



Researcher:

**Bertie Vidgen – DPhil
at the Oxford Internet
Institute**

Business:

Boston Consulting Group

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The project idea

During his first year as DPhil candidate at the Oxford Internet Institute, Bertie was concerned about his progress and he wondered whether he should pursue a career in academia or find a job in industry. As he was trying to figure out what to do and started to look at which companies and industries he could apply for, Bertie came to the conclusion that some of the skills that he would gain by working in a non-academic environment would be useful even if he decided to complete his DPhil and become an academic. For example, he realised that researchers are often not very skilled at giving accessible and engaging talks or at writing blogs, even if this know-how is increasingly important in an academic career, and that it was unlikely to exercise and develop such skills during a DPhil.

He decided that it would have been worth it to have a brief sample of a non-academic life. If the experience went well, he might have had new options outside of academia. If it did not go well or if it made him realise that he preferred an academic job, he would have anyway acquired important skills that he would not have gained otherwise. This conviction made him decide to apply for an internship: a solution to try out an industry job while not compromising his academic progress, given its limited duration (2-3 months).

Bertie identified around twenty companies for each of the three industries (technology, consulting and banking) that met two key criteria: a) he was interested in them and b) they were compatible with his skillset. He thought that the first criterion would be important to determine a positive outcome of the application, while the second would increase the odds of finding a good and engaging internship. To identify relevant companies, Bertie looked at the Vault Rankings, an online resource providing ranked lists of the top 100 companies to work for in each industry, based on their prestige, work environment and employees surveys. Once he had a suitable list ready, Bertie searched on the companies' websites if they were offering internships to PhD students. Unfortunately, not many of them had this opportunity, so he created a new file just with the available offers, specifying in it the companies' requirements and application deadlines. Once this was ready, Bertie began to put together the necessary CVs and cover letters. ▶

While he was developing his applications, Bertie decided to attend the Internships Careers Fair organized in November at the Oxford Town Hall by the University Careers Service. Bertie had not considered to attend such an event before because he had the impression that they were boring and full of irrelevant companies who would send random and uninterested employees. However, given his need to find an internship, he came to the conclusion that he had nothing to lose by going there. His proactivity was rewarded: the Careers Fair proved very helpful for him. He could talk extensively with the representatives of some of the companies he was planning to apply for and he was left especially impressed by the chat he had with the employees of the Boston Consulting Group (BCG). Originally, he became interested in them because they were one of the top three consulting companies worldwide – thus representing a good brand to have on the CV – and because they had a strong focus on technology and data analytics, which were the topic of his DPhil. What surprised him at the Careers Fair was to find that BCG employees were very nice, friendly, conscientious, and hard-working. Talking to them made him believe that he might have liked to work for their company. Since they encouraged him to apply, he put BCG on the top of his wish list and when he got their offer after the selection process, he was very happy with the choice and accepted immediately the opportunity.

The internship was scheduled to take place at a very appropriate time in relation to his DPhil – during data collection. Since this task was relatively flexible, when Bertie informed his supervisor that he wanted to take a couple of months off over the summer, he found no resistance, as long as he promised to have the data he needed by the agreed deadline. For the same reason, and given his supervisor's approval of his temporary absence, Bertie decided not to apply for an official extension of the DPhil, thinking that the internship would not have delayed significantly his meeting of the milestones. In the end, he proved correct – although it took him one more term than originally planned to complete his DPhil, and although this delay coincided with the amount of time he had taken off due to the internship, this did not affect him in any way.

While at BCG, Bertie worked on two different projects, each lasting four weeks. The first assignment was at an insurance company, which hired BCG for a transformation project for cost-saving purposes. The team that Bertie was working for had to find an optimal solution to outsource some of the work done by the company and to change its structure in order to reduce the

number of teams responsible for similar tasks. In the second assignment Bertie worked at a downstream energy provider who had hired BCG for a similar challenge – managing a large business transformation. In this project, Bertie was involved in modelling the decision-making tool and this made the experience much more enjoyable than the previous one. It felt more connected to his area of expertise and it enabled him to collaborate with the technology team, which was the part of BCG he was most interested in. Bertie got assessed at the end of each project. While the first assessment was disappointing, the second was very successful, probably thanks to a more enjoyable project and to a team where Bertie fit better. This gave him confidence and the satisfaction of knowing that his team manager and BCG thought he had done a good job.

The experience matched what Bertie had expected based on what he had heard from BCG employees and HR managers during his application and selection process, and it proved to be extremely valuable in clarifying his mind about what he wanted to do in his career. When, at the end of the internship, BCG offered him a full time job, Bertie knew what to do. Even if he had enjoyed the experience and learnt a lot in those two months, he realized that he preferred to focus on his DPhil and declined the offer. He had liked to try out different industries and to be forced to learn fast in order to tackle problems he knew nothing about. However, what put him off were the lack of control over the direction of the project, the difficulty of becoming an expert in anything, given the frequent rotation of assignments, and the unsociable working hours. ▶

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This made him appreciate the autonomy in conducting his DPhil project and the opportunity, as an academic, to work on what he was really passionate about.

Now that his DPhil is over and Bertie started an appointment as a postdoctoral researcher, he still works as a freelance consultant for a company that approaches him on an ad-hoc basis, depending on their workload and needs. This arrangement works very well for him. He is free to say no if he has other commitments or if he does not like the project but, at the same time, he can keep applying his knowledge and

research-related skills to something practical. Interestingly, this new consulting opportunity came to Bertie independently from his internship at BCG. The company he collaborates with found his profile as DPhil candidate online and approached him because they were interested in his work. He believes, however, that the internship at BCG provided him with key skills that make him a valuable collaborator and that have contributed to his progress as a DPhil student and, now, as an Early Career Researcher.

