



Sarah Anderson

PhD in English Linguistics

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Who is your current employer and what do they do?

The Beltane Public Engagement Network, <http://www.beltanenetwork.org/>

The role of the network is to support academic staff, contract researchers and students who are interested in making academic research accessible to the wider public. Beltane:

- Provides training for people wishing to undertake public engagement
- Arranges networking events where people can meet other researchers and external organisations
- Acts as a central source of information for people at Edinburgh universities wishing to undertake public engagement

A lot of the people we support already know with which public(s) they wish to engage, but Beltane also has a role as a relationship-broker. Our function means that we have good links with non-academic organisations. The Stand comedy club, the Scottish Parliament, the Scottish Storytelling Centre and the National Museum of Scotland are some of our key non-academic partners.

What is your job title and what does the job entail?

Project Officer; I only started it 2 weeks ago!

My role is to organise training for people who want to find out more about how to do public engagement, to facilitate networking events, and to develop new initiatives – e.g. festival workshops, internships, fellowships – with our external partners. Maintaining the Beltane website and promoting awareness of public engagement opportunities through social media is also going to be central to my role.

How did you achieve your current position?

After I submitted my PhD, I spent about 9 months seriously applying for every job I could find, both in the UK and overseas. (I had actually been applying for academic jobs since the second year of my PhD.) Most of the jobs I applied for were academic; I also submitted two (unsuccessful) postdoctoral funding applications and applied to do a PGDE. After being offered a fixed-term academic post which would require me to leave Edinburgh, I realised that I really didn't want to move away: I would either have to live away from my husband (then, my fiancé) or force him to uproot his own career, plus I really love Edinburgh. So, I turned down that job and started considering non-academic jobs in Edinburgh more seriously – I knew the chance of me making a long-term living as an academic without leaving the city were virtually nil. Around the time of my graduation, I stumbled across a job as a funding advisor at Edinburgh Research and Innovation (ERI) on the University of Edinburgh website and ended up getting it. Just as well, as I would have been a terrible teacher!

Even as I applied for the ERI job, I had some qualms about leaving academia, but the match between the job requirements and my skills was spot-on. (Being unemployed for 9 months had also made me considerably more pragmatic when it came to my career!) I had used ERI when applying for postdoc funding, so knew roughly what to expect, and academic colleagues had good things to say about people who worked there. I think the key things which helped me get the ERI job were:

- (i) My PhD and postdoc applications – ERI wanted someone with postgraduate experience, and funding experience was a bonus.
- (ii) My extra-curricular activities: I had previously done voluntary work for a hospice and had done some paid events work. Good interpersonal skills and excellent organisation were both vital for the ERI job, so these experiences helped.
- (iii) One of my referees was the University's VP Research at the time I applied, and her reference was apparently very strong. This was just good fortune – we had previously taught a course together.
- (iv) My PhD supervisor introduced me to some of the administration staff that I would work with if I got the ERI job, and they were able to give me useful tips on what to say in the interview.
- (v) I got a good advisor at the Careers Service who helped me tighten up my written application.

When I accepted the ERI job, my academic colleagues were pleased that I was no longer unemployed – they knew how tough it was. I think the great majority could not comprehend how I could leave academia, but no one was particularly judgemental.

After 4 years at ERI, I got my current job at the Beltane Network this summer. Accepting the job was an easy decision: I knew I would need to leave ERI in order to get career progression, and working for Beltane would allow me to spend more time doing the sorts of things I enjoy. In getting the Beltane job, my activities outside work were again important: social media is a big part of my role, and I started blogging and tweeting in a personal capacity about a year ago. Once again, too, I had a strong referee who knew both me and my Beltane colleagues well; this referee gave me a lot of advice on my application and interview.

How do you feel you have used the skills and/or knowledge developed during your research degree in your career to date?

When I worked at ERI, I became an informal go-to person for when anything needed writing – event adverts, reports, guidance documents. I have always loved writing, but I've no doubt that the process of drafting and re-drafting my PhD thesis, punishing as it sometimes was, really helped me tighten up my technique. I know that my current boss also wanted someone with strong, flexible writing abilities.

I haven't used the subject knowledge from my PhD at all in my ERI job or my current Beltane job. However, particularly when I first started my ERI job, having 'Dr' before my name definitely helped me be credible in the eyes of the academics and researchers I was helping. This isn't right – I think you should value people on their abilities, not their title – but that's how it was.

I've not been at Beltane long, but it does seem to be the case that a lot of the people working in public engagement have a science research degree. Coming from the humanities, I am a little bit different, but it shows the value of transferable skills!

Other qualifications

MA (Hons) English Language and Literature, 2004