

In the time and space between jobs

A user guide.

Being out of work is never easy and it is all too common in academia – and not just at the early career stage. I find myself in that position right now. In fact, as I write this, I have been out of paid work for precisely 1 week, if we don't count the freelance work I've picked up – but let's say my main source of employment and income has now gone.

So, what can you do to help get through the period between one contract ending and another starting...here are my tips based (these may be updated further over time...) but use as you see fit.

Cut yourself some slack:

The reasons why you're out of work will vary – it might be you've been covering for someone, it might be that your employer only intended to keep you for a certain amount of time, or it might be that your project or the one you've been working on has run out of funding. That's been my experience – working on a really valuable project but the funders decided against the project moving to the next stage. You're going to feel a range of emotions – roll with them and remember that you have value to people irrespective of your employment status.

Ride the emotional rollercoaster:

I knew the end of my contract was definitely coming for nearly a month before I hit that last day. I've felt sad, resigned to it, frustrated (not at my bosses or colleagues but at the funding decision makers and their processes), an urge to protect and support colleagues when they were feeling low and vulnerable, I've cried and been door-slammingly, walk off my frustrations, level of angry at the decision that has ejected me from a job I was really enjoying, and from a lovely team to boot. I've also felt optimism that something will come and despair that I might be out of work for ages at a time when we need to move house and need to secure a mortgage.

Sleep:

Never underestimate the power of sleep – it is a super power in my book. Unfortunately it does sometimes allude me at moments of high stress – I recently had my worst sleepless night – being awake for 36 straight hours. I don't recommend that, but I do recommend going with your body – I've managed to sleep better at night recently, but I've also felt I've had license to have a little afternoon nap – stretching out for 20 minutes the other afternoon, for example. Losing a job, looking for a new job, not to mention the process of applying, are all physically, cognitively, and emotionally tiring so help your body by getting sleep.

CV:

This is probably pretty obvious but take the chance to update your CV – HR should be able to advise prior to your end of contract but also seek out trusted friends/colleagues to

look over it – even if it is just to spot typos. Consider if you need different CVs, too. I'm in the process of redrafting my non-academic CV for jobs outside of academia having already brushed up my academic CV.

Keep an open mind...but set your boundaries:

It is easy to fall into the trap of only going for the same thing, not wanting, or feeling able to try something different, or feeling that being outside of academia is somehow lesser than an academic career. It isn't, but it might not be aligned to your values and what you want out of a career. Then again you may just simply not know and be assuming (we've all been there). I've worked in and outside of academia – both prior to and since getting my PhD. Rightly or wrongly, depending on your perspective, it is an industry like many others – not the ivory tower of myth and legend, but an industry with an economic model that whilst I don't agree with it, I accept exists. A while and a couple of jobs ago, having been turned down for an academic role I really thought I had a chance of at the time, I was told in my feedback that I'd been 'out of academia' for too long. Just for context I'd been working in another branch of education for precisely 6 months at this point. At the time the comment really stung, and I was completely frustrated by it. Now, however, I think of that comment and laugh to myself. Even if I don't know precisely who said that I'd guess that it was someone who has spent their whole life working inside the university sector and doesn't have a clue about work outside of it. In so doing they probably cannot conceptualise transferable skills or recognise the value that working outside of academia can bring if you have a positive attitude to it. Nor in the other direction. In what was a new role for me, colleagues assumed I'd been in the sector for ages, rather than just being able to assimilate new processes quite rapidly. For as tumultuous as my career path has been I'm at least glad it has saved me from constrained thinking about what I can and cannot do. I also know that a career path is not one-directional and being out of one industry does not automatically equate with being out of it forever. A career path is just that, a path, which by definition can lead to more than one destination, as well as back on itself. So go with what feels right, don't be afraid to try something different – just articulate your value and your skills – and equally if something isn't for you, don't do it just for the sake of.

