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## A conversation with Jen Polk, History PhD, a career coach and business owner (Part 1)

by *Monica Gates*

[http://www.beyondacademia.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/rVMhGSH7\\_400x400.jpg](http://www.beyondacademia.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/rVMhGSH7_400x400.jpg)) Jen Polk, PhD, graduated with a degree in history from the University of Toronto before going on to launch a career as a career coach and co-founder of [Beyond the Professoriate](https://community.beyondprof.com/) (<https://community.beyondprof.com/>). Cheerful and down-to-earth, she sat down for a Skype call to tell me about her current job and where she's been. I, Monica, am a blogger for [Beyond Academia](http://www.beyondacademia.org/) (<http://www.beyondacademia.org/>) and was excited to hear about her path.



This is the first of a two-part interview with Jen; see her advice for newly-minted PhD students in [Part 2](http://www.beyondacademia.org/a-conversation-with-jen-polk-history-phd-a-career-coach-and-business-owner-part-2/) (<http://www.beyondacademia.org/a-conversation-with-jen-polk-history-phd-a-career-coach-and-business-owner-part-2/>)!

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**Monica:** What's the path you took to get here?

**Jen:** I finished my PhD in February 2012. The graduation ceremony in June 2012 was important for me, because it meant that I looked at my name on the piece of paper and it was *real*. Then I flailed

around trying to figure stuff out: there was frustration and annoyance and crappy part-time jobs, but I had savings; so I could do this. Then in November, I hired and started working with a coach. This was not planned; I had never worked with a coach before, it just came up and I was able to do it. I'd never done any therapy, I'd basically never talked to anybody about myself before, so it wasn't an obvious thing for me to do, but it was a life changing experience working with her.

### *The blog*

**Jen:** Working with her was really important as a catalyst for me continuing to take action. I started a blog in December, so that's about 5-6 weeks after I started working with the coach: I created the blog From PhD to Life (<https://fromphdtolife.com/>). The intention was for it to be a blog, because I'd had a blog years before, something totally unrelated. I knew the medium, so I told myself I was just going to start a new blog! I started interviewing people— this is the “Transition Q and As (<https://fromphdtolife.com/resources/transition-q-as/>)” series— and I got on Twitter... this is January, February '13. Eventually my blog got picked up by a Canadian publication called University Affairs (<https://www.universityaffairs.ca/>), and they asked me if I would blog for them. So then my blog lived on University Affairs, which was a bigger platform for me.

### *The coaching business*

**Jen:** A few months later, about early summer of 2013, I decided that I was going to learn how to be a life coach. I took a class. I took more classes after that, but I started with that one class on how to be a coach. In class we were talking about how you needed a niche, and I realized, “Oh, I already have a niche!” Because the website [From PhD to Life] was already up, and I already had a bit of a following on social media. Just a month after I started that course, I had my first client. I was very open about what I was doing: “I'm starting coach training, I need practice coaching, who wants to help me? Oh, you helped me, who wants to pay \$10 a session...?” It was very organic in that way. There was no strategy really involved in this. I started the business saying “Let's give this a try!” I don't recommend doing that exactly, but I think the instinct behind it of “let me just start where I'm at,” and being open about it; you know, “join me on this journey”, I recommend that. That's how it started: the blog came first, and then the business came out of the blog. When I say business— I was making almost no money, but I was starting.

### *Beyond the Professoriate*

**Jen:** I don't know who recognized who first, but in the fall of 2013, Maren Wood and I spoke. Maren was writing at the same time in the Chronicle of Higher Education (<https://www.chronicle.com/blogs/phd/author/mwood/>), and Maren and I had done our Master's degrees together, like nine years before that. We'd been out of touch in the years since. But we ended up speaking, and Maren had this idea for this online conference that she pitched to me.

**Jen:** I said, “Yeah, let's do it!” I'm a little bit like that, like, “Let's just do it.” So we launched the first of what ended up being an annual conference; it's webinars, and I think it's genius. We just did our fifth annual conference in May 2018. So that's how I got started working with Maren and that project,

that conference, was and still is called Beyond the Professoriate

(<https://community.beyondprof.com/>). That business really started off as coming together for a few months a year to put on this conference. Maren and I both had our own separate [coaching] businesses. They were related, and sort of competing, but we're very different personalities so we had different types of clients.

