



Cheekyscientist.com. Isaiah Hankel, Ph.D.

## 7 Career Advantages PhDs Have Outside Of Academia

Having a PhD is a significant advantage. Don't let others confuse you. PhDs get paid higher than non-PhDs and are in high demand. Trained professionals who know how to create information, not just repackage it, are desperately needed. Entrepreneurship and innovation are at an [all time high](#). According to the McKinsey Global Institute, by 2018 there [won't be enough scientists](#) in the world. These trends will continue as the economy continues to favor innovation.

If you have a PhD or are on your way to having one and you're reading this, the future is yours. The only thing that can hold you back is yourself—by choosing to be one dimensional and choosing to ignore the less objective soft skills that will complement your PhD and make you a magnet for industry success. A PhD offers you great advantages over other job candidates and over the population in general.

### 1. They know how to find answers.

The top [three desired skills](#) for every industry position are critical thinking, complex problem solving, and correct decision-making. In other words, you have to be able to identify problems, find the right problem, and then find the right answer to that problem. Guess what?—PhDs excel in all three of these areas.

Never forget the fact that you are a researcher. You are highly trained in identifying problems and finding solutions to those problems. **Think of all the uncountable hours, days, week, months, and years (even decades!) you've spent trying to find answers to the world's toughest unknown questions.**

You know how to attack questions from every different angle. You know how to follow a lead through 5 academic journal articles, 7 book references, and a plot in a figure that was published 15 years ago just because it helps prove some minute aspect of your overall hypothesis. While most people are skimming nonsense on a message board, you have the research skills needed to dig deeply into Google Scholar and PubMed to find credible information. Employers value this. Make sure they know you have these skills.

### 2. They don't fear failure, they learn from it.

Remember when you graduated college at the top of your class and went to graduate school thinking you were going to be a rock star doctor with golden hands who would be able to get world-changing, Nature-worthy data in a few weeks? Yeah, that didn't last long. You learned pretty quickly that you would have to do some experiments 30 times just to find an answer to the tiniest question and then you'd have to do 30 more experiments to get the right p-value.

You failed over and over and over again, daily, without recognition or a decent paycheck. Yet, you woke up the next morning to do it all over again. Why? Because you knew that each failure would take you closer to getting the one piece data that would bring it all together. You woke up to fail again because failure is the best teacher—failure showed you what to do next.

Do you think most people are like this? No, they're not. Most people are quitters who would rather do nothing than fail. These people fail once and quit, or succeed and don't get a pat on the back and quit. You have a major advantage over these people.



### **3. They know how to deal with negative bosses.**

My academic advisor was brilliant and hardworking and a complete jerk. He would make me feel useless and small and stupid every day that I went into the lab. He'd yell at me, position other students against me, and try to block me from graduating. He even cancelled the congratulatory lab party that was supposed to happen after I defended my thesis.

I never used to talk about it because I thought I was the only one who had to deal with this kind of negative mentorship in graduate school. I was wrong. It turns out that hundreds of other PhDs have had very similar experiences. The problem is academics can become professors without any kind of management or interpersonal skills training. As a result, some students get horrible mentors.

During the five years I was in graduate school, there were at least three cases of professors either abusing students or sleeping with them. This is a widespread problem in academia that gets hushed up by Universities with huge teams of lawyers. Here's my point—if you can deal with this kind of tyranny, you can easily deal with anything that comes your way in industry. Sure, I've had bad bosses in industry too but nothing that compares to what I had to deal with in academia.

In industry, you have human resource departments, you have management training programs, you have firm harassment laws, on and on. If you're in academia now and struggling with a negative mentor, know this—you'll never have it this bad again and everything you're going through is preparing you for a better future in industry.

