

“It’s Healthy to Evaluate Your Situation and It Might Lead to Staying Where You Are or Finding New Challenges”



Tracy Warbrick



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Abstract In our interview with Tracy Warbrick, she shares her journey from using EEG and fMRI methods in her PhD and postdoc to working at a company that develops the equipment for this research. Tracy initially worked in customer support for the same company, but after a few years she was able to shift to a role that challenged her in a different way and provided more freedom. Tracy highlights the many skills that are developed in a PhD – including project management, problem-solving, and communication – that can go far in many other work contexts. Tracy didn’t have a long-term career plan but was able to leverage her knowledge and skills to find a role that fit her interests and motivations.

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

Tracy: I would describe myself as a scientist and educator. I've had quite a varied career with a few years as a postdoc/research scientist before leaving academia to take a position in a company. I've been working for the same company since leaving academia at the end of 2014. I started as a scientific consultant in the support team and moved on to being an Application Specialist for EEG-fMRI which was a bit more R&D focussed rather than customer support.

My current position is Head of Education and Scientific Communication. The work is quite varied in terms of responsibilities and day-to-day tasks. I take care of our educational program (online workshops, offline workshops, webinars, etc), our education-related products (e.g. product on-boarding), and engagement with the research community (e.g. supporting graduate schools, cooperation with academic partners for research or writing white papers). I also teach workshops and webinars in my area of expertise (simultaneous EEG-fMRI). I've been in this role since the first of April this year so it's a recent promotion, maybe a bit of background on what I was doing prior to that might be helpful. I've been taking care of establishing the Brain Products Academy for the past 2 years alongside my role as an Application Specialist for EEG-fMRI. As the Academy grew, it was clear more resources were needed for this and other projects so the new role was created. While it sounds like this role is quite a change in career path, my current role requires a lot of the skills I've developed over the years, during my PhD and outside of my PhD. I started teaching before I started my PhD and completed a Post-Graduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) for higher education, and I've done a bit of teaching alongside my PhD and research career. So my current role brings all of that together.

What was the focus of your PhD?

I did my PhD in the Psychology department at Staffordshire University, UK, and I completed it in 2006. The main focus of my PhD was investigating the effects of psychological factors on pain perception. More specifically, I looked at how

attention and anxiety influence our subjective responses to pain and the EEG responses to pain. I used two different types of painful stimulus across different experiments; electrical stimulation as a short, sharp stimulus and a “cold pressor” test as a longer challenge. The cold pressor test is essentially keeping your hand in very cold water for as long as you can. To manipulate attention, participants were given additional tasks to do or were asked to focus on the stimulation. To manipulate anxiety/arousal, I devised a script that described (fake) technical issues with the equipment and that the participants might get an extra large electric shock by mistake and to let me know if anything felt strange – it was harder to get the deception part of the protocol through the ethics committee than the painful stimulation part! I measured EEG in response to the stimulation and collected subjective ratings of the stimuli. In addition, I gathered further information about the participants’ general state and trait anxiety and their pain-related fear using questionnaires.

Analyzing – and making sense of – the electrophysiological, behavioural, and psychological measures was challenging, but I learned a lot and appreciated the value of multimodal measures. Consequently, I then went on to add fMRI to my research in my years as a postdoc.

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

I was working as a research assistant while writing up my PhD. It took me longer than my funding period to actually finish and submit, and one of my supervisors had moved to Birmingham University part way through my PhD; he had a part-time RA position available so I worked there while writing up. My focus was on continuing in research and I was applying for fellowship grants to continue working on my PhD research topic. There were also a few postdoc positions on offer at Birmingham, and I was lucky enough to get one and I stayed there for a couple of years. I didn’t even consider looking for jobs outside of academia at that point, I wanted to be a research scientist, and I enjoyed being in the University environment. I was also aware of the possibility of working abroad as a researcher, and as my postdoc funding was coming to an end, I started applying for research jobs outside of the UK. At the time, I was only looking for research and academic positions, I didn’t consider other options. I think that is partly because I didn’t know what else was available to me. I enjoyed research and was happy to continue on that path but had I been more aware of my employability in different jobs I might have considered changing career paths sooner. I haven’t always had a clear career plan and I probably wouldn’t have predicted that I would be doing the job that I do now, but at the same time it feels like absolutely the right job for me at this stage of my career.

