

Career Shifts of Professionals Who Transitioned into Careers in Academic Organizations

Susan Knapp, PhD
Purdue University Global

Susan Pettine, PhD
Purdue University Global

Carrie Stringham, DM
Purdue University Global

Susan Dana, JD
Black Hills State University

Kevin Pettine, PhD
Keiser University

ABSTRACT

This paper summarizes the results of a qualitative study focused on the career shifts of professionals who previously worked in non-academic organizations and transitioned into academic careers. It explores the factors that influence the decision of professionals to reinvent themselves as career academics as well as their level of satisfaction with their career shifts. The paper provides the results of a survey that was conducted with 336 survey respondents coming from an online university, an on-ground state university, a community college and a LinkedIn group focused on education. The results of the survey indicate that 90% of the respondents were satisfied or very satisfied with their new academic career and the reasons for their career changes are detailed. Gaining an understanding of why professionals decide to transition to academia and their satisfaction with their transition will be useful for talent acquisition and retention in higher education organizations as well as being helpful for those professionals who are considering making the transition to academia.

Keywords: careers, professionals, transition, academia, satisfaction, retention

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Career trajectories, once a straight line and often with the same employer, have changed dramatically over the past few decades. Even the United States Department of Labor offers resources for the zig-zagging worker including the source, “Career Planning the Second Time Around”, a guide for workers who are looking for career change. The reality and acceptance of career shifts over the course of an employee’s work life have led to increased availability of data and resources to assist with and explain the shifts, but gaps still exist. Barclay et al. (2011) wrote, “Although little data exist[s] to substantiate career movement, researchers, governmental entities, and career professionals offer information indicating not only that such movement has become common in the American workplace but also that it is showing a continuing trend” (p. 386).

Career movement appears to be characterized differently depending on where the employee is at in their work life. Zemon (2002) provides us with information about career choices and how they differ over the course of an employee’s work life. She writes,

Initial career choice is usually driven by youthful dreams, personal interest, personal talents, market availability, geographic preferences, and likelihood that the career will support one's lifestyle. It is a forward-looking choice. In some ways, it is the most open of all career choices.

Lateral and interim career choices are usually made for personal reasons (having to move, for instance) or because the current position has an unpleasant atmosphere, declining prospects, an incompatible boss, or because a better opportunity opens up elsewhere. These are generally future-oriented choices tempered and driven by accumulated experience.

Midlife career choices are a different matter. Boredom, plateau blues, family changes, success, fewer family obligations, burnout, restlessness, and mental fatigue all tend to drive career choices at this point. These are generally here-and-now choices (p. 665-666).

Generational differences also appear to influence career choices. Baby Boomers, generally categorized as born between 1946 and 1964, are seeking out second careers. Sherrid (2000) wrote, “Second careers. Second lives. Catering to the senior set. Now that's a retirement plan that today's aging boomers could grow to like” (para 17). On their heels, Luscombe (2013) describes Generation X, generally categorized as born between 1965 and 1976, as a generation that values a work environment that is perceived as “...being fair, equitable, supportive, socially aware, and charitable. Also, for the organisation to offer training and graduate programmes and the opportunity for Gen Y employees to be involved in collaboration and organisational decision making, as well as to be recognised and valued for their contribution to the organization” (para. 52). Generation Y also often referred to as Millennials, generally categorized as born between 1977 and 1995, are motivated differently in their careers. Calk and Patrick (2017) share this information about Millennials. “Millennials are an eclectic group that differs from other generations but are difficult to generalize in terms of their motivational needs” although they are “more positive and collaborative than previous generations” and have a “willingness to change jobs in search of more leisure or a more challenging and satisfying work environment as long as basic needs are met” (p. 137). Finally, Generation Z, generally categorized as born in 1996 or later seems to be more motivated by money and career opportunities. Bencsik et al (2016) writes, “it is mainly money and career opportunities which can motivate the young adults to stay at a company: it means that the traditional tools are more motivating than the non-material incentives” (p. 102). When highlighting values consistent with Generation Z, Bencsik

characterizes them as in the moment, rapid reacting, and brave (p. 95).

