



Reimagine the Possible – How agile thinkers move between sectors

An interview with Mindy Cohen, President, Higher Talent Executive Search

Now more than ever, there is increasing collaboration between universities and industry. This has created job fluidity, making now an excellent time to consider moving between sectors. Before going down that path, a series of considerations must be examined, including personal reflection about what is important, honest self-assessment and peer review of skillsets, and willingness to learn new ones.

UIDP: What are some factors to consider when transitioning between academic and industry sectors?

COHEN: There is no one-size-fits-all list, but some common issues include cultural differences and the speed at which things get done. Industry has different metrics--KPIs--than universities have. In industry, you will find a focus on digital transformation and customer-centricity coupled with an emphasis on earning money rather than raising money.

While moving between sectors can be exhilarating, it can also be daunting. It would help if you considered whether you are well suited and positioned to make the culture shift and are open to engaging in personal change management and upskilling.

UIDP: How should someone prepare before looking for an opportunity outside of their current sector?

COHEN: This is a journey that begins with due diligence and a hard look in the mirror. You must reposition your personal brand and think about what is pushing you toward this change. From there, tease out and evaluate your attributes, professional experience, core competencies, and interests; in essence, you will need to recraft your narrative for a new audience. This will help as you start to look for intersections between university and industry that may mirror your skillset or highlight voids to be filled. There are several functions that cut across university and industry, such as contract administration, technology transfer, and corporate/academic relations. Research backgrounds can also be leveraged across sectors such as cybersecurity, AI, and data science, to name a few.

UIDP: How do you get started job searching in a new sector?

COHEN: After doing the assessment described above, begin to network with your contacts, participate in relevant conferences, and get the word out that you're contemplating this change. Do some research and find others who have already made the transition. Everybody's situation is different, but you can certainly learn from other's perspectives and experiences. If you have the opportunity, participate in industry/university projects and volunteer to be on a committee or join a relevant association such as UIDP. Those looking to transition from academia to industry should attend industry seminars, understand the space, read global trends, investors' reports (if public), and start to build an industry mindset.

Honing a new personal story to showcase your agility to leverage your experience in this new sector is paramount. Identify organizations with a culture that supports new ideas. Don't focus on job titles, as they will shift from organization to organization. Instead, learn about the skills needed to be successful in this new sector and how performance is measured.

Concurrently, identify search firms that have helped others make this transition, get to know the search consultants, share your background and interests, and sign up for alerts about new searches.

Use social media; LinkedIn will become your best friend. Use keywords and other parameters to broaden your network. Follow groups and organizations that are of interest and sign up for relevant job postings to come straight to your inbox.

UIDP: Can you provide an example of someone who has made this transition?

COHEN: I'll share two stories. One involves the move from industry to university. The second is a reverse migration.

Our industry person studied technical writing, communications, and earned an MBA. Then he joined a large technology company where he ran applied research, data analysis, product development, and training operations. He rose through the ranks to manage large-scale technical advisory services and had established a new data analytics business for a large software firm.

After more than 20 years, he was ready to do something different. Careful assessment revealed his strengths and interests were in relationship building, technology, and connecting stakeholders. It also became clear that many of his clients lacked employees with the right skillsets. That opened the potential for a move to a different sector, higher education. He could leverage these attributes and contribute to the changing landscape for technology and workforce development. He began to network and consult with universities looking to build centers for entrepreneurship and innovation.

During one of his consulting projects, his client, a major research university, asked if he would take the lead role in establishing a data analytics institute. Over the next three years, he developed and implemented a strategic plan. He engaged with faculty across the institution, initiated the development of a new bachelor's degree program, and created a physical hub for data science at the university.

After this success, he was recruited to another major research university and has continued to sharpen his skills in data science and cybersecurity while focusing on interdisciplinary studies, workforce development, and solving large-scale global issues.

The second story is about a scientist who moved from academia to the pharmaceutical industry. Her first change was to relegate her lists of publications and presentations to the back of her resume and focus on teamwork, accomplishments, and metrics. While the academy values individual achievements, in corporate research, success depends on collaboration.

She also started her transition as a consultant. This allowed her to get her foot in the door and strengthen her talents in communication and management.

These examples highlight action to seek volunteer opportunities on a committee or a project. Many scientists in academia consult on industry collaborations or as a side gig.

Careers, like life, are journeys. They have more twists and turns today because of the speed of change and the corresponding demand for new skills. This is a challenge and an opportunity: between sectors can be challenging, but it is also an opportunity for those who are willing to leverage old skills in new environments as well as learn new ones. 