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

I've never really had a long-term career plan. I know this sounds a little odd because we're always told to have a plan and long-term goals. However, I think remaining flexible and being open to new challenges and opportunities has benefitted my career. When I left academia, I'd considered the paths open to me within academia and decided that they weren't for me and I didn't want to spend the rest of my work life in that environment. When I started working in industry I really didn't know where it would take me, I just knew that I wanted to take a chance on trying something different. After working in my role as consultant in the support teams, I realised that I missed the autonomy that I had in my research roles. While academic life can be quite stressful and the workload high, being able to plan your projects and your work yourself is nice. Also, I enjoy working on bigger, more in-depth, projects and driving those projects forward. My plans therefore shifted towards having a role with more responsibility and more project-focussed daily work. Fortunately, my skills and expertise were recognised by my supervisors, and I moved into a different role as an application specialist. I did briefly consider returning to academia, but I found fulfilment in the new role and decided that staying in industry, at least for the next few years, was the right decision for me.

The company I work for had been planning to develop an education-related strategy for some time. Given that I have a background in teaching as well as research, this was an interesting development for me and I asked to be more involved. As the project grew into what is now our Academy, it became clear that someone was needed to lead the project. I decided that I would like to have more responsibility and have the space to develop my own ideas as well as those of the company. I made this known to the company management, and when they were ready to push forward with the project, I was given the role of Head of Education and Scientific Communication. I think it's important to note here that you have to make your plans and goals clear to your employers. I did my job well and proved that I could handle larger projects and manage working with diverse groups of people, but once I realised what I wanted out of my career, I had to say that I wanted a leadership role and make it clear to my employers that I was open to such an opportunity if it should arise.

I'm happy with my current job and my plan is to stay in this role for the coming years. The department is new and there are many projects on the horizon, and I think this level of challenge is just right for where I am in my career.

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

My daily work is quite varied depending on what projects are active or urgent. Most days I will spend quite a lot of time answering emails and participating in meetings, which are the less exciting aspects of the job (depending on the topic). Perhaps,

taking today as an example would be useful to get an insight into what my days are like.

We're planning the release of a new product in my application field, and we had a release planning meeting this morning to make sure that the following things are in order: technical specification of the released version, safety and regulatory documentation, user manuals and conditions of use, marketing material, and information for the sales and marketing teams. As you can see, even for just one product in my field, there's quite a variety of aspects to consider and coordinate, and these topics will occupy quite a lot of my time in the coming weeks. This afternoon I will be working on our latest workshops. I will process responses and create a report on the customer evaluation of our most recent event and then feed that back to the teaching team in our event debrief meeting. We have two more workshops next week, and I will be doing the final preparations for making sure the content is ready and the teaching team have what they need. Tomorrow I will leave for the airport with the teaching team to provide assistance on site and to promote our educational activities.

This is quite a busy week for me and not every week involves travelling, but handling multiple tasks and topics each day is quite common. This is in contrast to my time in academia where I would be focussed on one project or a particular aspect of that project and would spend less time switching between topics throughout the day or week.

What do you like most about your work?

I like that it's varied, I would get bored doing the same thing day in day out. I like to be able to work on different topics with different groups of people, either different departments within the company or with cooperation partners. All of the projects that I'm involved in are interesting to me and most involve a degree of challenge, either because it's new (e.g. some of the tasks associated with the head of department role) or because the topic is complex (e.g. research and development for EEG-fMRI). I also need to get some kind of intrinsic reward from my work, and I do get satisfaction from completing projects in my current role, especially something like releasing a new product or delivering a successful education event. I think this is quite similar to research, for example completing the data acquisition phase of a study, finally having your results, or having a paper accepted. I like to work on a defined project with a measurable outcome and that is a huge part of my current job.

And what do you like least about your work?

