

## Thinking Outside the Box: How to Find Professional Opportunities Beyond the Ivory Tower

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Shhhhhhh. Are you outside the box? Are you outside the box too? Oh, you too? Wait a minute. If there are so many of us outside the box, then why are we whispering? And why are we so surprised at how many of us are out here? As a new professional with a nontraditional professional life (and loving every minute of it!), I am glad our profession is beginning to recognize that there are plenty of positions that offer both great professional satisfaction and a superior quality of life for psychologists who think outside the box. In fact, the February 2001 issue of the *APA Monitor* dedicated a special section (and cover story) to nontraditional careers in psychology, providing a sense of legitimacy to positions outside of traditional academics ([www.apa.org/monitor/feb01/homepage/html](http://www.apa.org/monitor/feb01/homepage/html)). However, barriers continue to hinder students and psychologists from being more creative in the application of their knowledge and skills. One main reason for this is not having some framework on how to plan and execute one's exit from the proverbial ivory tower. By sharing my personal experiences and offering suggestions to overcoming some of the obstacles to entering nontraditional careers, I hope to encourage readers to consider all their choices and come to realize that "traditional" is just a frame of mind. What is most important is finding and securing professional opportunities that are both personally and professionally satisfying, regardless of its title or setting.

When I started graduate school, I had every intention of going into traditional academics: a tenure-track position at a Research I psychology department. This would allow me to teach and conduct research 4 days a week and have a private practice 1 day a week, keeping the academic triumvirate intact (research, teaching, clinical). Today, I have maintained the triumvirate but not in its sacred form. I work part-time as a project director of a grant-funded program at a nonprofit organ-

ization and part-time as a behavioral/rehabilitation psychologist at a community hospital. I also have an adjunct faculty appointment at a liberal arts college and teach master's-level courses. I am compensated well for applying behavioral principles in new and exciting ways and am able to participate in the academic activities that I enjoy most (teaching, mentoring, writing) without the politics or committee work. Most important, I am able to translate research and science to where I feel it is most needed: at the community level.

### The Evolution and Revolution From Within

How we learn to behave and perceive the world is shaped by our environment. Therefore, it is not surprising that most students of university-based Ph.D. programs are trained and groomed for a life engaged in academic endeavors at a university department or university-affiliated institution. After all, your mentor can only teach you what he or she knows. And when you are "raised" a certain way, then you come to believe that what is expected of you is what you personally want. My professional upbringing was pretty research focused, plus all my peers expressed an interest in getting tenure-track positions or working for academic institutions. So there was no question I would be affiliated with a university and that research would comprise a good percentage of my job responsibilities. By the time I was ready to leave for internship, I found what I thought was the perfect way to appropriately incorporate my growing interest in clinical work: the dream 50% research, 50% clinical position at a University School of Medicine. I thought this was as far to the left as I could swing it and still be within my worldview of what was expected of my career. After all, I didn't want to feel bad about myself. And guilt, shame, and feelings of inadequacy are normal reactions when you feel like you are not meeting expectations, letting

someone (i.e., your mentor or institution) down, or are different from your peer group. As an overachiever, I tended to magnify these feelings and catastrophic thoughts.

By the end of my internship at the VA Palo Alto Health Care System (VPAHCS), I could no longer deny that while teaching and clinical work were where my passions lay, I wanted to consider options outside of academic institutions. Exposure to a setting where highly respected people were still able to teach and do research while engaged in a 100% clinical position got me thinking. Plus, as part of our internship training program, we had weekly professional development seminars where I had been exposed to speakers from a variety of work settings and with different professional responsibilities. It was good being introduced to different career options and to hear their process on how and why they came to their jobs. It was beneficial to hear them articulate some of my same reasons for wanting to steer away from research academics. It made more legitimate my desire to prioritize other real-life considerations (e.g., finances, family and personal life, geography), and it gave me hope that it was possible to do this and still have a job that I wanted.

