoted across different sectors and positions to find the right place for them. Additionally, hearing from clients who are in executive level positions about their own changes in their career plans and trajectory has allowed me to see that there are always options available. The second reason is that I have been offered various opportunities for development and progression at my current organisation. I have been able to get involved in projects that are not directly related to my research work and I am regularly given the time and resources to pursue side projects that can allow for the development of different skills and potentially a change in position. For these reasons I prefer to keep my options open and continue exploring what might be the right fit for me.

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

My day-to-day life in my current position can vary from scoping and evaluating candidate profiles to market research across various sectors to presenting research progress and outcomes to clients. I wouldn't say there is a 'typical' day in my position as 1 day might involve multiple meetings to discuss current assignments whereas another might involve several hours of searching for potential candidates.

As part of my responsibilities as a lead researcher, I can be involved in briefing other researchers on the assignment and delegating tasks to achieve weekly goals. As a researcher, my responsibilities include meeting with clients to get a scope of the candidate profiles they are interested in, finding relevant organisations from which we might find the right individuals, scoping and reviewing potential candidates, engagement with candidates to schedule interviews with my colleagues as well as with the clients, and presenting the progress of research to clients in update meetings. More recently, I have also taken on responsibilities to design and implement new processes regarding business development lead generation which can

involve examining news and social media sites to gather information about current or potential clients and setting up pipelines to evaluate potential leads.

What do you like most about your work?

I enjoy the range of tasks that I can be involved in on a daily basis and being able to have insight into sectors that are of interest to me. On a daily basis I might be required to switch between three to four different projects and assignments which can involve various meetings with colleagues or clients as well as dedicated time for research. I find this type of task switching very engaging and it allows me to stay on top of the projects that I am involved in. I am also able to spend time finding out about very interesting individuals and companies that are crucial to clinical trials, education technology and higher education. Given my background, I find this very interesting because I feel connected to these sectors as I can follow along with the latest market trends and news.

I really also enjoy working with my team. As the company is small and we work remotely, communication is crucial, so we are in contact across group chats and with regular meetings. In doing so, I've found my colleagues to be very supportive regarding training, sector knowledge, and even future career possibilities. Although I'm presented with new opportunities at the company which can at times be daunting, I do not feel that I am left to manage it all on my own as I can always get in touch with someone who might be able to help or advise. We also have monthly office-based, in-person meetup days and quarterly incentive days where we get together for activities (e.g. segwaying, go-karting) if quarterly targets are met. As everyone in the company gets involved, it's a very nice way to connect with each other and celebrate the work we have accomplished.

And what do you like least about your work?

There can sometimes be quite a bit of pressure to get things done quickly. As many others have realised, outside of academia, progress on projects can be much quicker and with tighter deadlines. As there is a responsibility to external stakeholders such as clients, everything can sometimes feel like it needs to be done as soon as possible.

I have often come across the phrase 'this needs to be done yesterday'. This can be very stressful, especially if there are multiple clients or assignments that need to be worked on within a limited time period. For example, within the same week or even day, we might need to present a list of potential candidates to multiple clients which will mean hours of preparation work across the team working on the project to interview the candidates and prepare relevant documentation to share with the clients. However, other projects cannot be deprioritised as we might be meeting with other clients the following week. So I have found that time management and

being able to switch from one task to another even when it feels like something needs to be completed are very important to stay on track.

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

I think the skills I learned during the PhD have been very beneficial in this position. Being able to research and present potential ideas, within my first few weeks at the company I was able to find and present a new tool that could be used to improve efficiency within the research team. Although this is a different type of research compared to academic research, I can definitely appreciate how being able to work independently to find, analyse, collate, and present information has been transferred from what I learned during the PhD. Additionally, I am able to take feedback constructively and improve on processes or my own approach to research while learning about these sectors.

I also think that my academic background has allowed me to connect with several of our clients across the sectors and understand not only the language but also their companies purposes and values. In particular, I have been involved in several eClinical assignments where our clients provide software to allow clinical trials to be conducted efficiently and safely. When discussing some of the details of the clinical trials process, I have been able to understand and engage with this information as I was involved with the Stroke Research Group at the University of Nottingham where individuals involved in designing and implementing stroke clinical trials presented their work. I have also worked with some edtech companies and programme providers that work with universities where my own experiences have helped me understand their visions and how their products or services impact students' lives. Understanding clients and their needs is crucial to conducting the research necessary for finding the right potential candidates and my experiences during my PhD have been a key factor in helping me succeed in this role.

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 would suggest that they look at the companies they might consider for potential employment and ensure the companies belong to the sectors of your interest. It would be very difficult to engage with clients and candidates if you don't like what they do! It's also important to examine the difference between executive search and contingent recruitment as your day-to-day work with clients, candidates, and colleagues will vary widely.

Another important factor is if you would like to be involved in research or delivery which differs in terms of the level of engagement with candidates. For example, researchers are generally involved in market insights, sourcing and reaching out to candidates, preparing documentation for clients, and presenting research progress to clients. On the other hand, delivery consultants are involved with conducting multiple interviews with candidates, presenting candidates to clients, preparing candidates for interviews with clients, and managing candidate and client expectations. These roles therefore require different skills: a researcher might spend their day finding information; a delivery consultant might spend the same day in interviews and client calls.

