From Physics To Finance:
How Great Minds Make Surprising Career Transitions

How is it possible for a person to appear to know so much about their chosen field of study, yet know so little about the other career possibilities near it? When candidates have such tunnel vision, even brilliant people who have been referred to as “geniuses” back themselves into a corner and can’t find the way out by themselves. Fortunately, with a little guidance and a lot of passion, they can not only be aware of new fields but even more importantly cross over into a more enjoyable environment.

The motivation to look around in the first place?
Yes, it’s money.

True, money isn’t everything when it comes to selecting a career, but let’s face it – it does matter some. For example, I’ve developed a bit of a “sub-specialty” if you will in helping people escape research situations in academia where it’s clear the money just isn’t going to arrive for that person. In such situations, the candidate is a bit lost. It’s easy to see why, considering the person has been doing a great deal of work all this time in a research lab.

As such, the typical conversation starts with the candidate saying, “I’ve been working on this research project for a long time and I know I’m not winning a Nobel Prize from this work anytime soon. I really don’t think I want to teach either. So it’s time I took a look at some other options for my career.”

Where do they wind up looking instead? Finance, of all fields. Why? Frankly, they’ve heard that a good amount of money can be made in that field for the more successful professionals. Here’s the part that surprises them: Some candidates may need to adjust their talents for the business market – which they expect – but what takes them only a few months can normally take others several years.

Case in point: One of my recent candidates from a Physics background was asked to learn a couple of semesters’ worth of finance education in two weeks. If that wasn’t enough on his plate, he also had to write a paper. Amazingly, in just a little over two weeks on a full-time basis, he learned everything necessary from his crash course in finance and submitted his paper. Before long, the company made him an offer, dramatically more than what he was making as a physicist.

How did he break through? The pattern in candidates like these is that they have an unmistakable passion for pursuing such challenges.

Would most other candidates dive into learning a semester’s worth of finance in two weeks? Not a chance. And how many of that small number would also write a paper for their prospective employer to review? A razor-thin number indeed. The ones
who rise to the top don’t run from challenges. They dive in wholeheartedly and without intimidation.

By the way, for this particular candidate, it’s just the beginning. His learning curve is dramatically faster since he’s starting from a world-class facility, not necessarily from scratch.

Here’s the reality: The difference between PhDs between schools tends to be much less pronounced in physics. Many graduates may actually end up working together because it’s not like Cornell or Princeton has its own supercollider. As I watch a show like “The Big Bang Theory” in which assorted professionals from research labs live together, I find I’m watching a group of incredibly intelligent people in physics and mathematics who never seem to have a lot of money. The reason is actually quite simple: They have no customers other than the federal government.

This isn’t all that different than the scenario I see playing out in the real world with such PhD candidates. Quite often, they have the capabilities that, once they move out of that field, they do exceptionally well. However, even if they have some remote idea of where they’d like to go from here, they have little concept on the steps to make this transition. Yet, when they are enlightened on what they need to do, what separates the winners from those who are trapped in one place isn’t brains – it’s the energy and will to do whatever it takes to transform themselves.

Come to think of it, this applies to many other field-to-field transitions too. If someone can go from Physics to Finance, maybe the switch of fields isn’t such a stretch after all. Especially when the right recruiter illuminates the path to cross this bridge.

Have you chosen to move into a completely new career compared to where you started? How hard was it to make that switch? Are you thinking about making what appears to be a dramatic pivot of careers? Share your experiences as I always enjoy hearing such stories.

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