I'm often reliant on other people doing their part of the project according to the planned timeline, and this doesn't always work out. So I would say that managing other people's contributions to projects is the part that I like the least. It's something that I've had

to get used to managing over the years, especially as my role has become more senior. On the one hand, I have to consider that I can't expect people to work to my timeline but I also have to keep to project deadlines. The flexibility to adjust and the communication skills needed to navigate these situations are things I have had to develop.

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

There are two main ways I think it has helped. The first is related to the non-subject-specific skills and experience gained during a PhD. I think we get so focused on our subject or specific projects we forget about the other skills we develop along the way: for example project management, time management, cooperation strategies, problem-solving, and communication (written and verbal). These skills are vital to my current job, and I started developing all of these skills during my PhD and have continued to use and develop them throughout my career. The second way is that people do acknowledge that a PhD gives you some authority on your subject. I know this sounds a little odd, and I don't think that one must have a PhD to be an expert on a particular topic, but I do have the feeling colleagues introduce me (and themselves) as Dr. when they want to emphasise expertise and/or knowledge. I would never say that this is a good reason for doing a PhD, but I think it is a consequence of having one and I have the impression that it does help you progress and succeed.

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

They should enjoy teaching and making their knowledge and experience accessible to others. I don't work on research projects anymore and I'm not contributing to new scientific knowledge, so they should be comfortable with leaving that part of science behind and focusing on how to provide quality learning experiences for others in the field.

Being comfortable with working with a wide variety of people is an absolute must. The nature of my work means that I cooperate with many other departments within the company, and I also work with our distributors, with external partners, and directly with customers. Being able to adapt the topic, level of detail, and communication style to the needs of the situation is essential, and it's actually a nice part of the job. If they have strong communication skills and like working with diverse groups of people, meeting new people, attending conferences, teaching, etc., then my current job would be a good fit for them.

They should also be prepared to work towards the goals of the company they work for, while ideally this will align with their own interests – sometimes you need to work on what needs to be done not necessarily what you want to do. As I said in one of my earlier responses, my work is varied and sometimes I have to jump from one topic to another, and this is often driven by external deadlines or deadlines where others are depending on my input. I think this is a little different to doing a PhD and working in research where you're often driving your own projects and do a lot of work independently.

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

I would recommend writing more and gaining some teaching experience. Regarding writing, this is an essential tool and I would recommend this to all PhD students not just the ones looking to pursue a similar career to mine. I recommend not focusing on academic writing, try writing for different audiences, e.g. science community outreach projects, write for non-experts, or school children, and maybe even try writing about something that's not related to your PhD topic, e.g. student newsletters for any societies associated with your work. Being able to get your point across is essential, and being able to adapt your style and content to the needs of the audience is a valuable skill to have. Gaining some experience in writing for different purposes will help with many aspects of a job in industry.

Regarding teaching, again this is a valuable skill that can help in many jobs. Learning how to pass information on to other people effectively is not only useful for formal teaching roles but for many aspects of cooperative work, customer facing roles, and many other non-education focussed jobs. Think about delivering information in a meeting, doing a presentation for prospective business partners, or onboarding a new colleague. All of these would benefit from some experience in preparing and delivering material. I think teaching is also good for improving communication skills and increasing confidence in situations where you have to talk to a room full of people. In my current role I teach, prepare teaching material, and support colleagues in their own teaching preparation. My PGCE gave me a good foundation for this, but I completed that quite some time ago and I'm happy that I took many opportunities to continue teaching during my career. If you have the opportunity to take a teaching class or course during your PhD, you should take it. If there is nothing offered as part of your PhD program or graduate school, actively seek it out. There is probably an education department (or similar) at your university, it can't hurt to check out what courses they offer for current students.

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?

Yes, I think this is true in my current position. I care a lot about the projects that I'm working on and I feel very invested in them. I think a good employer will also recognise that caring about your work is important and where possible will encourage you to pursue the projects that matter to you; this is beneficial for them too. I'm fortunate that this is the case in my current position. I do think this is a little different to academia though, as I mentioned above you have to be prepared to work on projects and meet deadlines that don't always align with the projects you really like or prefer to work on. So while I do work on many projects that I really care about, sometimes I have to work on topics that are not that interesting to me. But this is okay, and I think it's important to acknowledge that this happens too. As long as there's a balance that keeps everyone satisfied, this can work well. I would definitely recommend bringing up this topic during any interviews. I know it sounds obvious, but it's important to know how you will spend your time and to be clear about what projects and topics you will be required to work on, e.g. which parts of the job description carry the most weight in terms of time spent.

