

Transferable Skills for Industry Careers

This document compiles advice and insights from the Industry Skills Series panel discussion, “Transferable Skills” (September 23, 2025). Four industry leaders shared practical guidance on how PhD-trained researchers can identify, strengthen, and communicate their transferable skills when pursuing careers beyond academia. The goal is to help graduate students and postdocs better understand how to enter industry roles and grow their careers.

Types of Transferable Skills Highlighted

- Communication - written, verbal, nonverbal, and active listening (including communicating data to different stakeholders).
- Collaboration and teamwork across functions (QA, QC, PMs, etc.).
- Leadership and people skills, including emotional intelligence and leading without formal authority.
- Project management, prioritization, and time management.
- Adaptability, flexibility, resilience, and learning quickly in changing environments.
- Problem-solving, critical thinking, and making go/no-go or rapid decisions under uncertainty.
- Networking, relationship-building, and warm introductions.
- Translating academic accomplishments into business-relevant impact (KPIs, outcomes, concise messaging).

Understanding Transferable Skills

- Treat PhD and postdoc training as a source of broadly applicable abilities - ability to learn quickly, evaluate data, and drive projects is often more important in industry than narrowly focused methods.
- Frame academic experiences around impact and outcomes - show what actions resulted in, not just the techniques performed (e.g., an experiment that resulted in an abstract or poster).

Communication

- Clearly communicate data and results so stakeholders can make decisions - tailor level of detail to the audience (executives, cross-functional colleagues, non-scientists).
- Be able to gather, summarize, and present complex information in an actionable, attractive way for different audiences.
- Practice translating technical concepts into plain language and linking them to business implications.

Collaboration and Teamwork

- Demonstrate ability to work across functions - industry roles regularly require cross-talk with QA, QC, project managers, and other groups.

- Show examples of reaching out for help or resources (e.g., organizing RNA-seq through another lab) - being resourceful is a transferable skill.
- Be comfortable taking different roles on teams - contributor, facilitator, or leader - depending on needs.

Leadership and People Skills

- Leadership includes initiating, setting direction, building trust, and influencing without formal authority.
- Emotional intelligence and interpersonal skills are critical - being someone people want to work with builds career momentum.
- Establish trust early - reliable delivery, clarity, and follow-through are foundational.

Project and Time Management

- Industry often has tighter timelines than academia - break big goals into tasks with clear deliverables and timelines.
- Prioritization rule of thumb - prioritize tasks that unblock others or are time-sensitive; sometimes deadlines drive order, sometimes dependency does.
- Expect managers to share vision and objectives; use that guidance to align your priorities with team and company goals.

Adaptability and Problem-Solving

- Be ready to pivot projects when evidence indicates a different path - propose backup plans and make go/no-go recommendations.
- Embrace failure as a data point and show how you iterate and learn from it - resilience is valued.

Regulated vs Discovery Environments

- Understand the difference between discovery R&D (more like an academic lab) and regulated GxP environments - the latter requires strict documentation, traceability, initialing and dating, and other formal practices. Expect training/indoctrination on these systems.
- Know the level of rigor expected by the role you seek and call that out in applications if relevant.

Resume and Job-Application Tips - practical details

- Lead with impact - convert experiences into outcomes or KPIs (e.g., "work resulted in abstract submission and poster"), not just technique lists.
- Use exact terminology from the job description - if the posting says "Western Blot" or "ELISA", put those exact terms in your resume when you have the skills. Keywords matter for human and automated screening.
- Expect resumes to be skimmed - hiring managers often look at the first page, so capture role-relevant items high on the page.
- Tweak your resume for each role - many companies filter with keyword algorithms, so customize rather than using one universal CV for every opening.

- Include relevant certificates and non-lab roles (translational research certificate, industry training modules, writing coach, MSL involvement) - these show applicable skills and initiative.
- Highlight service, leadership, or organizational participation - these demonstrate proactivity and ability to work beyond the bench.

Showing Transferable Skills in Applications and Interviews

- Any experience demonstrating leadership, teamwork, and problem-solving adds value.
- Even if an activity is not directly tied to a job, showing initiative and versatility helps you stand out.
- Provide concrete examples that show your role - e.g., describe how you summarized a dataset for decision-making, led a cross-functional activity, or managed a project timeline.
- Be ready to answer prioritization questions - practice a concise rationale for how you choose tasks (deadline, impact, or dependency).
- Demonstrate proactivity without overstepping - present options (for example, "here are three experiments I suggest; which should I prioritize?") rather than asking, "what should I do next?"

Networking and Warm Introductions

- Network proactively - build relationships through events, career cohorts, LinkedIn, and commenting on field-relevant posts - even a comment can get you noticed.
- Warm introductions are powerful - many hires happen through referrals rather than cold applications. Ask mentors and contacts for introductions and informational conversations.

Industry Roles Beyond the Bench - VC, Consulting, Commercial, MSL, etc.

- Many non-lab roles value PhD-level subject matter experts - consulting and VC frequently hire scientists to evaluate datasets and technologies. Highlight domain expertise and ability to critique data.
- If you want a specific non-lab role, tailor your resume and examples to that role's core skills - communication and translating science for business are central to many of these jobs.

Company Size and Culture - what to expect

- Big, mid-size, and small companies differ in structure and expectations - try to experience different environments to learn what fits you.
- Culture affects autonomy, documentation expectations, and how decisions are made - adapt your approach accordingly and learn the matrix and power dynamics early.

For Experienced Postdocs - "Overqualified" concerns and strategies

- If you have many years of postdoc experience or many publications, tailor your story to the role - emphasize how your skills add immediate value and be open to roles where your breadth is an asset (consulting, subject-matter expert roles, medical affairs).
- Network broadly and pursue informational interviews to identify roles where your deeper experience is sought.

Professional Development - concrete suggestions

- Take targeted certificates and short courses (translational research, industry R&D process training) and list them on your resume.
- Use campus resources - career cohorts, industry skill series, and business club offerings provide exposure and leadership opportunities.
- Practice non-technical skills (presentation, writing coaching, leadership roles) to build evidence of communication and mentoring.

Entering the Industry Job Market

- Be open to starting at a slightly lower or lateral position if it gets your foot in the door. Career advancement can happen quickly once you prove yourself.
- Once inside a company, perform well, build trust, and explore internal opportunities. Many career paths are nonlinear and involve lateral or cross-functional moves.
- Do not be discouraged by rejection; persistence and resilience are essential in today's competitive job market.
- Tailor each resume to the specific job, making it easy for hiring managers to see your fit within the first half page.
- View your first role as a stepping stone, not your final destination.
- Be patient - career progression is possible and often faster than expected once you are inside.

Key Takeaways

- Industry values impact-oriented, communicative, collaborative, and adaptable candidates - show outcomes as much as methods.
- Tailor materials and use keywords from postings - resumes are often skimmed or filtered by algorithms, so be concise and targeted.
- Network - warm introductions and consistent engagement (including LinkedIn comments) frequently open doors faster than cold applications.
- Know the environment - discovery vs regulated settings have different expectations; be prepared to follow regulated documentation practices when required.
- Practice explaining what you do in plain language and prepare short, concrete examples that show leadership, project management, and impact.