### **4. They are comfortable with uncertainty.**

If you have a PhD or are getting a PhD, you've probably spent years of your life smack in the middle of uncertainty. You have no idea if your next grant is going to be funded. You have no idea if your paper is going to get passed that damn third reviewer and get published. You have no idea when your committee is going to give you the green light to defend your thesis. You don't even know if the project you're working on has an answer at all! Everything you're doing—your life's work—could be proven untrue at anytime.

As a PhD, you're not just comfortable with uncertainty, you thrive on it. You know that without uncertainty, discovery would be impossible. Most people don't get this. Most people want a sure thing and will spend their entire lives choosing unhappiness over uncertainty. Use this to your advantage. Be willing to take risks that other people are not willing to take.

### **5. They don't just regurgitate information, they create it.**

One of my committee members once told me the difference between leaving graduate school with a Masters degree versus leaving with a PhD. He said that a Masters degree is granted to those who have mastered a field while a PhD is granted to those who have added to a field.

Less than 2% of the population has a PhD. Why? Because adding to a field is hard. Anyone can learn something and then repackage it. Anyone can regurgitate information. That's easy. It's so much harder to create information—to bring knowledge into existence for the very first time.

If you have a PhD, you are a creator of information. This is one of your most valuable and most transferable skills. Don't assume that everyone can create information. Most people can't even do a book report. You, on the other hand, have spent years creating information and months putting it together into a hundred page story called a thesis just so 5 other people can read it. This kind of innovation and tenacity is uncommon.



## 6. They thrive on both competition and collaboration.

One of our consultants was working one-on-one with a PhD candidate who was about to defend her thesis but had no job prospects. She really wanted to transition into industry but felt that it was impossible given her lack of industry experience.

This soon-to-be PhD claimed that the number one reason she was not able to find work was because industry employers thought that she was too independent and wouldn't be able to work with a team. The consultant asked her if she had put anything on her resume about being team-oriented. No, she said. The consultant asked her if she had studied up on each company's culture before interviewing. No, she said again. Did she ask any questions during the interview? No. On and on. Things seemed bleak but after a few weeks of working together, she got a job. What happened?

One of the biggest changes the PhD candidate made to her approach was preparing questions that would show the employer she was team-oriented. She asked questions like, "Can you tell me a little about the working environment here—will I be able to work closely with a team?" and "Given your company's focus on diversity and teamwork, do you think it would be possible, if I'm hired, to schedule short meetings with each department to get to know everyone?"

If you have a PhD, you've worked very closely with other students. You've had to compete for resources and for publications and you've had to share resources and collaborate to get published. No one is more qualified than you to work with a team. Don't let this hold you back. Position yourself properly, ask the right questions, and get the job you want.

## 7. They are qualified for any industry position.

Every job is a PhD job. You can never be too qualified for a job. An employer telling you that you're overqualified for a position is like someone breaking up with you and saying it's not you it's me. It is you. They're turning you down politely and sparing your feelings. The real reason they didn't want to hire you is your lack of social skills or your inability to present yourself for the position at hand. I've sat on hiring committees who have used the excuse of PhDs being overqualified. It's never true. The real reason is always something else.

Imagine you're trying to hire the best person to work for you and your company, would you turn down an amazing candidate because he or she is too qualified? No, you wouldn't. You would snatch them up and let them thrive in that position or you would promote them to another position. Overqualified means wrongly qualified. If you ever get turned down for a job for being overqualified, simply change your approach. Don't complain about the system being against you. Go back and figure out exactly what the employer is working for. Leverage your PhD and experience towards their interests, not your own. Rewrite your resume, change your interview approach, and position yourself correctly this time.

We recently held an insider webinar series on rebounding from this kind of rejection. Two attendees who were told they were overqualified used the tips in the webinars to reposition themselves. They both reapplied to similar positions at the same companies and were hired. Having a PhD perfectly qualifies you for any industry position. When you strip a PhD down, it's really just a degree in knowledge. You're a Doctor of Philosophy after all. Your gift is your ability to acquire knowledge and use it to your advantage. You have the knowledge. Now all you have to do is leverage it.