Accepting a postdoctoral fellowship at VPAHCS bought me another year to decide what to do as I honed my skills and earned licensing hours. And to add another complicating factor . . . during my internship and postdoc years, I had been encouraged to and had experienced *balance* in my life for the first time since entering graduate school. I was able to maintain regular work hours (VA Tour of Duty: 8:00 A.M.—4:30 P.M.), leaving evenings and weekends for a personal life. It felt good being able to put relationships first and to go out without feeling guilty for leaving some work undone. My greatest challenge was having too many professional interests and not knowing how to focus them and make a decision. By now I had also become interested in

program development and in community-level intervention. I thought I would know what I wanted to be “when I grew up” and earned my doctorate. I at least came to realize I did not want a tenure-track position at a Research I institution! But what was out there for me to consider? Quite frankly, I did not even know where to begin. I had no clue as to how to look for or apply for a clinical job, as I had never been taught how to do this. I had never known anyone who applied for and accepted a position in a clinical setting outside of academia.

My mentors from graduate school were very supportive of my inclination to explore my career options, but could not offer much practical support. On the other hand, Toni Zeiss, my Director of Clinical Training, was an incredible mentor during these years of struggle. She provided me with a decision-making model for which I could more clearly decide for what kinds of jobs I would apply. It helped organize my thoughts and helped me see what was important to me, which eventually empowered me to make a guilt-free decision to take a nontraditional position. She and other clinical supervisors were instrumental in helping me network and identify positions for which to apply. They were integral in helping to prepare me for the application and interview process for clinical positions. I applied to a variety of positions, both clinical and academic (teaching-focused), and in the end I had happily accepted a full-time position with the Alzheimer’s Association, a nonprofit organization.

### Be Careful What You Wish for

My postdoctoral fellowship was a 1-year position, so when it came time to start looking for a “real” job I could procrastinate no longer. My biggest challenge was focusing my job search and deciding on *how* to focus my job search. I wanted to be successful, and if I did not get a more traditional job, how would I gauge this? I felt like I was letting myself and others down. After all those years of planning and sacrifice, I was not going to get the payoff I had long expected. I felt like I would be illegitimate and worried I would feel inadequate around my peers. That’s where Toni’s decision-making model played a crucial role. In essence, the principle behind the Three W’s model is that ultimately, there are three general factors that can be considered when making a decision: Who, What, and Where. WHO you want to be with, WHAT you will be doing, and WHERE you will be. To make a decision that you will be satisfied with, you must prioritize the W’s and make a decision based on the hierarchy of these factors (e.g., require the first, be increasingly flexible with each subsequent step of the hierarchy). For me, I wanted to be near my aging mother, who lives in California (within driving

distance was good enough). I love teaching, clinical work, and program development and wanted to work with older adults and medical treatment teams, in a medical setting. I needed the work environment and coworkers to be supportive and friendly. It would be nice if the position included some administration so I could build experience in this highly marketable skill, and after so many years of poverty, a particular level of monetary compensation certainly would be welcome.

I inquired into and applied for a variety of positions that met my stepwise criteria and I accepted the position that best fit my criteria. It actually was all the things I wanted in a job although not in a setting or organizational structure that I had ever imagined working in. In this position, I was responsible for developing and implementing a program to change physician behavior and caregiver/patient behavior in order to improve their health and quality of life and to decrease hospital service utilization. It entailed program development, teaching, grant-writing, research/program evaluation, and administration. Clinically, I would essentially be working as a consulting treatment team member for medical providers, providing patient support (not therapy) and recommendations based on assessment. Most important for me, I was doing this within a several-hour drive or a 1-hour flight to my family.

While my professional responsibilities and work environment made me feel really good about the position, the inevitable depression and feelings of inadequacy set in. Did I just underemploy myself? Am I going to feel out of place at conferences now? I did some real soul searching to get over my insecurities and realized I was comparing apples to oranges. My sense of self was still being measured with academic standards. I was still comparing myself and my accomplishments against those of my friends and peers, most of whom were in academic positions. I was not looking at my job and defining it within the correct context but rather trying to label it within an academic framework. I guess it is hard not to after so many years of overlearning. It was especially hard not to feel regret, shame, and inadequacy when a former professor’s reaction to hearing about my position was, “Oh, that’s too bad.” By looking at the function of my job rather than its label, I was able to see that, in fact, clinical researchers at Stanford University had almost the same program as did we (change physician behavior to improve Alzheimer’s disease management), except with a more extensive data collection process and protocol. It clearly was a label issue for me, so I had to learn to get over this mental block and move on.