Baby Boomers and Generation X employees are more likely to fit into the generations surveyed for this study given their age. To make a shift from an established career into a career in academia, an employee would need, at a minimum, several years of work experience. An employee may have spent years or even decades working in a prior role before making the decision to shift into academia. Factoring in years spent earning various degrees to qualify for a position in higher education, it is reasonable to assume that few of those making shifts would fit into Generation Y or Z categories.

DEFINITIONS

Midlife career shifts might be defined as a shift that often takes place mid-career or higher (Mabry, 2004, p. 400). The definition of mid-career varies greatly based on profession. A welder on a traditional educational path, starting instruction immediately after high school, might start a career after a year of vocational instruction, perhaps as young as 19 years of age whereas a physician, also on a traditional educational path, is likely to start a career in their late 20's, early 30's or even later. The number of years that an individual chooses to work or needs to work is also varied. To define what might constitute a midlife career shift, Jolson (1979) offers more specific criteria, pointing to midlife career shifts taking place between ages 40 and 60 (p. 27).

SHIFT TO ACADEMIA

The focus of this paper is to study the career shifts of professionals who transitioned into careers in academic organizations who previously worked in non-academic organizations. It explores the factors that influence the decision of professionals to reinvent themselves as career academics.

Midlife shifts into academia share some characteristics common to all career shifts. "When individuals are seeking to change career direction, they are often not just focused upon the future, but also seek to make some sense of their career stories" (Brown, 2015, p. 279–280). When seeking out a new career, drawing on past experiences allows the shifter to affirm that previous career choices had value. This may be especially true for those shifting from an executive role to a position in academia. Previous work experience may serve as a gateway and catalyst for opportunities to teach, allowing the shifter to draw on past experiences to provide a rich learning environment.

Graff (2015) wrote about the link between academic and non-academic work environments.

These demands for change indicate that the worlds of education and work are becoming more closely linked, in order to make the education-to-work transfer as easy as possible. One aspect of this is that we can even see an opposite work-to-education transition, i.e. approaches and methods from working life are entering the formal education institutions. There is a growing appreciation in academia for the experiences and competence that practitioners out in the field have. Another aspect is the growing insight that knowledge comes in different forms, which means that re-evaluation of practical knowledge, real world experience, and competence has gained momentum (p. 74).

The executive's shift into academia coincides with student's movement into business and management roles. "As students increase their efforts to move into professional management, more business executives are moving into full-time teaching at leading schools...." (Jolson,

1979, p. 22). Sometimes it is planned. Other times, it is more spontaneous. Friedman (2015) wrote about his shift. “In my own initial planning, I had not considered academia, and it had never occurred to me that becoming a law school dean, no less a university president, was a possibility” (p. 12). It is no surprise that leadership experience in business is an asset in any academic position. The five rules of management, based on the work of Henri Fayol in 1916, have morphed into the four functions of management that we acknowledge today. They include planning, organizing, leading and controlling (Decenzo et al., 2016, p. 28-29). Each of these pillars of effective management are transferable from business to the classroom and to academic administration. Administrative positions in academia rely heavily on these transferable functions of management. Friedman moved from the position of business executive to dean, and finally to university president, using the management skills that he had developed in his business executive roles.

Some authors focus on what they term career derailment. Hicks (2020) writes “Derailment occurs when a high-performing individual in a leadership position “unravels” due to inappropriate or ineffective behaviors and their career as a leader comes undone” (p. 79). Other reasons for derailment may occur. McCormak et al. (2017) researched possible reasons for career derailment, specifically at the executive level and found that “Four superordinate themes emerged which are organized as four phases in a trajectory towards personal growth: (i) self-doubt and blame; (ii) targeted bullying; (iii) psychological vulnerability and distress; and (iv) meaning-making and personal growth” (p.30). One of the themes, meaning-making and personal growth, may be a catalyst to a shift into academics. While the shift into academics can be an opportunity to share knowledge, it also affords the academic an opportunity to learn and grown in an environment rich with fresh perspectives, new ideas, and opportunities for reflection.

