

Behavioral Scientists Get Off the Trail

"If you're in academia and you're applying for a job as a professor, you know exactly what to do," says Eric Gold, a behavioral economist at Fidelity Investments' Center for Applied Behavioral Economics in Boston. But if you are looking for a nonacademic job, "you have to be much more entrepreneurial. ... The path isn't already worked out for you."

For many, leaving the well-trodden path can have serious consequences. "Sometimes students come out of a lab feeling so demoralized that they're not following their adviser's path that they can't even take the first step; they think they have nothing to offer," says Diane Witt, program director for behavioral neuroscience and neuroendocrinology at the National Science Foundation in Arlington, Virginia. In fact, she says, they have much to offer. Behavioral scientists' training yields highly marketable skills and knowledge that are valuable to many employers in a wide range of professions.

Here are six examples of behavioral scientists who have stepped off the academic path into some interesting territory. >>

Forecasting health care's future

In 2005, behavioral neuroscientist Lisa Slama was a postdoc in molecular biology at Northwestern University in Evanston, Illinois. She was feeling uncertain about her career path.

"I was studying the regulation of one ion channel on one receptor on one type of neuron in one part of the brain," says Slama,

30. "I wanted to do something that would have a much broader impact." She also wanted to put her writing and oral-presentation skills to work in a corporate environment. As she explored jobs outside academia, she felt hampered by a lack of industry experience, but she

wasn't afraid to crash a party. At a job fair intended for undergraduates, Slama connected with Sg2, a company based in Skokie, Illinois, that analyzes emerging clinical developments, technological advancements, and market trends for clients such as hospitals and biotechnology companies.

She finished her postdoc, then took a job at Sg2. Now she contributes to the company's neuroscience projects and leads its

women's health efforts, studying advances in medical and drug research and technology, health-care developments abroad, demographic projections, and insurance-payment trends that are likely to influence health-care delivery. She consults with clients on a variety of projects: whether to expand a stroke program, for example, or build a neuroscience center, or recruit specialists in a certain area. The aim, she says, is to guide clients' long-term strategic decisions.

"I got lucky," Slama reflects. "I didn't even know there was such a thing as health-care consulting, but I found a job that allows me to use my writing and oral-presentation skills on a daily basis and make an impact on health care in the U.S."

Assembling online communities

Shelly Farnham is a social psychologist and a technophile. Although some fret that our digitally saturated lives separate people, she believes increasingly nimble Web technologies can increase social connectedness, not reduce it. The key, she believes, is filtering the glut of information online, the millions of MySpace profiles, YouTube videos, and Del.icio.us bookmarks.

"Technology provides you with the opportunity to meet thousands more people than you ordinarily would," Farnham

says. "But that's not what you want. You want to meet three new people who are the *best* three people. You don't want to just increase access; you want to increase relevance."

That's what her business is all about. After finishing her Ph.D. at the Uni-

versity of Washington in 1999, Farnham worked as a researcher in the Social Computing and Community Technologies groups at Microsoft. In 2005, she left Microsoft to found Waggle Labs in Seattle, Washington, with a partner, computer scientist Peter Brown. In addition to consulting for various start-ups, the team designs interactive software: for example, a new social-networking game called RealityAllStarz in which participants challenge one another to complete tasks such as hugging a famous person or making art out of food. Players rate one another's photo-documented efforts and compete for prizes.

Farnham, 37, says her work is much like traditional experimental psychology, in which researchers create interventions to test hypotheses. "You can think of technology as an intervention," she says. "You create it, deploy it, and study its impact." The difference, she says, is that most research is about teasing out details of work that has already been done. "I want to feel like I'm doing something new."

Nudging procrastinators

Everyone procrastinates sometimes, and Eric Gold has a pretty good idea why. A behavioral economist with a Ph.D. in behavioral decision theory from Carnegie Mellon University (and master's degrees in psychology, computer science, statistics, and decision-making), Gold is interested in, among other things, inertia: that implacable force that keeps people from filing taxes on time or saving for retirement. Fortunately for him, his interest in how people make decisions—financial decisions especially—is shared by his employer.

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LISA SLAMA

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ERIC GOLD

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At Fidelity, Gold, 49, conducts research on decision-making and economic behavior and shares his knowledge with other corporate divisions. Fidelity's brokerage company, for example, might ask him to develop Web tools to help customers do financial planning.