I loved this job, but after a few years, I felt the need to expand and stretch my clinical skills. I began to subtly let people know that I

was “exploring my options” with my mentors, friends, former coworkers and supervisors, and with people I met at various conferences. At conferences, I would also take the opportunity to inquire about people’s positions and work settings to better learn what opportunities were available, what the organization-specific processes were for hiring, and what the current climate was for psychologists in these various arenas. This allowed me to get the informal word out that I would be interested and available should people become aware of an opening or to keep me in mind for something in the pipeline. It also gave me the opportunity to expand my horizons and think even further outside the box. At the AABT convention in Boston, I met Nancy Baker at the Aging SIG meeting. After finding out that we both worked in the Bay Area, we struck up a conversation. While we were talking about her position and work setting and about my experiences and clinical interests, she mentioned that there was a possible opening where she worked, which is how I learned about my current behavioral psychologist position.

Networking and letting others know about your interests, experiences, and availability is an important way of creating opportunities for yourself. This is also how I became adjunct faculty at a local university. I have never been quiet about the fact that teaching is my first love. I love teaching, whether in a classroom setting, during an informal consultation, or at a community presentation. One of my former supervisors became aware of an opening to teach a course at a local university and alerted me. During the interview process, the chair took note of my experiences, and I have been teaching a variety of courses ever since. While it is admittedly a strain to teach in addition to working a full-time position (or the equivalent of one), I wanted to take full advantage of this opportunity so as to keep my options open for the future. I can always decline an invitation to teach, but I have continued to accept because it allows me to teach in a classroom setting and to hone my teaching and mentoring skills.

### Concluding Thoughts

It is important to recognize that interests and priorities will change over time. The need to be flexible and open to change is important for those considering nontraditional careers. I had always imagined teaching and applying clinical principles to improve people’s quality of life. I just never imagined it would manifest itself as working three jobs at one time. But I’m having a great time and that is what counts the most. I want to end with a summary of a few practical suggestions for those considering a job outside of traditional academia:

1. *Be aware that you may be your own worst obstacle.* Explore the expectations you have for yourself and determine whether they are institutional/external expectations that you may have internalized as your own. Realize you will experience feelings of insecurity, inadequacy, fear, and other negative affect at some point. Do some reality testing and restructure your thoughts and feelings. The likelihood of experiencing negative affect is probably stronger for those of us who were trained in a university-based doctoral program surrounded by faculty with strong research programs and academic inclinations. But regardless of whether you were trained as a scientist-practitioner, practitioner-scholar, or professional/practitioner, if you don't limit yourself when considering and deciding on your options, then you also will not limit your professional and personal happiness, and your ability to balance the two. Be honest and prioritize your interests and what is important to you. Give yourself permission to prioritize personal happiness and other real-life factors.

2. *Seek others' guidance.* If your major professor/mentor cannot be of practical help or is not supportive of your decision to find a different career path, find another person in your area to be your mentor in looking for and better understanding the hiring process outside of academia (e.g., time frames, expectations, interview process, salary). Having access to someone who has a nontraditional career and can answer your questions or validate/normalize your thoughts and feelings can be very powerful in keeping up your confidence and feeling of legitimacy. Seek out peers who are going through the same process and support one another.

3. *Looking for positions.* Network and lay the groundwork. Plant seeds early and reap them later. When positions become available, organizations typically want to fill them as soon as possible because they want as seamless as possible a transition from one person to the next person who will be filling the position. So, unlike academic jobs, if you see a posting for a clinical/industry job, expect that they will want you to begin soon after the selection process is over. Look closer in time to when you would want to start the job, about 3 months. Realize many jobs are advertised via word-of-mouth. By the time they are posted, the organization may already have candidates in mind (if not already selected). Therefore it is important to network and express your interest to people that you are looking for a position. Ask people to keep you in mind if there is currently anything in the pipeline, or when there are any possible openings in the future.

4. *Apply for everything.* Be creative when looking at postings for positions. Jobs that you are qualified for as a psychologist may be listed under different guises. Depending on the in-

dustry, there may be fantastic positions that sound interesting to you but they are only requesting an MA-level person. Check your pride at the door and inquire further about the position. Keep in mind that job descriptions also may not be a good representation of what the job could look like. If you're not sure, try to speak with the contact person for the advertisement and seek clarification. You may find that job responsibilities are not always set in stone and that there may be room for negotiating the position to make a better fit with your skills and interests.

