

From PhD to Masters to trainee Patent Attorney!

My adventures over the last year, discovering my new career path

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Over a year ago I wrote an article about studying for a PhD at the University of Cambridge, which was published in the first edition of Insider Imprint in May 2018. However, since then I have ‘quit’ my PhD, written up my results for a Masters and I am now a Trainee Patent Attorney at Appleyard Lees in Cambridge. In the following article I describe my adventures over the last year, including my realisation that ‘quitting’ when things really are not right, does not make you a failure.

My lifelong love of science led to me pursuing a degree in molecular biology at the University of Liverpool and I was fascinated by all aspects of my degree. It was sitting in a virology lecture and learning about bacteriophages that inspired me to embark upon a PhD. In September 2016 I started my PhD and my first year passed with what I assumed were the “normal” feelings for a green PhD student, finding their feet in a new lab, in a new city over 150 miles away from home. From feeling like

an imposter and dreading repeating the same experiment *again* that week, to longing for some structured learning, my first year passed in a flurry of anxiety and lack of fulfilment. These feelings came as a shock to someone who had always succeeded in everything so far, and they did not go away over time.

In January 2017, I started to attend careers talks and workshops to explore possible career options as I had decided that post-PhD I did not want to continue in academia. One talk was given by a Patent Attorney and I was immediately captivated by what sounded like the perfect career for me in. It would allow me to combine my technical background in molecular biology with my other interests in science communication, writing and marketing. I decided then that this would be the perfect career for after my PhD, as I was under the impression that to become a trainee you required a PhD. Although not all firms demand a PhD, I also thought that no one would employ a Cambridge ‘drop-out’. I decided that I would continue with my PhD and just fill my spare time with extra-curricular activities (such as writing blogs, editing articles and science communication) which would allow me to develop the other skills a Patent Attorney requires so that after my PhD I could apply for trainee positions. I rapidly approached the end of my first year with no real improvement to my mood and I realised something had to change.

My PhD came with the opportunity to take three months away from the

lab and to complete a work experience placement in a career outside of academia. I embraced this opportunity and managed to obtain a three month placement with an Intellectual Property (IP) firm in Cambridge. Many PhD programmes come with this option to take a three month break to explore careers outside of academia. A well researched three months away from the lab can help students take a step back and do something different. It is worth taking the time to fully research potential placements and write targeted CVs and cover letters in the same way as you would for a job. This can seem like quite a daunting, near impossible task when you’re trying to juggle a research project, but it is very useful.

“Quitting when things are not right does not make you a failure”

I started my placement in January 2018 and I thought taking some time away from research would help to re-inspire me and provide that motivational push for the remaining two years. However, my three months away had the opposite effect in that I enjoyed it so much that all I wanted to do was become a trainee Patent Attorney. During the placement I learnt a lot about the career and I got to experience the role first hand as I was given real cases to work on from day 1. It confirmed that this was the perfect career for me and despite feeling very nervous about being viewed a ‘Cambridge drop-out’, I decided to apply for trainee

positions. I was also lucky that I had managed to generate enough data for a masters and so it was agreed that I could write up and get something out of my time at the university.

I applied to three firms, but the job at Appleyard Lees was the one I wanted most. I had read a lot about them on their website and reading so many positive interviews with current trainees online made me want to work for Appleyard Lees even more. Everyone I met at both stages of the interview process was incredibly friendly and I felt that the office had a very welcoming, supportive atmosphere. I was delighted to be offered the job and I started with Appleyard Lees in May 2018.

My first eight months have been incredible. Every day presents new challenges and the opportunity to learn something new and solve problems in interesting ways. Whether this is new scientific or technical knowledge, a new skill or a new rule or article, I find that every day my brain is in constant use from 9am until I turn off my computer around 5pm. I absolutely love being a Trainee Patent Attorney and I love all aspects of the job. There is a lot of reading to do, exams to pass and it is a steep learning curve as with most scientists making the transition, I have never studied law before. I have also had to juggle writing up a masters thesis with working full-time, which I am pleased to say has now come to an end as I submitted my thesis in January 2019!

I always preferred reading and writing to carrying out lab work and this job allows me to still use my science and keep in touch with new developments, but in a much broader area than studying one specific protein or gene in one specific bacteria or cell! It is very varied and I work on a variety of cases, which is one of the many things I love about the career. As well as learning new science and law, there is also a lot of

application and problem solving to do, such as thinking of ways you can overcome an examiner's objection to get a case through to grant. Patent law is incredibly rewarding and ticks all of my boxes. There are frustrating days, but there will be in any career and the imposter syndrome still finds a way of creeping in.

PhDs are not all bad and I think it is normal to be frustrated during the process, providing it does not become unhealthy. A lot of people do really love doing their PhD, becoming experts in a niche area of research, making new discoveries and having responsibility over planning their own time and experiment plans. However, it is important to recognise when negative thoughts and feelings are unhealthy and where to seek help for these. In my case, it was an obvious decision to make as I didn't enjoy the main bulk of the work. The way I thought about it was if I was doing a job that I hated, rather than a qualification, I would actively seek out alternative employment, so why should my PhD be any different? There is a huge stigma surrounding 'dropping out' of a qualification and for so long I continued on a path because I was worried about what other people might think.

If something isn't working out, don't be afraid to challenge the 'norm'. Never just put up with a situation for fear of the unknown or what others might think. I made the best decision for me and I do not regret it. I now work for an incredibly friendly and supportive law firm, doing something that I love.

If any readers would like more information about being a trainee or has any questions about the career or my journey, please do not hesitate to contact me –

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