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## A conversation with Jen Polk, History PhD, a career coach and business owner (Part 2)

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 (see [FromPhDtoLife.com](http://FromPhDtoLife.com) (<https://fromphdtolife.com/>)), writer (see her [blog](https://www.universityaffairs.ca/career-advice/beyond-the-professoriate/) (<https://www.universityaffairs.ca/career-advice/beyond-the-professoriate/>)), host of [Self-Employed PhD](http://selfemployedphd.com)



(<http://selfemployedphd.com>) and now cofounder 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 chat about advice for newly-minted PhDs. I, Monica, am a blogger for [Beyond Academia](http://www.beyondacademia.org/) (<http://www.beyondacademia.org/>) and was excited to hear her thoughts.

This is the second part of a two-part interview with Jen; see her story in [Part 1](http://www.beyondacademia.org/a-conversation-with-jen-polk-history-phd-a-career-coach-and-business-owner-part-1/) (<http://www.beyondacademia.org/a-conversation-with-jen-polk-history-phd-a-career-coach-and-business-owner-part-1/>)!

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**Monica:** What do you recommend to newly-minted PhDs in terms of career pursuit?

### *The job search*

**Jen:** I think folks think that the job search is about looking at job ads and applying, and that's part of it. But actually that's the last part of it. There's so, so much to do before you even get there, and ideally you're doing that stuff intentionally. And that stuff is knowing yourself, and knowing what's out there.

**Jen:** You should also be gaining experience if you need it and learning new skills if you need them. Then you can look at job ads and apply. But really there is a lot to do beforehand, and that's the advice I would give to people: now is the time to start doing that early stuff, knowing yourself and knowing what's out there.

### *Know yourself*

**Jen:** You need to really figure out who you are. I don't mean for that to sound silly, I really mean it. We live and breathe academic culture and it imposes a lot of values on us and things that we want. I was just listening to a

clip today from a former panelist who was saying "I don't care if I ever see my name in print on an article ever again, but a year ago that would have been super, super important to me." That's the kind of thing I mean by academia imposing values on you. You might take in that it's really, really important for you to be doing x, y, and z, but you've got to figure out: is that actually really important to YOU? You've got to figure that out for yourself, and maybe it is, maybe it isn't. You really need to know yourself, and do all of those exercises I alluded to before.

**Jen:** What do you actually like doing? What are the tasks that you do like? Not just what your knowledge is— your knowledge is important, many jobs can tie into your knowledge. Not in my case, but for some people, yes, absolutely. But beyond that and more importantly for many of us, what are your skills? What are the tasks that you've done? What are your experiences? Then there are things like, what kind of work environments do you thrive in? Really figure that out. Think about what you've done in the context of people in your program. What did those people do, what did you do that was different? I think that's really important: we're not all the same just because we all have the same degree. We're all different. So figure out yourself.

### *Know what's out there*

**Jen:** The next thing is, and it's concurrent of course, is to figure out what's out there. Don't make assumptions. You don't know what's out there. I don't know what's out there either, because there's *so much* out there. You have to explore, and you have to really be open-minded. That curiosity and that love of learning that so many of us have in PhD programs? That's to your benefit. Just really embrace that and learn about what's out there. Keep an open mind and ultimately those two things together is what's going to help you actually take the step forward with making you feel more confident. Because you're gonna know who you are and what's important to you, and you're just going to feel more confident about that. Then you're talking to people, and you're getting more

experience and you're learning the lingo, and people are going to give you advice. Then you're going to be able to do all the stuff you have to do, like write resumes or read job ads and actually apply to stuff and go to interviews and negotiate and whatever. But know yourself, know what's out there. That's the simple answer.

*An example*

**Monica:** What did you not know was out there?

**Jen:** Everything! One answer is... I did freelance work for a couple of years before I finished my PhD, not high-level stuff at all. I took a few things from that experience. One is that I don't just like research for the sake of research. I like research because it tells us something. I learned that it was fun to work on a team of people and to contribute to something bigger than just my own project. I also learned, and I don't mean this in any negative way, but that you didn't have to be a genius to have your own business. I had no experience at all with self-employment or people having their own businesses, entrepreneurship, none of that at all growing up. Working with these consultants—they were very highly skilled and had lots of experience and did good work, but they weren't super geniuses. They were just regular smart, talented, good folks. I was not intimidated by them in the way that I imagined that I would be intimidated by business owners. That was actually a really important lesson, that I could do something similar to that. Trying out stuff is important.

*Try things!*

**Jen:** Knowing yourself and knowing what's out there is just so important. Let me quote [my cofounder] Maren [Wood]: your next job is not your last job. So many of us put enormous amounts of pressure on ourselves that the next job we get after a PhD is going to be the career job, is going to be *the* job, is going to be awesome. Academia sets us up to think that way, because if you don't get your tenure track job right away, you're probably not going to get it. That's just how it works in academia. That is not how it works anywhere else, like *anywhere* else. So your next job is not going to be your last job and there is an opportunity here, this is your chance to— not just take *any* job that you're going to hate— but try a few things out.

