PhD Horizons Conference 2018

Panel 1B: Entrepreneurial

Dr Jo Watts, Founder, Effini
Dr Jonathan Downie, Owner and Consultant Interpreter, Integrity Languages
Dr Paul Brennan, Co-founder, Eo Surgical Ltd.

Dr Jo Watts, Founder, Effini

Jo completed her PhD in Astrophysics at the University of Edinburgh in 1999. She initially worked at the Defence Evaluation and Research Agency, and as a Programme for Romax Technology, before moving into the financial industry as a Statistician for Capital One. Jo also held risk management roles (Senior Risk Analyst and Risk Change Manager) at RBS, before moving into data analytics. From 2013-15 she was Retail Bank Data Governance Programme Lead at RBS, and thereafter she spent one year as Head of Customer Analytics, which involved the development of a Customer Analytics and Data team for the creation of Williams and Glyn. In September 2016, she joined Dufrain Consulting as a Principal I in Customer Analytics. In July 2017 she founded her own data and analytics company, Effini.

What do you do in your current role?
Effini supports small companies with their data, doing consultancy work and data skills development.

How did you decide to pursue your current career path?
All Jo's previous roles had been data-related…She found herself falling out of alignment with decision-making, thinking how she would do things differently if it were her company. She talked about setting up a company and, when people said they would be her clients, felt she had to commit to taking that step.

How has your PhD influenced your career?
It set her off on this journey. A PhD gives you the ability to think; to challenge what’s put in front of you.

What advice would you give to current students?
Software engineering is a good step if you want to develop a tech career.

As we’re entering the fourth industrial revolution, data underpins everything, blurring the dimensions between the physical, technological and biological. People will be needed who have the skills both to build the models and to understand the ethics. Hard technical skills will be useful – but not essential. Taking relevant courses in data science (eg S2DS, Data Lab, Coursera, DataCamp) and in programming skills (eg R, Python) could be useful. The softer, non-technical skills you’ll have been developing during your PhD (presentation skills, summarising to non-technical people, getting budgets together) will also be important – think about how you will communicate these. Finally, consider which areas of data you’re interested in – different people are good at different aspects.

Dr Jonathan Downie, Owner and Consultant Interpreter, Integrity Languages

After completing a Masters in Conference Interpreting and Translation in 2007 at Heriot-Watt University, Jonathan set up Integrity Languages. The company provides conference and business interpreting services to clients across a range of industry sectors. He went on to do a part-time PhD in Interpreting Studies at Heriot-Watt University, completing it in 2016.

What do you do in your current role?
Jonathan’s role involves sourcing interpreters to meet clients’ needs. This can mean a whole team offering a range of languages. He also spends about half his time acting as an interpreter.
himself, as he decided early on that this was important to him.

How did you decide to pursue your current career path?
He became interested in interpretation research while doing his Masters, and carried on to do a part-time PhD. He wrote a book, “Being a successful interpreter”, and this led to invitations to give talks.

How has your PhD influenced your career?
He developed his business strategy while doing his PhD. You need to commercialise either your PhD findings, or your way of finding them, turning your specialist knowledge into something the world cares about.

What advice would you give to current students?
PhD thinking is critical thinking, teaching you a way of seeing the world. Think about what your PhD tells us about our world, and why it would matter to someone outside your field. Get in front on an audience of non-specialists eg at TedX or Brightclub to develop your communication skills. You’ll have learned to think creatively, manage bureaucracy, and manage budgets. You have conceived, managed and completed a project from beginning to end. Now you just need to reapply these skills.

Businesses need to evolve – rethink your strategy every year.

The “hard” business skills (eg branding, marketing) are the easiest ones to pick up – you can buy a book or do a MOOC. “Being a nice person” is possibly the most useful skill, however. When it comes to marketing the soft skills you’ve developed during your PhD, spend some time convincing yourself so you are confident in the usefulness of your skills – then you can transmit that confidence.

Dr Paul Brennan, Co-founder, Eo Surgical Ltd.

Paul is a Senior Clinical Lecturer in Neurosurgery at the University of Edinburgh and Honorary Consultant Neurosurgeon with NHS Lothian. He completed his PhD on cancer cell biology at the University in 2012 and his laboratory research is focused on cell biology of glioma, which he combines with his clinical research and operative work. Around completion of his PhD he co-founded eoSurgical Ltd. The company provides accessible surgical simulation hardware and software.

What do you do in your current role?
Paul has three current roles: neurosurgeon, managing a research laboratory, and co-founder of eoSurgical. These roles are complementary.

How has your PhD influenced your career?
His business isn’t related to his PhD subject. But it helped him hone his pitching skills, and this helped him to win business competitions – which provided the total start-up funding for his business.

What advice would you give to current students?
Entrepreneurship is woven into his story, and the different fields in his life now complement each other, but paths are not laid out for you; nothing is set in stone and your projectory doesn’t have to be straight.

Risk management. If getting work depends on finishing your PhD, focus on doing that.

How do you develop business skills such as branding and marketing? You ask for help, or you learn the things you really need to learn – because knowing how to learn is one of the things you’re good at.