### *Expanding Beyond the Professoriate*

**Jen:** But then a year and a half ago, we starting having conversations about how we needed to make Beyond the Professoriate more than a once-a-year thing: let's join forces year-round and figure out how we can do that. About a year ago we started working together much more year-round, and now both Maren [my cofounder] and I work on that company pretty much full time. The business has three main components to it. One is a community for individuals, which individuals can join for a few dollars a month. The second is launching in August: it's an e-learning platform for institutions: universities. Then the third part of Beyond the Professoriate is the annual event I mentioned.

**Jen:** Both Maren and I basically don't have our own businesses anymore; I don't have many clients. There's no time. It's amazing to me how different [what I do now] is from being entirely self-employed. Before, I maybe hired contractors, but did my own thing, really, for myself and my clients. But building a business with a partner where you require more resources... a bigger business is more ambitious, and it's just so different. It's not, but it is. I'm still so surprised all the time. There are so many more moving parts and there are so many additional skills to learn. It's very impressive, and amazing and crazy.

**Monica:** What are the skills?

**Jen:** Maren and I come out of humanities (history) PhD programs, and we are super good at working on our own. That's what it is to be a humanities PhD for the most part: you do your own stuff, and that works very well when it comes to self-employment. That sets you up less well when it comes to having a team and having to work with a team all the time. Not every second of every day, but most days Maren and I talk, and we have team members that we communicate with, employees and contractors, every day. Managing other people, even if they're awesome— it's the type of work that I'd never done before ever. Then there are things like: I'm learning how to do payroll, I'm doing my taxes for business, I'm doing bookkeeping, I'm sending invoices, and all this little stuff that you just don't do at all as a grad student. It's very different. It's a lot of learning all the time; it's a lot of making mistakes all the time.

**Monica:** What's your day-to-day like in terms of like tasks?

**Jen:** I have a desk job primarily. I work from home: I send emails, I communicate with my team and Maren. For example, today I hosted a webinar— I didn't deliver the webinar, I was the host, and then I did all the stuff I needed to do on Vimeo. I uploaded the file and I sent instructions to our video editor and then I was sending instructions to our a graphic designer, and I was checking their work.

This is not necessarily every day, but that's today. I was updating stuff on the websites, I was on social media, I'm talking to you.

**Jen:** I do a lot of organizing, like setting up group meetings. I have to be really organized with what I do. Ideally, I would do more creative work. I would do more coaching and more one-on-one meetings with folks or group meetings, and I would do a little more writing work, creative work. I do some of that. I do lots of stuff but it's all on the computer. Our team is located all over, and our clients and our collaborators are all over, mostly in the US. It's fun. It's been fun. It's been neat.

**Jen:** Basically Maren and I get to decide between ourselves what we each do, and I think a lot of jobs are kind of like that. Some jobs are: we need you to do this and you're doing this, and that's part of my job— like, “Maren's on vacation and so I have to do this”. But the stuff we don't want to do, we can potentially hire someone to do it. It's nice. It's nice to have people working for you. It's nice not to have to do everything.

**Monica:** Do you enjoy it?

**Jen:** Yes. I think it's true for both [Maren and I] that we are doing stuff now to build this business and to make it successful that long-term we don't want to be doing as much, so there's definitely parts of the job that I don't love so much. But I'm happy to do it because it's all part of a strategy, and it's all important for long-term growth and success and we need that, because I make no money off this business right now: I'm not getting paid. So it's really important to keep doing it. While I do like it, I think long-term I'd be doing slightly different things than I'm doing now, because there are definitely things that I'm doing that are not my strengths, but we're small team and I have to do it.

**Monica:** I was going to ask: what your least favorite and favorite parts of your job?

**Jen:** The thing that, I mean it sounds silly, but the thing that I find super stressful is emailing people. What I really enjoy... I love the conference. Outside of the conference, as part of the community we host live events. I host webinars and career panels, and that's really fun. Even more fun than that for me is when I'm facilitating group coaching sessions or group strategy sessions, and those are live. I like coaching; I like coaching one on one and I really like the group coaching. I hope to do more of that. The other thing that I like, which I don't do very much of nowadays, is that I actually enjoy networking. I like talking with people; I actually like having conversations like this and I'm hopeful that I can do more of that. The idea is that the business will stick around so that we can grow, and then there will be a role for me to network. Also, I do like— when there's time for it, which there never is— I like writing and blogging.

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See [Part 2 \(http://www.beyondacademia.org/a-conversation-with-jen-polk-history-phd-a-career-coach-and-business-owner-part-2/\)](http://www.beyondacademia.org/a-conversation-with-jen-polk-history-phd-a-career-coach-and-business-owner-part-2/) for Jen's advice to PhDs!



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