Key benefits & challenges

Bertie values very much the opportunity to develop several skills that he had through the internship at BCG. For example, he became better at presenting and at preparing engaging slides, he learnt to communicate the key points of a project in a concise way stripped out of all unnecessary jargon, and he could try out how to manage people. He also improved his time management, in order to avoid working long hours every day, and to deal with conflict. Finally, he got used to thinking about solutions rather than just presenting problems and in making a good first impression. He has no doubts that these skills will be useful in his academic career as some of them already proved to be very important, such as presentation skills. He is also confident that he would not have developed them so quickly and well if he had not done the internship, given the lack of training on these fronts in the academic environment. Earning extra money thanks to the internship and the belief that the experience would have benefits even for his academic career helped Bertie to feel less stressed about the months he was not dedicating to his DPhil and the prospect of having a delay on that front.

Bertie believes that working for BCG increased his self-confidence and the way he is able to portray such confidence to an external audience. An added benefit was that this experience was pivotal in making him work hard to obtain his DPhil. While before the internship he was losing motivation, the moment he realized that an academic career was what he wanted, he put on his research the same effort and time that he was forced to put on his internship assignments and achieved much more satisfactory results because of that. The clarity he achieved about what he

liked and did not like to do was invaluable. Thanks to it, when the time came, he had no second thoughts on which opportunities to pursue during and after his DPhil.

While some of the challenges encountered might have played a role in making Bertie refuse the job offer of BCG, he would not rate them as incredibly daunting issues or as something that affected his experience there in a negative way. The main problem he faced was adjusting to a commercial management structure, where team managers do not always have the time to provide insights and explain their priorities and where people are understandably very stressed about achieving objectives that have a key financial impact for their company. To deal with this competitive and fast-paced environment, Bertie focused on staying positive and motivated. What kept him going was having a clear objective in terms of what he wanted out of this internship: a job offer putting him in the position to decide where to take his career. Remaining focused on the end goal made him determined to have a positive experience, especially as both projects were relatively short in duration, and to show his team managers that he was trying hard to improve and to contribute to their projects.

The other challenge that Bertie faced were the long working hours: for most days he was working 8am to 7pm but there were also many days in which he had to remain in the office until 10-11pm or even 2-3am and then be back at work the following day at 8am. He reckons that BCG deployed a significant effort in making the long hours enjoyable and productive by ensuring that it would always be a team rather than an individual member working until late, and by organizing social events and parties at the end of most weeks. BCG managers were also generally happy ▶

with junior team members leaving early if they did not have a specific task to complete and they did their best to empower junior members to make a genuinely positive contribution to team projects, and thus have real impact. At the same time, Bertie knew that he would have been assessed at the end of each project and that any assessment would have been relevant for his future opportunities. As such, he often felt he wanted to stay as long as the rest of the team (which was encouraged), thereby contributing as much as possible whenever possible. Overall, this environment proved testing.

The variety of projects posed an additional challenge because it made it difficult for Bertie to feel on top of things. The industries were out of his expertise and specific tasks were assigned to him last minute almost on a daily basis, based on the team workload, the availability of other members or where the project was going. This made it difficult to develop context- or task-specific knowledge. At the same time, two aspects he quickly adjusted to were the need to commute every day to the office of the client (which was one hour away, out of London) and the goal-focused attitudes of some team members.

Advice for other researchers

While each internship and industry are going to be different, there are some words of advice that Bertie thinks will be helpful to any researcher looking into gaining some industry experience while in their DPhil program. For example, researchers will need to learn how to receive negative feedback and to become flexible enough to accept unexpected tasks and asks that will come their way due to the needs of the company, since they will have very little say and control in a project. Moreover, in any collaboration it will be important to keep in mind what is the overarching goal and to be realistic about what can be achieved in the timeframe at disposal.

According to Bertie, some skills will be required even to get the internship opportunity in the first place. In the application process it is fundamental to be very clear about why the company would want to hire you and what added value you will bring. Generally speaking, companies will not be interested in the specific knowledge connected to the DPhil but will appreciate characteristics such as being a hard-working person, having analytical and problem solving skills or being able to offer a competence that is clearly linked to their work and objectives. Articulation and persuasion, however, might

still not be enough if not supported with preparation for the selection process. While preparing the BCG application, Bertie was very critical of his own work. He kept reworking and rewriting his cover letters multiple times, as if they were academic papers, and he prepared around 40 or 50 questions that he thought as likely to come up in the interviews in order to be sure he could deliver effective answers. This helped him during the interview because he sounded confident and able to get straight to the point in general questions such as “why shall we choose you?”, and in this way he could spend all his energy and effort in answering well the challenging ones.

The main message that Bertie would like to convey, however, is the need to commit: “If you are going to do it, commit to it like you would commit to your PhD. Make the most of it, take time off work, make the most of the learning and networking opportunities and make sure you perform well because that is what might get you future job offers or research collaborations”. While he was at BCG Bertie went to every event they were organizing, he showed involvement in every task and project and he believes that this was fundamental in granting him a job offer at the end of the internship, which in turn enabled him to choose with no doubts his current academic career.