POSSIBLE ADVANTAGES SPECIFIC TO SHIFTS INTO ACADEMIA

There are a variety of reasons why a business executive might choose to make a career shift into academia. Ayres (2016) writes about just a few of them. “If done for the right reasons, rejoining the academic world to develop and mentor young students can pay high returns, including a better work/life balance, intellectual stimulation through both teaching and research, and an improved sense of self-worth” (p. 23). Mabry (2004) cited similar reasons for making a shift, writing “[I]...appreciate the flexibility and autonomy that is uniquely available in a full-time academic role” (Mabry, 2004, p. 401). Dash (2018) cited research that indicated reasons for these transitions include the belief that positions in academia would be more enriching, nobler and less frantic.

It is possible that an increased online presence in academia has also contributed, at least in part, to such shifts. Online courses offer academics to work from nearly any location with a quiet work environment, a computer, and an appropriate internet connection, further increasing flexibility and increasing work/life balance options.

POSSIBLE DISADVANTAGES SPECIFIC TO SHIFTS INTO ACADEMIA

Mabry (2004) also wrote about some of the surprises experienced when shifting to an academic position. “I was struck by several things in my new role in academia – the staggering amount of work involved, the relative lack of resources (compared to what I had become accustomed) and the sheer loneliness of the job” (Mabry, 2004, p. 399). Mabry goes on to explain that the culture shock experienced was unexpected (p. 401). The atmosphere in a university campus certainly differs from the atmosphere in a traditional business.

“While all relocating faculty experience challenges, faculty transitioning from a previously established career found the move and loss of prior personal and professional life a

major challenge (Cherrstrom & Alfred, 2020, p. 50). Herman, et all (2020) identified the challenges associated with the shift from being experts in their previous careers to now being novices in their new careers. The sense of beginning at a lower rung of the academic ladder in contrast to their previous work accomplishments could result some transitioning professionals to feelings of a loss of status that might emerge during the early stages of the career transition.

Those who adapt to the atmosphere in higher education may struggle with other aspects of academics as they look for ways to transfer their industry experience to the classroom. “Participants also strove to apply prior career experience in their new context of higher education. Prior experience influenced research, teaching, and service. For example, prior career knowledge, skills, and interests influenced research agendas, brought real world practice to classroom theory, and influenced service assignments and activities. However, they often struggled with how to best transfer prior career experience to higher education” (Cherrstrom & Alfred, 2020, p. 58).

The differences can be even more stark in an online environment where academics may have limited face-to-face interactions with peers. Budgetary constraints are wide-spread in academia and over the past decade, most higher education institutions have been forced to grapple with substantive budget cuts. Yuen (2020) writes, “The coronavirus pandemic has led to the most difficult semester in generations on college campuses across the United States” and further explains that, “Absent dramatic new action from Congress, many of the public colleges that support social mobility will confront an existential threat” (p. 1). This influences programs, course loads for faculty, and even resources including copying availability for exams.

DISCUSSION OF STUDY DATA COLLECTED

To explore the career shifts of professionals that transitioned into careers in academic organizations who previously worked in non-academic organizations, a survey was conducted. The survey consisted of a demographics section which addressed gender, age, ethnicity, and level of higher education attained. The survey included questions that ranged from the reasons for making the career change to level of satisfaction with the career change. The questions regarding reasons for the career change were divided into external reasons and internal reasons, such as seeking more money or relocation. Recruitment for survey respondents took place within a leading online university, an on-ground state university, a community college and a LinkedIn group focused on education.

