Steps I took to transition into consulting

Understanding how humanists can translate their academic skills

Following your curiosity

Rachel Waxman
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Thanks for sharing your story, Rachel. Can you tell us a little about yourself?

Currently, I’m a PhD candidate in the history department. Before starting my program, I worked a number of jobs—including gigs at a wine store, an advertising agency, and a book publicity firm—and lived in my hometown of Kansas City, in New York, and in Montreal. I think it would be fair to say I was a bit all over the place!

What inspires you every day?

Under normal, non-pandemic times (and during pandemics, too, I suppose), I’m inspired by the possibility of unexplored paths. Specifically, I’m motivated by a desire to create a non-traditional career path that pulls together a little bit of everything that fascinates me. I’ve never been satisfied with the idea of putting myself into a single “career box.” I believe that if you follow your curiosity and put in the work, you can forge a very interesting and fulfilling professional life that is unique to you. When work feels like a slog, I try to remember this bigger vision.

That all said, I’ll admit that during the pandemic, I’m also greatly inspired by the promise of a glass of wine at the end of the day.

What motivated you to pursue a PhD in History?

This is something I reflect on a lot, especially when I’m feeling disconnected from my research.

In terms of a concrete motivation, I pursued a PhD because I wanted to have the experience and credentials I believed were necessary in order to write history books. I didn’t necessarily have in mind the goal of becoming a professor, although I think I had some vague idea about wanting to become “a scholar.” Were these good motivations for pursuing a PhD? Who knows, but I’m here now.

What were some of your professional goals at the start of the program? How did they evolve along the way?

The motivation to write books hasn’t changed. In terms of wanting to be a scholar, I’ve since come to realize that life is about doing, not about being. I also experienced a major professional identity crisis about halfway through my program, when I started freaking out about whether or not I wanted to be a professor and changed my mind about it every other day. Graduate school can do weird things to the psyche, and frankly, I think this identity crisis will be with me for life. One day, God willing, I’ll wake up at the age of eighty and wonder if perhaps I should start applying for academic jobs.

You are about to begin a career as a consultant. When and how did you get interested in consulting?

As with so many other things in my life, my foray into consulting began with a long period of research and indecision, followed by a sudden jolt of action.
For some reason, I was mostly unaware of management consulting as a career path when I was an undergraduate. But oddly enough, I did know about the case interview, so the career center folks must have done a good job promoting their interview workshops. It was probably sometime in my fourth year of the PhD that the idea of consulting came to mind as a viable career path. I’m really not sure how I came upon it, but I’ve always been interested in business and problem-solving and I like wearing lots of proverbial hats. I also enjoy Google searches. So I probably threw together some keywords in an impassioned attempt to sort out my life, and came upon management consulting resources online.

The next step was talking to current and former consultants. I did a lot of this over the course of about a year, because I wanted to clear up some concerns I had about consulting: namely, that I would be forced to work 20-hour days and 100% of the time would be dedicated to crunching numbers in Excel. This was decidedly not what I wanted. Thanks to the lovely people I chatted with, I learned that while consulting can certainly be demanding, only some firms require excessively long hours, and while Excel is part of the game, the work also involves creativity and plenty of qualitative research. In other words, consulting was more like what I hoped and less like what I feared. It was after a conversation I had with a former consultant when I was in California for a research trip that I finally decided to go for it. I signed up for an info session with a firm in DC, which led to meeting a bunch of other graduate students aspiring to work in management consulting, which led to finding case

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interview practice partners, which led to fully committing to preparing for interviews... etc. The point is, once I committed, one thing just kind of led to another until I eventually landed my future job.

**In your own words, what do consultants do?**

Consultants are essentially “hired brains” that help companies and other organizations solve problems. Say, for example, you own a yoga studio and suddenly a pandemic hits. No one’s coming in for classes anymore. You might call in a consulting firm to help you cut costs, find new revenue streams, and maybe even change your business model. Or you’re a car manufacturer with a new electric vehicle in the works but you’re not sure how to price it. This is something a consulting firm might help with. This is a fairly common example, but the types of problems organizations face are limitless.

**What are some of the strengths & set of skills that a humanist can bring to consulting?**

Based on my experience so far, I would say there are two main things humanists bring to the table. The first is written and oral communication skills. STEM PhDs can obviously have these skills as well, but given the amount of writing we do as humanities PhDs and given the way our training works, we tend to be more fluent in this area. The second thing—and this is a major one—is our ability to deal with ambiguity. Things are rarely black and white in the humanities. The humanities are all about argument, persuasion, nuance, ambiguity. In the sciences, contradictory data often means something’s wrong. In the humanities, contradictory data is our lifeblood. The sources I use in my historical research are messy and vague and speak in all directions, and it’s my job to make sense of it and tell a story about it. The same is often true in the business world. The data might be unclear, there may be no right or wrong answer, but you have to work with what you’ve got and make sense of it. As humanists, we do this quite well.