"They might come and say, 'We're interested in how our customers are thinking about diversification, to help them understand how their risk tolerance is reflected in their investment decisions. How can we explain this connection?' It's a hard question because it involves how people understand numbers and probabilities. To explain those things, you have to understand what's inside people's heads. Something I'm proud of is that you can look at our Web site and see that it's better because of how we've understood our customers."

Bringing artifacts alive

As a graduate student at Indiana University, Bloomington, anthropologist Elizabeth Babcock decided she wanted to apply her research skills and knowledge to solve tangible problems. So as she wrote her dissertation, she built a portfolio of applied anthropology experiences.

Now, at 39, Babcock reckons she's in her dream job, developing and evaluating education and outreach programs at the Field Museum in Chicago, Illinois. Her daily tasks run from teaching schoolteachers how to conduct an unforgettable field trip to planning an overnight museum adventure for families. She might spend one day reviewing label text for an Egyptian hieroglyph exhibit and the next accompanying a staff paleontologist on an expedition to a fifth-grade classroom, assembling materials to evaluate whether an exhibit was a success, or meeting with foundation representatives to plan a community-outreach project. Babcock is also in charge of the museum's library collections, which she integrates into education programs.

When she left academic research, Babcock half expected that her days of having scientific colleagues were over. But today, she is surrounded by anthropologists, botanists, geologists, and zoologists. "I have a corps of colleagues here, even though I'm not in an academic department," she says.

Promoting adolescent well-being

Developmental psychologist Jill Denner knew when she was a graduate student at Columbia University that she didn't want a university

faculty position. "I wanted my research to have a direct application, and I didn't want to teach," she says. The trouble was, she had no idea how to proceed.

During a postdoc at the University of California, Santa Cruz, she began cold-calling: lots of calls to anyone she could think of who might tell her how she could use her Ph.D. in a real-world setting. One call was to ETR Associates, a California nonprofit focusing on health education and promotion. In 1998, ETR Associates' research department offered her a job.

These days, Denner, 39, is a senior research associate at ETR Associates, designing and evaluating programs promoting girls' participation in nontraditional careers, helping to prevent HIV infection and teen pregnancy, and leveraging technology to enhance education.

In one HIV-prevention program, for example, poor, urban high school students role-play difficult social scenarios and do volunteer work in the community. The goal is to learn whether volunteering can boost students' views of themselves and encourage them to take control of their health decisions. In another program, called "Girls Creating Games," Denner studies how computer games can be used to increase the representation of women in the information-technology workforce. "It's amazing to see them realize that they can make a difference in the world," Denner says. "There

is so much research knowledge that never makes it out of an academic journal. For me, these programs are just two examples of how psychological research can be put into practice to help youth make positive decisions for themselves and make a contribution to society."

JILL DENNER

Ph.D., Developmental Psychology.
Designer and Evaluator of Social Programs, ETR Associates



ELIZABETH BABCOCK
Ph.D., Anthropology.
Education and Outreach,
The Field Museum

Informing judicial policy

As a project director at the Federal Judicial Center (FJC) in Washington, D.C., the research and education arm of the federal court system, social psychologist Beth Wiggins directs research on topics as varied as the use of technology in courtrooms, the mechanics of dispute resolution, and the consequences of waiving filing fees in consumer bankruptcy court. She develops orientation materials for new federal judges and contributes to continuing education for judges

BETH WIGGINS

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and court staff, work that often incorporates the fruits of her research. As part of FJC's statutory mission to help developing judiciaries elsewhere in the world, she has worked in locales as far-flung as Kosovo and North Africa.

"There's a real kick to knowing that somebody is relying on your work," says Wiggins, 49, who has joint J.D.-Ph.D. degrees from Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore, Maryland. "You get addicted to it, in a sense." But the most exhilarating aspect of her work is also the most frightening. "In this environment, when you do a research project, you don't have time to replicate it, and people rely on it to make important decisions. Although it can be frustrating and it carries a lot of responsibility, it challenges us to do the very best we can at the first shot."

Looking back, Wiggins ponders how easy it would have been to not take an unconventional path. "Like most graduate students, I was groomed to go into academia," she says. "There was this sense that that's what the 'good' graduate students did. It's so easy in graduate school to be the 'good child,' to do only the things that your adviser or your committee sees as furthering your career." Wiggins recommends a different approach. "Go a little blindly sometimes. Sometimes you'll bomb out, but you'll get there."

—SIRI CARPENTER

Siri Carpenter is a writer in Madison, Wisconsin.