There were 336 individuals who responded to the survey. The survey respondents’ genders broke down to 57.40% female and 42.60% male, while .6 respondents did not answer. Respondents’ age groups were .59% in the 20-29 age group, 10.00% in the 30-39 age group, 29.71% in the 40-49 age group, 39.71% in the 50-59 age group, 18.82% in the 60-69 age group, and 1.18% in the 70-79 age group. From a generational perspective, the following ranges were used to describe the different generational groups the survey respondents divided into. Baby Boomers (1946-1964) were 33.14% of the respondents. Generation X members (1965-1980) were 56.21%. Millenials (1981-1996) were 10.65%. Therefore, the largest survey respondent representation was in Generation X. The survey respondents’ ethnicity categories were 78.53% White, 7.35% Black, 1.47% Asian American, .29% Native American, 3.23% Hispanic, 1.47% Biracial, 1.76% Preferred not to answer, and 2.65% selected Other. Additionally, 3.24% skipped this question.

With regard to the question of “Are you still involved with industry as well as teaching”, 63.38% of the respondents indicated they were while 36.62% of the respondents indicated they were not.

For the survey question, “Have you considered, are presently in, or have completed a career shift into academia”, 89.88% of the respondents answered Yes. Those that answered No consisted of 10.12% of the respondents. In a follow-up survey question, those surveyed were asked, “If yes, did this have an external (job-related) or internal (personal reasons such as seeking more money or moving to a new city) prompt?”. There were 40.97% of the respondents that replied that there was an External (job-related) prompt. And there were 59.03% that indicated an Internal (personal reason) prompt.

For those respondents that indicated an External prompt, the following reasons were provided: 50.73% of respondents indicated: A desire to pursue a higher education and teach; 33.66% indicated: A desire to give back; 27.80% indicated: Other issues; 16.10% indicated: Lack of career development path; 15.12% indicated: Lack of job growth; 14.15% indicated: Boredom with position; 14.15% indicated: Conflicts with organizational culture; 8.29% indicated: Issues with top management; 7.32% indicated: Ethical concerns regarding the business/industry; 4.88% indicated: Issues with immediate manager; 3.90% indicated: Issues with lack of diversity; and .98% indicated: Issues with sexual harassment. Other responses fell into the following general categories: Seeking work-life balance, seeking a more intellectual pursuit, seeking to engage in their retirement, layoff issues in their industry, experiences with age discrimination in the industry, moving from the military to a civilian life, and the perceived flexibility in teaching. The total response rate exceeds 100% when adding the various responses together because some of the respondents provided multiple reasons for the external prompt.

For the survey question, “Have you considered, are presently in, or have completed a career shift into academia”, the follow-up question of “If you had an internal (personal) prompt, please describe this”, those surveyed were asked if they responded to external or internal prompts. For those who indicated that they responded to internal prompts, some responses indicated multiple internal prompts for a single responder. When multiple responses were listed, an attempt was made to determine the most influential prompt based on the written response. For those who responded that they had an internal prompt that caused them to make the shift, 33.64% indicated that their desire to teach and passion for teaching led them to make a career shift into academia. One respondent wrote, “I love teaching, it is honestly where I feel the most energized, excited, and passionate in any occupational endeavor.” Flexibility or the schedule in academia led 19.16% to make the shift and included reasons that were primarily family-related such as “Need for flexibility to be a caregiver for parents.” The desire for more meaningful work led 12.62% of those who responded that they shifted due to an internal prompt. Comments included, “Felt unfulfilled at current job” and “Looking for a more rewarding career.” Several responses included more specific reasons. One respondent wrote, “I worked in the entertainment industry. The ethics were questionable, and the intellectual level dreadful. I was responsible for promoting people and lifestyles that were terrible. Disrespect for gender was rampant. Counter-culture values were promoted as norms, and intellectualism was actually mocked.” The need for increased or supplementary income provided 9.35% of those who responded with an internal prompt to make a career shift into academia. Of those who were surveyed, 12.15% did not answer the question while 13.08% provided miscellaneous responses that were not able to be grouped into one of the categories.

