



Transcript: Lucy - finishing up and moving on

At what point during the PhD did you start seriously thinking and planning for life after the PhD?

Well the first year I was there I was doing an M.Phil. and had no intention of going to do a PhD. And they were doing sort of milk-round applications you know of all the sort of City firms in London. And I, up until then, assumed that I would have an academic career but when I noticed people doing that I thought 'oh well', you know 'maybe that's an option for me.'

And the next year, when I'd started my PhD and it was also the year before I was going to finish and ran out of money, I started seriously considering it. And I thought my PhD is quite stressful, if I do something else completely and have a blank slate I can sort of wipe it. I felt I was like on the back foot. Everybody else who had planned their graduate studies better had another year to do things. The people who would be finishing their PhD at the same time as I did had spent longer on it and I sort of felt like I was constantly trying to catch up. And so the opportunity to go into something different where I was starting on the same level as everything else was very tempting and so I decided then that I wouldn't apply for academic jobs, I would apply for corporate jobs instead.

And so at what point were you applying for corporate jobs?

A year before I finished my PhD. And so all these companies – management consultancies and IT companies and so on – tend to do a sort of milk round of presentations during the term before Christmas and so I was going to all these things sort of September, October, November and I was due to finish my PhD a year later.

Did you feel that those milk rounds were really aimed at undergraduates?

Yes they were, but they also promised extra bonuses and so on for graduate students. I think a lot of that in my experience turned out to be hot air. Although when I did eventually get a job I did start on a higher salary than the undergraduates but I had to do a lot of reminding that this is what I was promised. To be honest I'm not sure those companies, at the least I went to, I'm not sure it was set up to take on PhD graduates.

Can you talk me through your experience of the milk round process right through to applying for positions and ultimately being interviewed for them?

I think I found out when all the milk round presentations were taking place through the careers service and then it was just a case of turning up and it would be a presentation put on by a particular company. They would send people, usually people who had been through the graduate training programme of that company, to talk about what they did and, you know, what you can expect. I'm not sure how accurate they were. You know in those sorts of companies it seems to be a joke that recruitment is just like a bunch of misrepresentations, which is probably very true. But you know that's what it was – it all sounded very exciting and marvellous. And so I ended up doing some further work on the internet, I sort of looked up these companies. They would send you information about them if you asked them and then it was a case of applying.

Did you get short-listed for a job at the milk round?

Yes, I really only had interaction with one company and that was the company that I went to work for. It was an enormous multi-national IT company that also did things on the business side like outsourcing and consultancy and stuff like that. They asked me to attend - it wasn't really an interview - it was sort of... I can't remember what they called it but basically loads of graduates turned up and you sat through presentations on the company. You did various sorts of strange tests to find what your abilities were in various capacities and what sort of person you were. And then you went away and I was asked back for another day, which was a similar sort of thing but involved – it was more interview based. I think I had several different interviews I had to give a presentation on, I can't actually remember what the topic was, but it was basically sort of why I want this job. I had various different interviews. There was a group task with maybe five or six other applicants. You were sort of given a situation that you had to – it was like a puzzle that you had to solve. I remember Lego being involved. It was a problem solving exercise and you would do that while the panel of the interview watched and wrote things down on clipboards.

And then I went away and I got a job offer from them. The interviews I think were happening December of 2000 and I got a job offer to start in November 2001. There was at that time no detail of what the pay was because I suppose it was so far in advance they hadn't reviewed what it was going to be. But I was so pleased to have everything sorted out that I accepted. In the sort of short-term it was really good to know that whatever happened with my PhD the next stage of my life was starting.

In the selection process were you conscious of there being any other PhDs in the shortlist?

No, I don't even know if I met anybody with a PhD in these interview days that I attended. When I eventually started, the people that started on the same day as me, I think there were eleven of us and one other person had a PhD.

And in the recruitment process did you notice any particular bias or negative or positive attitude towards the PhD amongst the people interviewing you?

