

Some Thoughts on Jobs outside of Academia for PhDs
Felicia Herman, PhD
Executive Director, The Natan Fund
New York, NY

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If you're reading this, then I want to start by congratulating you for already thinking outside of the box in terms of ways you can put your PhD to good use, even if you don't go into academia. When I was in graduate school, I definitely was not thinking this way – and were my mind ever to wander in that direction, I would get scared that such ideas would make me look like I wasn't committed to my research, that I wanted to “jump ship,” that I was nervous that I couldn't make it in academia, that I didn't like researching, writing, or teaching, or – worst – that it might look like I was ungrateful for all of the time and attention that my advisors were giving me.

The reality is, however, that the academic job market is extremely challenging, *and* that there is a great big world outside of academia that can use people with the skills that PhDs have. In fact, it seems apparent to me that the world outside of academia needs *more* PhDs, and thus that taking a job outside of academia should not be considered a stop-gap measure til the academic job comes along – and not a cop-out because you don't want to move to Idaho for a one-year non-tenure-track position that pays \$23,000 a year – but, rather, that jobs outside of academia are an excellent way to put your skills and training to use, a way to broaden your impact beyond the academy, and, often, the path to a very fulfilling career.

Those are very broad statements, but the truth is that I really only understand one small part of the world outside of academia well enough to speak about it, and that's the world of foundations – and even more narrowly, Jewish foundations.

For the past decade, I have worked at two different Jewish foundations, first as research & program officer at Jewish Life Network/Steinhardt Foundation, one of a handful of very large American Jewish foundations in existence today, and which has given out about hundreds of millions of dollars since inception in the mid-'90s.

Since 2005, I have been Executive Director of Natan, a much smaller operation, where I was for many years the only full-time staff person, and now am part of a team of three. At Natan, which is a giving circle, I oversee both the operations of our giving circle – made up of about 70 member “units” (individuals or couples), mostly Jewish professionals under age 45 in New York City – and our grantmaking, which ranges from about \$800,000 to \$1,000,000 a year.

Let me give you a few facts about foundations in general, because I know that I didn't know a thing about foundations when I got my first job at one.

There are essentially two kinds of foundations, at least if you slice the field according to how the foundation's money is given out: operating foundations and grantmaking foundations. The Steinhardt Foundation is an operating foundation: most of its money goes toward researching, developing, and implementing its own programs. Though those programs may spin off and

become independent organizations, they are still in some ways “in-house” and are not external grants.

The foundation (theoretically) does not give grants to external organizations. So, for example, a program like Birthright Israel got its start in the Steinhardt foundation’s offices, with the foundation’s staff developing the idea and figuring out how to implement it.

Then there are grantmaking foundations, like Natan. This is the model that you are probably more familiar with, since you have probably applied to foundations for grants for your own research. Natan funds Jewish and Israeli social innovation: social entrepreneurs and new and emerging nonprofits around the world who are operating in (this year) eight different program areas.

Most foundations, especially those with professional staffs, have guidelines about what kinds of projects they fund. In Natan’s case, in addition to our program areas, we also only support organizations with annual operating budgets of \$1.5 million or less, at least when they first enter our grants portfolio. (We also now have a grant committee devoted to supporting long-time grantees that are past the startup stage, many of which have budgets exceeding \$1.5 million.)

These are all things you should think about if you plan to apply to a foundation for a job. You should be interested in the funding areas of the foundation, on board with the mission statement, and in general agreement with the preferred methods of accomplishing this mission. You should also try to uncover the explicit or unstated biases the foundation has. This last point is actually extremely relevant for Jewish foundations. There are some with very conservative approaches to Judaism and Jewish life – and there are others that are quite liberal, even radical. There are some that support only the large, mainstream institutions of Jewish life, like day schools, synagogues, Federations, JCCs – and there are others, like Natan, for example, that support new institutions and initiatives.

Quite logically, a foundation’s funding areas, mission, methods, and biases are generally determined by the person or people whose money the foundation is spending. So you can also slice the foundation field according to where the money comes from: for example, many Jewish foundations are private family foundations (and generally, I should note, with very small staffs – who tend to stay in their jobs a long time): the money comes from a single donor, living or dead, or from a single family, and the board of the foundation usually has at least one family member on it. The foundation may even be staffed by a family member rather than by an unrelated professional. About 2/3 of all foundations in the US are family foundations, and they’re generally very recognizable, because they’re usually called something like “the Samuel Bronfman Foundation” or “the Samberg Family Foundation.”