In response to the question, “Are you still involved with industry as well as teaching?”, 63% of the participants responded that they were still involved with industry and 37% responded that they were no longer involved with industry as they transitioned to teaching.

There were 309 responses to the question, “What industry are you, or were you, in before

the career shift?”. Of these responses, 70 participants identified health care as their previous or current field, 25 participants indicated behavioral health/social work, 22 participants identified law and 21 participants identified elementary/secondary education. Nineteen of the participants identified law enforcement as their previous and/or current field, 17 of the participants identified information technology, 14 participants identified financial services, 13 participants identified management/consulting, nine participants identified government, eight participants identified journalism/communication, seven participants identified manufacturing, and six participants indicated marketing/public relations. The remaining participants responding to this question indicated one of the following fields: retail, military, human resources, training, non-profit, sales, real estate, research, insurance, pharmaceutical, ministry and small business management.

Eleven of the individuals responding to the survey, or 3.53%, indicated they were Dissatisfied in response to Question 8, “If you have completed a career shift into academia (even if you are still in industry), please rate your satisfaction with your new teaching career.” None of the responders indicated they were Very Dissatisfied. The responders who commented about their dissatisfaction with their teaching careers attributed this dissatisfaction primarily with low pay with the next most frequent comment being a lack of trust with the leadership of their organizations.

In response to the question, “If you have completed a career shift into academia (even if you are still in industry), please rate your satisfaction with your new teaching career”, more than 90% of the 312 individuals who responded stated that they were Satisfied or Very Satisfied with their new teaching career. Over 50% of those who responded were Very Satisfied. Less than 4% were dissatisfied and only 6.41% were neutral. When asked, “If you selected Very Satisfied or Satisfied, what is the most satisfying part of having a career in academia”, 282 individuals responded. Several themes emerged from their responses. More than 64% of the responses pointed to student success and growth as being the most satisfying part of having a career in academia while 14% of the responses included flexibility including schedules and for some respondents, being able to work from home as being a Satisfying or Very Satisfying part of having a career in academia.

DISCUSSION OF STUDY DATA RESULTS

The majority of the survey respondents were ages 40 to 59 and from a generational perspective were Generation X. Over 60% of those responding were still involved with industry as well as teaching. Nearly 60% of those who considered or had completed a career shift into academia cited an internal prompt as the reason for their shift with over 33% of those responding indicating that their desire to teach and passion for teaching led them to make a career shift into academia. Perhaps one of the most compelling responses was around satisfaction with their new teaching careers. More than 90% of the 312 individuals who responded stated that they were Satisfied or Very Satisfied with their new teaching career. Over 50% of those who responded were Very Satisfied.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Limitations of this research include sample size. A larger sample may yield different results. The research could be further dissected, and targeted questions could be asked as follow-up to each of the questions posed. Many of the respondents were from two institutions which could influence responses. Future research might include a larger sample from several institutions with a focus on any one of the areas addressed in this research study.

It may be useful to consider satisfaction rates of those who transitioned from industry to academia as compared to those who took a more direct career path into academia. The results

could be further dissected to determine which specific factors increased satisfaction for each group of academics. This information could provide academic institutions with information that could be used to improve employee satisfaction rates in their institutions.

This study has practice implications for the recruitment and integration of new faculty. Recruiting potential faculty with extensive career experience who desire a career change presents an excellent source for faculty positions. Identifying strategies for integrating potential faculty who are career transitioning will help ensure their acclimation to academia is a smooth and effective process.

CONCLUSION

As career trajectories continue to zig zag, future generations are likely to benefit from the career shifts of professionals who transitioned into careers in academic organizations after previously working in non-academic organizations. Understanding the reasons professional transition into academia will be helpful for talent acquisition and retention in higher education organizations. Those making the shift benefit too. The factors that influenced the decision of professionals to reinvent themselves as career academics left them Satisfied or Very Satisfied with their career shifts, creating an end result that is likely to benefit society overall.



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