Location, location, and boundaries:

Are you prepared to move for work? Are you in a position to? Even if you are, do you really want to? After my PhD I was prepared to move – and I zigzagged across the country, from one university to another, from temporary contract to temporary contract. Sure I gained lots of experience and made lots of friends and colleagues along the way. I saw how different departments worked and also the kinds of workplace cultures and practices I am and am not prepared to work in. I'm no longer prepared to just up sticks and move. My partner is doing his PhD at the University of Leeds and I'm not prepared to live apart from him for the sake of a job. I'm prepared to commute for maximum an hour, which gives geographical boundaries to where I will look for work. I'm also prepared to work remotely for the most part, with the occasional commute a longer distance, say down to London. This may seem as if I'm closing myself off to potential job opportunities but really if the lifestyle costs, not to mention the financial costs of running two homes, is

too high, then it is no opportunity at all. Work-life balance is crucial and if work means sacrificing life then it is no life at all. Decide what's right for you and become comfortable with it.

Audit what you do:

It can be the case, especially in academia, that we have additional roles that we do voluntarily, ones that are with different organisations to our employer. They can be career enhancing, and make you feel more anchored in a community. Indeed, some are about community building. Others are more related to profit than just developing the field. I've roles in both areas. I've known for a while that I've been juggling too much, and you might think that now I'm out of work that weight is lifted, but not really. Previously these roles had made me feel part of a community, that I had purpose irrespective of my employment status. I've grown with them, and I've benefitted from them, and hopefully I've made a difference, too. I've certainly enjoyed them. Yet, recently I've felt the need to move on, to make opportunities for others in some instances – those that are community building, not for profit, to allow myself time and space for new opportunities (which may also be voluntary) but allow for personal growth, and in others to say, I've done enough for free. If you do something voluntarily that relies on free labour for profit, then perhaps it is based on an economic model that needs to go. Take from it the experience you can but don't feel obliged to do something for no pay. So even though I'm now looking for work I'm auditing my voluntary roles, letting some go whilst staying on in another until the end of the role's term.

Join / Don't isolate yourself:

Now this may sound contradictory given my preceding point, but I don't mean suddenly start volunteering and doing hours of unpaid labour. I mean sign-up for things – they can be free online courses, talks, or something else entirely. It is all too easy to feel isolated at this point but being involved, talking to people leads to opportunities.

Allow yourself to be looked after:

My first instinct on knowing my and my colleagues jobs were going, was to reach out and help my colleagues – solidarity in adversity and whilst we were in a bubble of non-disclosure we needed the pressure valve release of talking, walking and eating chocolate. Now I'm out of work I've felt the need to be looked after too – from time spent with my partner, just doing things – going to the library together whilst he worked on his thesis, and I on an article; talking with friends and family; letting my dad take me shopping and buy me two, big, comfy and very cosy jumpers. It all helps.

Do but don't just job hunt:

Do stuff – yes, you need to look for jobs, find and apply but it is labour intensive, and you can't do it all day, every day. For one you'll burn out and therefore won't do it to the best of your ability, wasting your time and frustrating yourself, for another it might just drive you

to despair. I've been giving myself tasks to do. Handily, I do have article revisions to do so I've been working on those this week, feeling a sense of achievement. I've also worked on some translations and am contemplating a new little side project. I've updated my [Linkedin profile](#) and my [website](#). I've had conversations with others that I'm turning into blog posts. I've spent time just reading. It all helps.

Structure your days your way:

It is really tempting to pull the duvet over your head on a morning and say I'm just hiding away. That won't help in the long run. I'm also not very good at being bored and am reliably informed I am a pain to be with when I don't know what to do with myself (I admit it makes me really cranky). So, I've set myself tasks each day, and I've got up around the time I usually do, and I've put myself into a routine of sorts. It's not strict and set to a firm 9-5 routine – I've honestly never liked the constraints of that – I like to be in the driving seat and if I want to start at 8, I do.

Eat well:

Yes, there has been chocolate consumption in the last few weeks (there often is anyway). Some indulgence is fine but eat well – a good healthy balanced diet will help your energy levels and your mood. I find the act of cooking is also soothing.

Exercise:

As with wanting to pull the duvet over your head, it is tempting to say, I just can't be bothered, but do something – no matter how small. I've been out on my bike more than I have been in previous weeks and when the weather was too bad for cycling, I've been out for a walk. I've also borrowed my sister's dogs and taken them walking, watching their boundless joy as they scamper about the fields always lifts my mood.

Keep on going, and do what feels right:

That's it really, just keep on going and do what feels right for you at this moment in time. I thought about this guide a couple of days ago and today it just felt right to write it, so I have. I may add to it over the coming days and weeks, I'm treating it as a work-in-progress.

Above all I really hope this is useful – if not for now – then for when you need it.