There are community foundations, which receive donations from members of the public, and which make their grants in a specific geographic region; and there are also corporate foundations, which are the giving arms of for-profit companies.

Then there is the burgeoning giving circle movement, which is actually what Natan is: when people join Natan and make their contribution, their money goes into a combined pool, and

members then sit on the grantmaking committees and make the grants out of that combined pool. Giving circles are infinitely customizable, and there are hundreds if not thousands of them in the US, but most are small and not professionally staffed. (You can always start one of your own, but that's another topic.)

I tell you all of this just to show that the foundation world is not monolithic, and thus that you need to figure out where your strengths lie, consider what kind of foundation work you're willing, interested, and able to do, and then start scouting about for the kind of foundation that meets your interests. Operating foundations, for example, like to hire people with experience working in or running an organization, because the foundation is creating and even perhaps administering its own programs. On the other hand, if the operating foundation is very research-focused, it may be looking for people simply to conduct research in its areas of funding.

I would surmise that in general, PhDs – especially whose fields of study are somewhat esoteric – are more likely to land jobs in grantmaking foundations, because we tend not to have too much experience running organizations, but we have been trained to be critical readers and thinkers, which comes in handy when you're assessing applications. And, also, because we have *sitzfleisch*: we don't look at a stack of application as high as your arm and cringe. We're used to doing a lot of reading!

I think, however, that there's a more important takeaway from this last comment than anything having to do with getting a job in the foundation world. My real piece of advice for job-searching, no matter what you're interested in doing, is that you need to think **very generally about your skills**, to think about **what you know how to do**, not **what you know**.

If you're applying for an academic job, you are (usually) being judged on what you know, and on the quality of your ideas. Did you transform the field with your dissertation? Does your research have great promise? Is your particular body of knowledge needed by a specific department?

But, my guess is, for most jobs outside of academia, no one will care what your dissertation was about. Honestly, since graduate school, I have had many people ask me what my field PhD is in; fewer ask me what my dissertation was on; and many, many fewer who asked any questions beyond that. And my topic was *accessible* (the relationship between the American Jewish community and the film industry in the 1920s-40s).

So what you need to do for applying for jobs outside of academia is to think about the *skills* you acquired from graduate school or from teaching – not (just) the *knowledge*.

Here are a few examples:

- You have public speaking skills – you've taught classes, lead seminars, given conference papers, maybe given public lectures. So you are probably comfortable in front of a crowd, and hopefully you know how to adapt yourself to different kinds of audiences.
- You know how to write – and, maybe, how to write quickly.
- You know how to edit.
- You know how to analyze other people's work and ideas.
- You know how to read – how to read critically, how to read a lot, and how to read very

little but sound like you've read a lot.

- You have *sitzfleisch* – you can sit for hours, reading, and distilling large amounts of information into important points or arguments.
- You probably speak a few languages – this is always in high demand – at least if you speak living languages.
- And – if you've gotten the PhD – you have a credential that signals to the outside world that you're smart. You're a professional smart person, and don't underestimate the power of the letters "P H D" or "M A" in any job market, no matter what your field of study actually was.

There are also skills that you probably don't have, and which you can either decide to gain on the job or try to acquire by taking a few courses in non-profit management, philanthropy, grantmaking, or fundraising.

I'll give you a few examples, all taken from my long list of things I wish I had been trained for when I became executive director of a foundation:

- How to create a budget.
- How to work with live donors, and help them to feel good about giving away their money.
- How to read non-profit financial statements.
- How to build and develop an effective board.
- How to figure out best practices for ethical grantmaking -- how to wisely and thoughtfully wield the enormous power and privilege that comes with giving away with someone else's money.

As this last comment implies, working at a foundation is quite wonderful. You often get the chance to make people's dreams come true: to allocate critical financial resources to projects you (and the foundation's other decision-makers) think are excellent. You get to work with incredibly creative people working on the frontlines of the issues you're interested in, and you often get to feel like you're actually making a real difference in the world. And the Jewish foundation world happens to be filled with disproportionately wonderful, smart, caring people.

Finally, because I really believe that getting a job is actually more about who you know than what you know, I welcome you to reach out to me if you're interested at all in the field of Jewish philanthropy (where again, I caution, there aren't many open jobs at any given time). I'm more than happy to tell you in more detail about what I do, to help you figure out how to market yourself, and to connect you to some people who might be able to help you further. I wish you all the best as you try to figure out what you want to do with your life.