You and others are evidence that Humanists can transition into consulting roles, how can humanists translate their academic skills to non-academic roles?

Consulting firms are usually looking for problem-solving skills, leadership, teamwork, and quantitative skills. Humanities PhDs are well-positioned to show these first two skills but might struggle with giving evidence of the last two. In terms of problem-solving, this doesn’t have to be interpreted so literally. We can talk about our critical analysis skills, our experience dealing with complex (and ambiguous!) sources, or our ability to make sense of conflicting information. When it comes to leadership, teaching is a huge one. Or, think about the times you’ve organized something: a conference, a conference panel, a workshop, a reading group, anything. You have the skills, you just need to be able to describe them in a way that is concrete and that others will understand.

Things get trickier when trying to show evidence of teamwork. Is participating in a graduate seminar teamwork? (You know, working together to figure out a book? Maybe?) I thought about this once and decided it was too much of a stretch.
Consulting can be a great option for humanities PhDs who enjoy working with people, who crave the satisfaction that comes from making a tangible impact on the world, and who—I think it goes without saying—enjoy intellectually stimulating problems. Academics often talk about how wonderful it is to get paid to think. But academia doesn’t have the corner on that market. Consultants are also paid to think, just in a different context.

So this is one where you might need to take on something extracurricular, even if it’s small. Organize something interesting with a couple of colleagues and there you have it: teamwork. For the record, this is a skill that any company in any industry will appreciate, so it’ll be worth your time no matter what you do.

The same trickiness holds true for quantitative skills, unless you’re involved in the digital humanities. Personally, I wasn’t able to take on any projects that screamed “quant skills!” in the timeframe I had. So I did the next best thing: I put numbers on my resume. Yes, this is a thing and you should do it.

Take any opportunity you have to throw a number onto your resume, and make sure it’s written in number form (6, not six). Did the paleography workshop you just hosted attract 10 attendees?

Excellent, then say it. Did your stint as organizer of whatever conference increase attendance by 15%. Declare it loud and proud. If you’ve won any grants, try to figure out the success rate of that grant (often they tell you in the acceptance email how many applications they had). Then add that detail to your resume. It’s all about the numbers.

What was the most challenging aspect of transitioning into consulting?

Hands down, the hardest part was becoming proficient in the case interview. There were two parts to this that I found difficult. The first was building the skills necessary for laying out an approach to solving the case (one might call this “framework skills”). The second challenge, as cliché as it is for a humanist, was getting my math skills up to snuff—something that’s needed for the case interview. I did perfectly well in math class back in the day, but it’s been ages since I’ve done anything like long division. I had to find a video on the internet in order to relearn it. The case interview resources out there will all emphasize that the math required for the interview isn’t hard, and that the real challenge is getting used to doing math under pressure and not being able to use a calculator. This is true, but for those of us who don’t use math on a daily basis, it really does require some additional legwork. Don’t be afraid of it. But don’t forget about it.

What are CASE interviews? How did you prepare for your CASE interviews?

The case interview is a peculiar beast that is specific to the consulting industry.
It’s essentially an open-ended business problem that you solve over a period of about 30-45 minutes. The interviewer will ask you a question, like how a hypothetical client should solve their declining revenue problem, then you have about a minute to map out an approach to the problem. You spend the rest of the time “solving” the case (there isn’t necessarily one right answer), which involves asking the interviewer for information, reviewing graphs and charts, and doing calculations. The case interview is supposed to replicate, in condensed form, what it’s actually like to work as a consultant.

I did something like 60 practice cases over a period of 7 months, in addition to going over the material in VocaPrep, the case prep resource we have access to through Hopkins. I also tried to do 10 minutes of math drills every day.

What are some of the reasons Humanists should consider work in consulting or organizational management?

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What are some immediate steps that Humanists can take in their PhD programs to prepare for a career in Consulting?

First, start networking by signing up for info sessions with any consulting firms that look remotely interesting. Info sessions from the “Big 3”—that’s McKinsey, Bain, and BCG—can actually be useful sources of free information for how to prepare for the case interview. If consulting piques your interest after attending one or two of these info sessions, I’d suggest you start reading up on the case interview. The book Case In Point is a good place to start, although it’s a bit out of fashion these days, so take some of it with a grain of salt. I also recommend Victor Cheng’s book, Case Interview Secrets as well as the resources on his website. When you’re ready for a deep-dive, check out VocaPrep (we have free access through Hopkins) for an excellent series of case prep videos. At the same time, you should be identifying case interview practice partners for live practice sessions. There are lots of case books out there from business school students that can guide you with this practice.

Where do you see yourself in 5 years?

Consulting by weekday and writing by weekend, with a few projects on the side. And hopefully, doing all of it without a mask.

If you would like to be featured in the next issue of PHutures PhD Spotlight, please email me at rrao12@jhu.edu.
Life is about doing, not about being

RACHEL WAXMAN