



THE ROLE OF POST-DOCTORAL SCHOLARS IN RESEARCH & DEVELOPMENT

A MISSING LINK BETWEEN PRIVATE SECTOR INNOVATION AND SUBJECT MATTER EXPERTS

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Recent labour trend analyses have found that the Canadian university system is producing far more PhDs than can be reasonably absorbed by the academic job market (Fullick, 2013; Schuman, 2013). In 2007, Canadian universities awarded 4800 doctorates, while hiring only 2616 full-time professors (*The Economist*, 2010). Nearly 50% of post-doctoral scholars (post-docs), therefore, require work outside of the university system. Currently, this non-academic track job market is under-developed.

“While enrollments (and numbers of PhD graduates) have increased [...], more of these grads now struggle to find employment that matches the level and nature of their education” (Fullick, 2013).

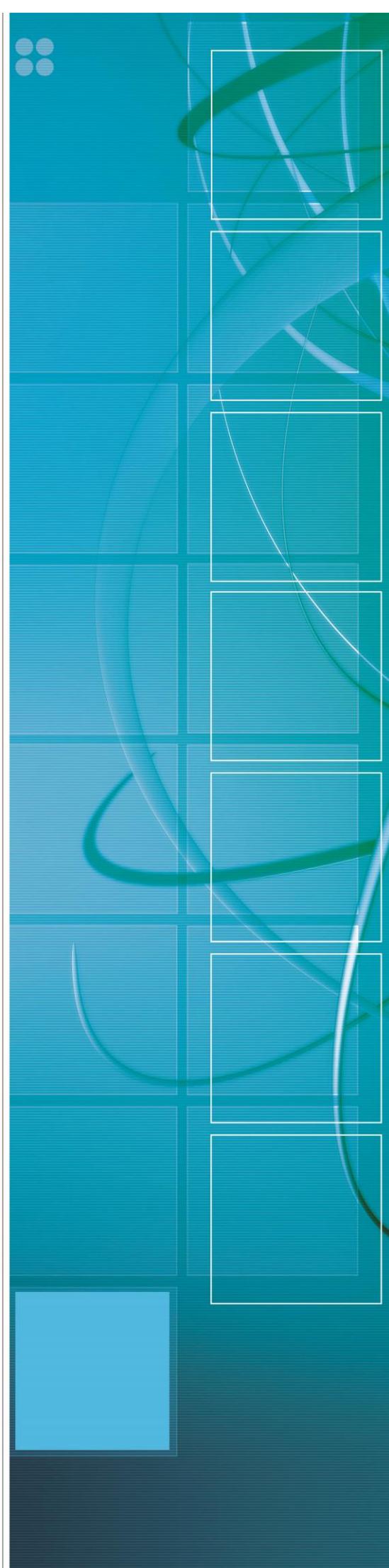
That these highly skilled researchers are often left to languish in low-skill, low-pay occupations suggests that a major inefficiency exists in career development for these knowledge workers (Kendzior, 2013). Indeed, workers for whom the academic track was their first choice occupation often struggle to re-articulate their skill sets and work experience in ways that make them competitive for private sector jobs. The private sector tends to exclude post-docs from consideration by developing jobs in which non-university based work experience is prioritized over educational qualifications.

While it has long been common place for science PhDs to seek out employment in the private sector, until recently this non-academic career path remained relatively unexplored in the humanities and social sciences. In 2011, it was announced that Google expected to hire between 4000-5000 humanities PhDs. According to Marissa Mayer, then vice-president of consumer products, Google looks for “people who are smart and get things done,” a characteristic that the organization has found humanities grads often carry (Reisz, 2011).

Importantly, PhD hiring isn't just for large companies. The size of the post-doc labour pool means that even small and medium sized firms, both for-profit and non-profit organizations, can access these highly skilled and capable workers.

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Four Reasons to Explore Post-Doctoral Hiring

Employability – There is a misconception within the private sector that PhD grads are not willing to “work their way up.” In contrast, PhDs often apply for jobs which require a Bachelor’s or Master’s degree, only to be excluded from consideration because they are over-qualified. This is a major industry oversight. Newly-minted PhDs are intelligent, hard-working, and ambitious. Given an opportunity to start a career in your organization, they can be expected to add value to your workplace through high-level thinking. Having been educated in a challenging and highly competitive environment, PhDs can also be expected to pursue promotion opportunities and expanded job responsibilities. They seek to build an innovative and exciting career, not stagnate in a comfortable, low stakes position.

Cost-Efficiency – Many PhDs who do not attain full-time academic positions work in a non-tenure track teaching capacity. These positions are very low paying, precarious, and often have minimal benefit packages. The private sector can easily outbid universities for these workers. Additionally, government programmes such as MITACS exist specifically to fund industry/academy partnerships which allow the private sector to utilize doctoral and post-doctoral researchers in a research and development capacity. This programme essentially offers the private sector subsidies amounting to roughly half of the researcher’s wage for a one-year project.

Expertise – The expertise of the post-doc extends far beyond the narrow subject matter of the thesis. A majority of humanities and social science doctoral programmes include extensive coursework, comprehensive examinations, and employment as a research assistant on a range of projects. The PhD is an expert in a very broad field as well as a specialist in their own research area. Many doctoral students teach undergraduate classes in areas that fall outside of their specialties. They are able to do this because their advanced training enables them to learn new areas very rapidly, thus gaining sufficient expertise to conduct research and teach at a very high level. Such advanced knowledge can be acquired by the post-doc on a project-by-project, as needed basis.

Innovation – A rapidly growing knowledge economy requires a creative, ambitious, and skilled workforce. Surplus PhDs offer a crucial labour force from which to draw. Currently, there is a disconnection between how post-docs articulate their skills and career objectives, and how the private sector frames job qualifications. Organizations that find ways of incorporating this labour force will not only be gaining access to the best and brightest, but will also be gaining an important corporate strategic advantage. Whatever research problem you are dealing with, it can almost be guaranteed that somebody, somewhere, has written a thesis on it. That person should be working for you.

Post-Doctoral Job Skills:

- Research design
- Literature synthesis
- Project management
- Rapid learning
- Critical thinking
- High-level writing and editing
- Time management
- Long-range project stamina
- Big picture thinking
- Attention to detail
- Subject-matter expertise

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