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?

There is definitely less freedom than in academia, but I think the degree to which it is different depends on the job. I've had a few different roles in the company I work for. In my current role, I do have a lot of freedom to work on projects that I find interesting, and this is because we are setting up many new things and developing an education strategy within the company. This means there is a lot of scope for new ideas and projects that I would personally like to pursue. I think this freedom also comes from experience or seniority in the company, as I mentioned above, my current role is quite new to me and is a promotion that allows me some more freedom with topics (while still aligning with the company goals of course). So it might be unrealistic to expect a lot of freedom as a new hire, but it is worth considering how that could change as you progress in your chosen career and/or within a specific company.

In my previous roles in the company, particularly those in customer support, there was much less freedom to pursue projects I was interested in; the daily work was driven by the needs of the customers. In my more research and development-oriented role, the decision regarding what to develop and when was not mine to

make; it was a collective decision by all stakeholders in the company. This meant that I was not always working on something I was interested in or passionate about. But, it’s important to find a balance.

Have you thought about returning to academia?

Yes, I’ve thought about returning to academia a couple of times. The first time was actually quite soon after leaving. I missed working on my research projects, I was still interested in them and I was still writing up some papers from the last project I finished so I remained very close to the topic. I was also struggling to adjust to the less independent working style associated with starting a new job in industry, and I was questioning whether I had made the right decision. I went from being autonomous and working independently to having my every task supervised and checked. It’s also worth noting that I came to my first job in industry after almost 10 years of postdoc research, while most other team members came directly from their PhD without any work experience outside of that. I really felt like I had taken a step backwards in my career and that maybe I should reconsider my choice. After a few more months of learning the new job, I settled into it and adapted to the working style of the team I was working in, and I decided to continue. The second time I genuinely considered returning to academia was maybe 2 years after leaving. It was due to a combination of not feeling challenged in the right way in the customer support role that I was in and the limited project-related freedom associated with that role. I wasn’t comfortable with the job not matching my preferred working style and I didn’t feel that I was working to my full potential. This led to frustration with my work situation and pushed me to reconsider my career plans. At the same time, I was also considering moving back to the UK for personal reasons and I started to look for a job in academia. After discussing my concerns with the management of the company I work for, I was assigned a new role as an application specialist. I found what I was looking for in the role, in terms of job satisfaction, and I decided to stay in industry. It’s been a few years since I had the feeling that I might like to return to academia, and I would be surprised if that feeling came back.

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

Figure out what’s important to you. I know this sounds obvious, but it actually took me a little while to understand what motivates me, what I want to get out of my career and my daily work, and how I would like to balance that with my non-work life. Related to this point is setting boundaries; know what you want to get from

your work but also what you're prepared to give. It's very easy to get caught up in the unhealthy work culture often associated with academia, especially for new PhDs. It's okay to set boundaries with your time and your commitments, in fact I would consider it essential. Being good at your job and committed to your research doesn't mean you have to sacrifice other aspects of your life.

Acknowledge that it's okay to question your choices and change your mind. If you find yourself questioning the path you've chosen, that's fine. It's healthy to evaluate your situation and it might lead to staying where you are or finding new challenges. Either way, regularly evaluating your career and whether you are moving in the direction you want is beneficial.

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

It's okay to not know exactly what you want to do for the rest of your career. As long as you make smart decisions about what skills to work on and what experience to gain, you can figure some things out as you go. The non-subject skills learned during a PhD will take you far, even if you decide not to stay in academia. It's important to remember that and to take opportunities to develop communication, writing, project management skills, etc. and to acknowledge these skills in job applications. A PhD prepares you for much more than you can imagine when you're lost in the very focussed, almost self-centred, task of writing up your thesis.

Thank you for sharing your advice with us, Tracy!