



## Career Connection

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### Making the Switch

#### ~ How does my academic training transfer to the business world?

Nicely. In the business world, *students are rewarded*. By this I mean that employers value employees who can learn and adapt to changing circumstances over those who are hermetically specialized in a single technical field. You distinguish yourself by becoming an information sponge who is constantly learning about your industry, your market, and your competitors. The fact that the business world tends to reward effective scholarship with cash and more responsibility is a pleasant surprise for those coming from the murky world of tenure remuneration.

Geoffrey Moore, a Renaissance literature PhD turned venture capitalist/writer/business strategist, told me that in his experience, "having a humanities degree makes it harder to get your first job and easier to get every subsequent one." I agree. Excellence outside the university is contingent upon the ability to wed metaphorical and critical thinking to an insatiable thirst for knowledge. And who is better equipped to see and interrogate what others cannot see and do not understand than the literature, art history, or humanities PhD?

Don't worry about your lack of a business degree. You already have the key ingredients for business excellence—handiness with metaphor and imagination, and a highly-tuned set of critical thinking skills. You can conjure solutions and interrogate propositions that some MBAs can't fathom. Business distinction is about imagining the unknown and tearing into the multiplicity of voices and texts informing a proposition. Take command of this fact, and you have taken the first step toward transferring your considerable skills into a career beyond the university

#### ~ How do I get a good recommendation from a professor for a non-academic job?

Ask your professor to focus on your creativity and your leadership skills. As a teacher and scholar, your life is dedicated to coordinating people and ideas into problem battering rams. You also spend significant time monitoring progress. To excel at these tasks, you must wed your PhD's persistence to a skepticism about your own assumptions. To be creative is to relentlessly challenge ossified beliefs. Do this well, and you'll find solutions where others only saw unfathomable, unapproachable chasms.

These skills transfer well to the work world. Ask your professor to write about your ability to imagine, organize, focus, and keep projects and people moving toward completion. If your letter of recommendation exemplifies your leadership and management experience, it may also help disarm those who view scholars as hopelessly abstracted.

If you think your professor will not take kindly to your striking out for the stock-option territories, then be direct. Candidly explain your career options, then assay your professor's response. If the professor is truly repulsed by the idea of your considering other career paths, then

you might ask if his or her feelings are a response to larger economic forces, or you personally. Hopefully your professor will be open-minded enough to realize that his or her contempt for systemic realities should not condemn your own future well being. After all, you're just expanding your horizons, and that's what universities are meant to do in the first place.

**~How do I justify the time I spent becoming an expert on Marguerite de Navarre to employers?**

Let the accomplishment radiate. Present your PhD or what it is—a vast and complicated project that you single-handedly directed, focused, and delivered. Managers love enthusiastic, self-motivated, resourceful hires. Your PhD is evidence that you have these qualities.

Also, banish the notion that you need to justify your efforts. Many PhDs I've spoken to are haunted by a notion that their efforts are somehow shameful, and that they need absolution. The opposite is true; your interviewers (who most likely will not have a PhD) may in fact be intimidated by your bagging of the academic Everest. Put the respect a PhD brings to work for you.

- Mark Johnson [http://www.ironstring.com/sellout/sellout\\_faqs/sellout\\_faqs.shtml](http://www.ironstring.com/sellout/sellout_faqs/sellout_faqs.shtml)