

Case Study: Alumni

Zoe, PhD Gastroenterology

Graduation Year: 2000

Job Title: Director

Employer: WCG

What has been your career path up until now?

Following completion of a Bachelor of Science in Biotechnology in Australia, I moved to the UK to travel, and picked up an MSLO job at Bart's Hospital. Once I got over the travelling bug I realised I wanted a more challenging role but could not afford to do a PhD... until, what was then, the Royal Postgraduate Medical School at Hammersmith Hospital advertised a lab research job that came with a sponsored PhD, on a topic I was interested in. I applied, got noticed with a quirky cover note to my CV, and luckily there was an Australian there who was able to explain what my school results meant, so I got the job! I feel incredibly privileged to have had a job that allowed me to also do my PhD. By the time I had finished, the RPMS had become part of Imperial College, and I had realised lab research wasn't for me. I noticed while I was conducting my literature review that some scientists were better at writing than others, and decided that I should go into scientific/medical writing or publishing to help ensure all the great nuggets of information out there are made the most of. So really, my course at Imperial helped me rule out one career choice and find another. I applied for a job advertised by an independent company that published sponsored review journals and text books. They were a small company who could make their own decisions and take risks so they agreed to hire me with no relevant experience into a subeditor role, which was the perfect thing to develop my writing skills. They allowed me to also work in their medical education and communications sector and we soon found I had a flair for working with people and so transitioned over to working in communications for pharmaceutical clients – helping them develop their marketing and education material and meetings for doctors. The only piece missing from the communications mix there for me was public relations – working with medical media and consumer media/consumers – so I moved to a PR company, and then another! I chose to move to WCG two years ago as they are an independent company, and were fairly new in London at the time, so I felt there would be an opportunity for me to be involved in shaping the future of the company, and have the freedom to do the best work for our clients.

What does your job involve?

As a Director at WCG, an integrated communications agency focussed on healthcare communications, my role and day to day work is varied. We work with clients that range from pharmaceutical and biotechnology companies with medicines, medical devices and diagnostics, to patient advocacy or medical expert groups. We help these clients communicate about themselves and their products to a range of different



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stakeholders, such as their own colleagues, healthcare professionals, consumers, policy-makers and people responsible for financial decisions in healthcare. This could be via the media, directly in person, or via the internet and social media. It could be from a marketing perspective, or in a non-promotional, educational manner, depending on the needs and regulations. We work with client contacts from many different functions – communications, marketing, advocacy, market access, medical and even research scientists. And alongside them, we work with their external advisors and partners such as specialist healthcare professionals and patient advocacy groups. We work alongside our clients to understand the external environment and their own needs and goals, and provide strategic recommendations on the kind of work that needs to be done, and then work with them to do it. So we're an integral part of their team, involved in developing concepts as well as implementing.

I work for more than one client, meaning I get to learn about different diseases, molecules, devices, medicines, healthcare professionals and people. My typical day is never typical – I could be at my desk and on the phone most of the day, or attending a medical conference or client meeting in Europe or the US. Each day I need to keep abreast of what is happening in the wider world that may be of relevance to my clients, and if something comes up, use my critical thinking to determine what it all means for them and provide recommendations on what action, if any, we should take. I also regularly need to write content based on complicated scientific or clinical information, which needs to be tailored for different audiences, to meet their level of understanding and touch on the things that will capture their attention or motivate them. An understanding of all the elements of the work our company does is necessary to be able to connect everything together and advise clients, so I need to keep abreast of the latest ways of collating and interpreting data to deliver insights to clients or measure the success of an activity, the different ways information can be shared and people can be engaged with, and the creative process behind developing a diagram, video, brand, and so on. This is the kind of career path for people who like using both sides of their brain, are interested in people and the wider world, and are motivated by change and the opportunity to think laterally and critically.

Do you use skills that you obtained during your Imperial course?

My PhD at Imperial helped me hone desk research and critical thinking skills through the literature search portion of my thesis; project management skills through planning my lab research; analytical thinking and problem-solving through interpreting the results; and people skills through working as part of a research team. Presenting and publishing my work helped me hone writing and public speaking, and writing my thesis upskilled me in how to distil down large amounts of complex information into a succinct document that read well to both experts and non-experts. All of these are skills I use in my current job, even though it is so different from what I was doing then.

Did you use the Careers Service or go to Careers events? E.g. job fairs, employer talks, etc.

Unfortunately, as I was not working on campus, the only times I really interacted with the college were at my viva and graduation. Attending the careers fair recently on behalf of my company made me realise just how much I had missed out on in terms of additional experience that would have been useful and support and advice that I could have tapped. I'd counsel every student to get involved and make the most of the support available!

Could you give us one or more career tips for Imperial graduates?

My career tips are to keep your eyes and ears open to new knowledge and opportunities, and to make sure you know yourself. When studying, it's easy to get very focussed on just your studies, which is understandable as it's hard work and time consuming! But the more time you spend looking at what else is out there in the world, and getting to understand your own personal strengths, weaknesses, interests – and being able to express your own 'brand' – will help you spot potential career opportunities and know whether they are right for you. It'll also put you in a good position to apply for jobs as you'll be broadly knowledgeable and be able to express your own value. This information can come from friends, family, people you work with /meet during your studies, as well as reading relevant media. If you see someone inspirational, contact them and ask them for advice!