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

I would suggest they start by researching the sectors that are of interest to them (e.g., education, fintech, edtech) and then find which companies belong to those sectors. This will not only be of interest to you but will also give you an important talking point in interviews if you can come prepared with some recent market information. LinkedIn is crucial in recruitment, it is often a first point of call where recruiters often look when hiring for their organizations. I would recommend updating your LinkedIn profile with as much detail as possible, especially with keywords for skills and information about what you have accomplished in previous roles. One of the biggest issues when determining if an individual is approached for a role is the information on their LinkedIn profile and this will factor in if applying for a research position within recruitment.

If possible, I would recommend speaking with someone in recruitment about their day-to-day activities and hours as these are very different to academia and it is important to understand if this is something that you can manage. If you secure a meeting or interview with someone in recruitment, it is crucial to come prepared with the understanding of the company and also with questions about the company culture. To prepare for this, I would recommend speaking with the careers service at your university. This was a very helpful part of my process in searching for a position outside of 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?

I think in recruitment there is a degree of removal from direct influence in a particular sector. I still feel I have the opportunity to work in sectors that I care about and I am grateful to be able to see them from a different perspective. In academia, the

focus was on contributing to the literature and finding answers to questions whereas my role here is more clearly defined in searching for candidates that will have an impact in a particular organisation. For example, having been involved in a search for an executive within a commercial education organisation that works with universities in international student recruitment, I was able to see the direct impact of individuals we place on the lives of students. Having been an international student myself, I really connected with this search as I could understand how any individual we placed in that organisation might help or hinder the opportunities for students like me.

In another capacity, while working on market intel for business development across eClinical, commercial education, and higher education sectors, I have been tracking various companies and universities and I am able to stay in touch with relevant updates. For example, this has allowed me to stay connected to the impact and conversations around technology such as ChatGPT in higher education as well as developments in stroke clinical trials. While I may not be actively engaged in the same way as I would in academia, I appreciate the ability to stay connected to the sectors and topics that I care about.

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 think I have a good balance of freedom to explore my own interests and also a structure to follow. In terms of structure, we have a standard process for assignments that has been developed and refined over the years and has been found to be effective. As I moved into this new field, I think this was very beneficial for me to work with an established process because it gave me the opportunity to learn about how our clients work and how we fit into their hiring process while being able to contribute to assignments. I think one aspect of moving into industry that was quite different for me was that a lot of the training was ‘on the job’ and I was effectively implementing what I learned in a training session on assignments in my first week. Coming from a PhD where a lot of time is spent preparing and reviewing prior to running experiments or publishing articles, that seemed like a major shift. At times, this can seem daunting but it means that there is a different level of flexibility required as changes can happen more quickly than we might be used to coming from academia.

I do still feel as though I have enough opportunities to work on what’s interesting to me. For example, I have now been involved in several efficiency projects that have either already been implemented or are being designed. These have been particularly interesting to me because I have been able to evaluate current processes which involved gathering information from colleagues about what is working and

what is not and then assessing various options to make changes, designing a potential solution, implementing it, and then collating feedback for improvements. To some extent it feels a bit like running experiments which for me was one of the most interesting aspects during my studies. The difference here is that when a new process or programme is implemented as a result, I can see the direct impact on the team and can have feedback in real time which can allow me to make changes relatively quickly. Overall, I think that this mix of structure, flexibility, and freedom works quite well for me.

Have you thought about returning to academia?

At the moment, I have not considered returning to academia although I have not entirely ruled it out as a possibility. As I didn't initially have a set plan to either stay or leave when completing my PhD, my experience has been different from individuals who intended to stay in academia and then shifted paths. I also don't feel too far removed from academia yet as I have only been in industry for less than a year, so I think there is still quite a bit of exploring for me to do. As I mentioned before, I think that it's best to keep various options in consideration.

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

I would recommend starting early in considering your options. Attend seminars or webinars from individuals who have left academia and find out about the path of those who have stayed so you are well informed before making a decision. Make a list of sectors or companies that you might be interested in and find out more about them and the career and progression opportunities you might have. I would also recommend looking at LinkedIn profiles of individuals from interesting companies so that you can have an idea of their career progression, especially those who have come from similar backgrounds.

I often felt that I left it too late in my last year to start actively applying because balancing the PhD, a part-time job, and searching for a job was a lot to manage. It can sometimes be several weeks or months between sending an application and receiving a response so it's best to start early. A start date can be negotiated but an application deadline is likely automated. It is also important to not rule yourself out from a potential opportunity if you think you do not meet all of the criteria. There are many factors taken into consideration when screening and interviewing job candidates and as an applicant you are likely only seeing a small part of that process.

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

Everyone has a different experience but I found it helpful to discuss my options with my supervisor. I appreciate that not all supervisors may be supportive of leaving academia but I would recommend speaking to someone within the department or the university to get advice or suggestions on where to look, apply, or even to network. Common advice when searching for a job is to reach out to your network, but if you are an international student or have been working remotely that might be difficult, I would recommend setting up or updating your LinkedIn profile and starting to connect with relevant people as soon as possible to expand your options. People are more often willing to connect and have a conversation than you might think. Also, it is important to have a method of tracking your applications and interviews as well as the documents you have submitted for each application. This can be particularly helpful when interviewing so that you can refer back to something you mentioned in the application or when applying for similar roles where you can use some previous relevant information. In general, I would recommend keeping your options open as you might find something very interesting that wasn't on your radar in the beginning.

Thank you for sharing your experiences with us, Yashoda!