*What about experience?*

**Jen:** There are lots of things that you could do to gain experience if you don't have it. People get frustrated and say, "I can't get hired because I have no experience, but how can I get experience if they won't hire me?" But there are lots of ways to get experience, whether you're doing freelance work or you're volunteering or doing part-time jobs, contracts. All these things are good: part-time, contract work, freelancing. It's good if it's moving in the right direction and it might be the only way that you can move in the right direction.

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**Monica:** What did the soul searching, choosing post-PhD career period look like for you?

**Jen:** I was unpleasant to be around for a while. It was frustrating. I came out of a program where there's basically no profession for people like me aside from academia; this is common for a lot of us. There are very few jobs that call for historians and most jobs that call for historians are not in my field. There's no obvious job to go to. You're not going to be a professor. So you have to figure out, well, what else can I do? And then you look at jobs like working as an editor or in a museum or being a journalist. Those kinds of jobs didn't necessarily appeal to me, but also there are professional pathways into those jobs. I can't just waltz in as a history PhD with no experience and say I'm going to be an editor. You can do a whole degree of editing. You can do a Masters or PhD in museum studies; they don't need me. I'm not actually trained to do these jobs. It's very frustrating. You can't be a professor, and these other jobs are also not really accessible to you. Then that's it. No one has any other advice for you.

**Jen:** I feel like that's really, really, really common for folks in arts and humanities and social sciences. Our fields don't exist for the most part beyond academia. Like if you have a degree in musicology, maybe there's like five jobs that are available to you with a degree in musicology, but otherwise you need to do something else. It's very difficult because you have to start over, potentially, at least in terms of thinking about what you like to do, and you've got to reframe everything starting from "I'm an expert in early 20th-century American-Russian relations". That blue book [(she points)] is my dissertation. And that is totally, utterly, completely irrelevant and useless. I don't say that to put myself down, it's just that it's not useful in a direct way because nobody cares about the content.

**Jen:** You've got to figure out: but what *is* useful about what I've done, and what do I *like* doing? And you can't just say, I like researching. I like teaching. I like writing. That's too big. You have to break it down with what *specifically* do you like doing? Like, Maren really likes strategic thinking. That's a thing. I really like proofreading, that's a thing. Strategic thinker is not a job title, but that's how you have to do it. I really liked mentoring students one-on-one. I did not like grading papers. You've got to figure out, okay, what are the 100 things that you did, and what are the 10 things you actually like doing? Then you have to do your research— by talking to people, primarily, but also reading job ads and just doing other sorts of research to figure out how the stuff that you said you like doing exists outside, what's the same sort of core skill, the same core interest. For example, I like mentoring students one-on-one. You learn over time in a different context that's maybe called training, that's maybe called managing, that's maybe called facilitation. You've got to figure out where these core interests exist outside, and what they're called and what language to use. That takes time. And you've gotta keep your spirits up; you can't be doing informational interviews feeling like an asshole. That's not compelling and attractive in a job candidate. It's just really difficult in ways that I think for outsiders it's hard to understand.

**Jen:** It's a practical problem; it's challenging to get a job, it's challenging to write a resume if you've never done one before. These are new things that are difficult to do for practical purposes. But it's also psychologically very challenging. Ultimately I was totally fine: I had savings and the worst that could ever happen to me was that I would have to move in with my parents. But you know, it's tough, it's psychologically challenging. Definitely a different mindset from being in the PhD, where everything's more focused. You have an identity. "I did a PhD, I'm a grad student, I'm an academic.

This is why." Then you finish and you're out and maybe you feel like a loser and people ask, "What are you doing next?" And you're like, "I don't know," because you don't.

**Monica:** Do you regret the PhD?

**Jen:** I don't regret it, but if I could go back in time to give my past self advice, I would strongly advise she not do it. People would fight me on that, but I've heard people say similar things. There's no point regretting, and I like my life now, and my life would be very different if I hadn't had done a PhD. It's impossible to know in what ways it will be different. But I think we make a big fallacy in thinking that if we hadn't done our PhDs... you'd probably still be smart and still curious. Still interesting. It would have been different, but it might have been easier than it had been. It might've been worse, but... I finished my PhD at 32 years old and I had no job experience. That's a hard thing. That's why I think there are easier paths.

**Jen:** I mean, it doesn't make me a better person that I did a PhD. It doesn't make me a worse person, but I think there are better ways to do this. I think people really need to think long and hard, and there's a lot that goes into it. There's a lot that goes into it, your own personal situation and how much funding you get and what kind of program you're in, etc. There are a lot of smart people in the world doing interesting things, and some of them are PhDs and most of them aren't, just because there's so few of us. I came from a family that did not attend grad school, but where education was highly valued, which I think is common. My dad was a grade seven teacher for 25 years, and my mom was a civil servant at a government agency for 35 years. They had very different careers and types of careers, and then there are Millennials. We have very different careers, and I didn't know anything about that at all. The people I looked up to were my university professors, but they don't know about other stuff like that either; there's so much out there that on they don't know about. So I don't regret it, and I don't mean to sound bitter, but I would caution people that are younger and thinking about it, or that are in it who are maybe not happy, that there are better things to do potentially.

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Thank you, Jen!



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