



Anthropological Job-hunting (and gathering): Finding Non-Academic Work (1 of 3)

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In [my last post](#) I expressed my concern that an overemphasis on oblique anthropological theory was doing a disservice to young anthropology PhDs by leaving them poorly prepared for a shrinking academic job field. I would be a sad advocate for pragmatic relevance if I only spoke about it in abstract terms, so I'd like to share some of what I've learned over 5+ years of job-hunting with a graduate degree in anthropology. The lessons I've learned may not be applicable to all of you, but they've gotten me into a job that I love, and hopefully some of



what I share with will help to do the same for you.

Part 1: Skills

Your abilities and experience are far more important to most potential employers than your knowledge. In preparation for the job-hunting process you should reframe your self-presentation in terms of what you can do, rather than what you know.

To do this you will need to write to your audience. Your audience is a keyword-searching computer program run by an overworked HR person with an AA degree. Later on, someone with more specialized knowledge may take a look at your resume, but first you need to get past the gatekeeper.

Furthermore, even if someone needs to hire an anthropologist, they may not know they need to hire an anthropologist. They may simply think, “I need someone who can conduct open-ended interviews, identify trends in that data using quantitative analysis, and write up the findings in conjunction with some basic context.” Most people who don’t have graduate degrees don’t understand what a PhD entails, much less an anthropology PhD.

- Are you experienced in research design?
- Can you conduct research in a foreign language?
- Have you prepared documents for publication?
- Do you have experience with systematic internet and database research?

Despite the fact that these are implicit parts of most anthropology PhD work, they are not necessarily obvious to non-anthropologists. With this in mind, it may be helpful to think about what other skills you have or can acquire that will make you a more attractive new hire, while also making you a better anthropologist. Some of the obvious ones are:

- Quantitative Data Analysis Software (SPSS, STATA, SAS, R)



- Qualitative data analysis software (MaxQDA, Atlas TI, NVIVO)
- Geographic Imaging Systems (ArcGIS/ArcView, Autodesk, Mapinfo)
- Online survey platforms (Survey Monkey, SurveyGizmo)
- Social network analysis (NodeXL is a free add-on to MS Excel that's great for this)
- Crowdsourcing software (Ushahidi)

Note that these are all software applications. Proficiency in high-demand software is a useful way to show your capabilities in terms that non-academics can easily see as relevant. There are, of course, much less obvious ones that are worth exploring:

- **Business writing and technical writing:** Being told, “you write like an academic” is not a compliment outside of academia. Editors and project managers do not relish the idea of having to rewrite material and retrain writers. Experience and/or formal instruction in generating tight, easy-to-read content may help counter the stereotypes that are all too often associated with the worst excesses of scholarly jargon.
- **Grant-writing:** The experience that you've gained writing applications for research grants is, of course, directly applicable to grant writing in the nonprofit sector. However, there is also substantial skill overlap between writing grant proposals and writing contract bids, and if you have successfully done the former, you should be able to explicitly make a case for your ability to do the latter as well..
- **Budgeting:** It's no fun, but being responsible for money just screams “responsibility” to a potential employer. Anything you can do to show your budgeting savvy will be hugely beneficial to how you are perceived by a potential employer, even if the position you're applying to doesn't mention it explicitly.
- **Administrative/Management experience:** One of the areas where I feel that anthropology's class-conscious underpinnings has hampered the employability of many otherwise desirable job candidates is in its general reticence to be associated with anything resembling “the man”.



Egalitarianism, proletarianism, and anarchic/acephalous organization structures are exciting and fascinating to us to the point where the idea of taking a basic business management course would never even occur to many formally trained anthropologists. As a result, general management processes related to leadership, delegation, accountability, and workplan development end up being learned through trial and error.

I understand that I'm barely covering these issues, and many of my points may be obvious to many of you, but there's only so much that can be said in a single blog post. I'm acutely aware of how much it sucks to be neck deep in debt without a job. It is my sincerest hope that the debt load associated with higher education in North America (and elsewhere) will be mitigated sometime soon, and the academic shift away from full-time and towards adjunct staffing will start to change someday in the near future, but in the meantime I hope my comments here are at least somewhat helpful to some of you.

Note: You may find it annoying that I use the term Anthropology, when I'm mostly talking about Cultural Anthropology. In my experience, teachers in the fields of biological anthropology and archeology do more to prepare their students for work in the nonacademic world than cultural anthropology teachers do. I don't know enough people coming out of linguistic anthropology programs to know the state of that field, but my comments here are intended to be broadly applicable to anyone with an anthropology degree.