Not in the interview process. I think this issue had been addressed earlier in the milk round presentation when you have an opportunity to ask questions. And I think I asked a question about PhDs and the impression I got was they welcomed the skills that PhD graduates could bring, which I think is absolute nonsense. I think probably the sort of people that a lot of companies want are sort of people who are sort of sensible and enthusiastic and imaginative but will do as they are told. And I am not sure that PhD graduates are those, I mean, I certainly wasn't! But you know I suppose they sort of try and put a positive spin on it. I was aware of it possibly being a negative factor because I didn't want people to think that I was a sort of air-headed academic with my head in the clouds and was completely unable to tackle these sorts of cutting issues of the business world. I am that sort of person but I didn't want them to think that.

And so in the presentation I had to give in the interview when I was trying to explain why I wanted the job, one of the issues I tackled was why I didn't want an academic job. I was trying to put that in a positive way and sort of suggesting that I wanted to sort of tackle real world issues, I wanted to engage with people a lot more than I had been, which I think I probably over-egged the pudding there. I sort of made myself sound like the sort of person I'm not, you know, it wasn't a deliberate deception you decide what you want to do and you sort of work out how to get it.

I would probably say a valuable lesson I learnt there, which I have used ever since, is that if you lie about yourself in an interview you might get a job but you might get a job that you don't like. The chances are if you tell the truth about yourself and the sorts of things that you like and dislike and what you are good at, if you don't get the job you probably wouldn't have liked it anyway. And so that is something I would say to a job applicant.

That is a very good piece of advice. And what was the position that you got?

The title was IT specialist – it was a graduate training position. I actually think that if you are a graduate and you want a decent career, weirdly a graduate training scheme is probably one of the worst things you can do. I know lots of people who graduated and went to work for quite small companies and because they were quite small companies they didn't have specialist graduate training schemes and so they just went straight in and they had to kind of learn fairly quickly how to do their job. And then ended up progressing up the career ladder in that company much quicker than anybody I know who joined a graduate training scheme.

What tends to happen is you join a company as a member of a graduate training team, you are immediately identifiable as somebody with no useful skills. And the sort of work I ended up doing was the sort of thing that I thought that is what you had GCSE work experience pupils to do. You know, it was things like pasting information into spreadsheets. I remember having to research an order for a new mobile phone for somebody; it really was things like this under the guise of learning about the company and so on. And so you know, in retrospect, it wasn't a very good thing to do.

What did your job require of you?

Well the title was IT specialist, which I think was just the title they gave to anyone who joined the graduate scheme in that way. You then got put into a certain part of the business; really broadly speaking, I was in the outsourcing area. And what you had to do then is find a role, find an opening in the company that was available to a graduate. What I ended up doing was something that was just kind of assisting somebody really. It was doing things like putting information into databases and collecting information from databases and putting into a spreadsheet. Putting this information into a presentation and so on. It was really kind of quite boring low level work.

The impression I got is most people on that graduate scheme weren't very happy with it. I perhaps should mention that this was November 2001 and into early 2002 and it was straight after, you know, 9/11. A lot of my friends who had applied for similar jobs and got accepted had their offers withdrawn because of the downturn at that time and so there was perhaps less business about and maybe this sort of thing is better now. But you ended up doing fairly sort of unskilled jobs and the people who ended up doing well just had to persist through it, but I just didn't have the toleration or the motivation to do it.

How did you feel that your colleagues felt about you having a PhD?

Well a lot of people were quite impressed by it, a lot of people said things 'like well why the hell have you come here?' Because, you know, regardless of what had been said at recruitment, it wasn't a company set up for that sort of thing unless you had a PhD in computing and then you go off and do a technical job in the company. But they were quite impressed by it – it was quite a novelty. To an extent I mean there was a negative effect, I mean I excel better in an academic atmosphere than I ever did in a corporate atmosphere. I was probably perceived as quite sort of slow and dippy and not very organised and not very worldly and you know people did say this to me in a nice way. And you know they were right. But you know if you are a little bit like that anyway and it seems that you've spent far too long in academia, then that just sort of solidifies their opinion. If I had cared about excelling in that company that could have been a drawback.

Do you think so?

Yeah I think people didn't think I was – the sort of things that I was doing it was quite important to have a good business sense and I just don't. I can buy things in a supermarket and that is about as far as I go in business skills.