5. *Recognize your skills via a resume.* Take out the machete, because outside of academics, people want to see a short (e.g., 1- to 2- page) resume. You will be shocked at what incredible skills you have when you begin to boil your 15 pages of accomplishments into something closer to 15 descriptive sentences. Every industry has its own standard on what is important to include on a resume and how to phrase things. Read books like *Leaving the Ivory Tower* or go on the Internet and look at resume-building sites (e.g., Chronicles of Higher Education). Review your school's career development center resources. You must know someone who works outside of academics who can lend fresh eyes to your resume. Ask them to provide you with feedback.

6. *Develop a support network.* Find other psychologists who are going through the same decision-making process or are also in nontraditional positions. Finding a peer group will help normalize your feelings when they fluctuate and give credence to your reasons for choosing a nontraditional position. Your peer group of psychologists also can help you develop new and more appropriate markers of success. Similarly, you may be the only psychologist in your workplace. On the one hand, it can be lonely and frustrating at times, but on the other hand, it makes you unique and can boost your visibility and career.

7. *Maximizing your skills.* No job is perfect. If you want to use more of your skills than is being tapped into at work, then if appropriate, try to create an opportunity that requires that you use more of your skill set in your (existing) responsibilities. Or, you can find an alternative outlet for the range of your skill set (e.g., get a second job) or find another job altogether.

8. *Learn from models of success.* Get more exposure to psychologists and other professionals who have successfully applied their skills in creative ways. Learn about how they prioritized their interests, identified their skills, determined the most appropriate setting and career, and coped with the transition. This can help you expand your worldview of psychologists and their roles. Most of all, it can help you gain confidence that it can be done. Some nice profiles are in the February 2001 issue of *APA Monitor*. The

Chronicles of Higher Education ([www.chronicle.com](http://www.chronicle.com)) also has good articles in their Career News and Advice archives. Other resources include:

Basalia, S., & Debelius, M (2001). *So what are you going to do with that?: A guide for M.A.'s and Ph.D.'s seeking careers outside the academy*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

Kreeger, K. Y. (1998). *Guide to nontraditional careers in science*. Philadelphia: Taylor & Francis Group.

Rosen, S., & Paul, C. (1998). *Career renewal: Tools for scientists and technical professionals*. Chestnut Hill, MA: Academic Press.

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■ **When you started graduate school, what did you think you were going to do after you got your degree?** I wanted to be professor in a psychology department, conducting laboratory-based research on human participants.

■ **What did you want to do when you finished graduate school?** I wanted an appointment at a university school of medicine. I wanted to do clinical work but have the affiliation to a university so I could conduct clinical research and also teach in the medical school.

■ **How long did it take before you got over the "imposter syndrome" (the feeling that you're not as much of an expert on topics as other people think you are, or that they will "figure out" that you actually don't know what you're talking about)?** It's never gone away, although it seems that over the years, it has become less prevalent and intense in certain settings and circumstances than others. But it's always there when I'm applying my skills in a new setting or with a new population.

■ **What helped you get over the imposter syndrome, if you have at all?** I'm not over it by any means, but I think realizing that I do have more knowledge and expertise than most others (after all those years of school and specialized training!) in certain settings (e.g., medical treatment teams, teaching) makes me feel much better. I must know something they don't know if they've hired me and haven't yet fired me! I also solicit constructive feedback from my colleagues now and again to see how I can be more effective in my position. The positive reviews

are always reinforcing and help me to combat this distortion.

■ **How has AABT helped you in your professional development/career?** It has allowed me to meet new people and build relationships. It's a small enough conference that you can actually meet "big names," establish and maintain friendships (grad school or intern friends, conference buddies) as well as good relationships with colleagues from across the country and around the world. After all, sometimes it's the only time

you get to see people face to face! It reinvigorates and informs me on how to be a better scientist-practitioner and provides me with great professional opportunities. It is through AABT that I got one of my clinical positions. And the relationships that I have developed and maintained through AABT have allowed me to keep a finger in the academic world without a traditional academic post (e.g, writing, conference presentations, service). ✍