

The poster children for squiggly careers with Sarah McLusky

(Research Adjacent Episode 98)

Sarah digs into guest career paths to find out just how we have all found ourselves here

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Charlotte Stephenson: [00:00:00] There's not one route into being in a research adjacent role. There's lots of different ways, aren't there?

Sarah McLusky: Hello there. I'm Sarah McLusky, and this is Research Adjacent

Each episode, I talk to amazing research adjacent professionals about what they do and why it makes a difference. Keep listening to find out why we think the research adjacent space is where the real magic happens.

Hello, and welcome to the Research Adjacent Podcast. I am your host, Sarah McLusky and we have reached episode 98. And this is, as we run up to episode 100, gonna be another compilation episode. And this episode is gonna be all about the kinds of career paths that people have taken to find themselves in these research adjacent jobs.

Now, in the last episode, I was talking about what we mean by research adjacent jobs, so if that's something that is maybe a bit new to you, [00:01:00] that might be a good one to go back and listen to. That was episode 97. But today, having established what those jobs are, I'm gonna

talk about how people actually found themselves doing them, and there are some incredible, weird, and wonderful, and sometimes sad stories of how people ended up where they are, so we're gonna dig into that a little bit today.

So in the last episode, we established that most research adjacent jobs didn't exist 35 years ago, didn't exist 20 years ago. Some of them didn't exist 10 years ago. And these are jobs which have gradually emerged and evolved over that time. So if these are jobs that didn't exist when I was at school, perhaps when you were at school, then we might wonder how people have found themselves in them because these are not jobs that anybody was thinking about doing when they were at school, perhaps even when they were at university. So how did we [00:02:00] find ourselves here? Well, before I had the language for it, I used to say that I had a portfolio career, and I used to say that I had a portfolio career before it was fashionable, 'cause it seems that now everybody has side hustles and all sorts of different things going on because I think that is just the nature of work now.

But then I discovered the Squiggly Careers podcast, and if you don't know it, then a big shout-out to that. It's an excellent podcast. You can go and find it wherever you're listening to this one. And that gave me some new language to describe my journey and some language that some of my guests have chosen as well.

And my guests are the same. Some of them have found themselves here by chance. Some of them have followed their passions to get them to where they are. Others have made very pragmatic choices, as you'll hear. And some of them have found themselves having to reinvent their career, having to reinvent themselves many times, perhaps following redundancy, health challenges, [00:03:00] or other major life events.

So there's all kinds of different stories. And as you heard the... in the introduction to this episode, that was Charlotte Stephenson speaking. Charlotte is a paleontologist turned research facilitator at the University of Leeds. There is no one route into these jobs, and the vast majority of my guests haven't followed a particularly straightforward career path, and all of them are just making it work one step at a time.

So if you are listening to this podcast to discover the one guaranteed way to succeed in a research-adjacent career, then I am afraid you are going to be disappointed. Each of my guests has a journey that is as individual as they are. But I think that's inspiring in its own way because it means that wherever you are now, there is a way in, and there is a way through.

And if it could work for them, it can work for [00:04:00] you as well. So, as I say, in this episode, I am gonna share some examples, some common themes of people who have been on the podcast and some of their interesting journeys.

And I decided that I would start with what I am going to call super squigglyers, and these are people who have shifted direction multiple times, sometimes really quite dramatically. And I can't claim having done any particularly dramatic career shifts myself, but some of my guests have. One of the most unusual journeys I heard was from Sam Steele.

Sam Steele didn't even go to university until she was 55, even though when we spoke she was running a research center. I've got a feeling she's doing something different now as well. So what was she doing before 55? Well, she started out as a music journalist and then became a radio producer working at the BBC at Radio 1, and then spent 10 years as a food [00:05:00] entrepreneur working with her husband before she came into the work that she did.

Here's a little quote from Sam

Sam Steele: I think I was just an early adopter of the portmanteau career because I always wanted to be where the cultural conversation was.

Sarah McLusky: Another person embracing a portmanteau career and also always wanting to be where the cultural conversation is, was my guest Esther Lisk-Carew. Now, Esther originally aspired to be a French judge. Yes, you have heard that right. She loved languages, and she loved law, and so that's what she originally went off to study, but eventually realized it was not a great fit. There was a short stint working in NHS admin, and now Esther works in arts engagement, amongst other things. Here's a little bit from Esther

Esther Lisk-Carew: And it certainly isn't a role when I was at school thinking about what do I want to do with my life? What kind of career do I want to have? What kind of [00:06:00] life do I wanna have?

Saneeya Qureshi: Because I am definitely the poster child for the squiggly careers, I think as they've come to be known.

Sarah McLusky: That second quote that you heard there was Saneeya Qureshi. Now Saneeya is quite senior in researcher development at the University of Liverpool, and as you can tell, her quote inspired the title of today's episode. Saneeya has squiggled her way across not only careers, but also continents. She started out as a primary school teacher in Pakistan, and then studied business admin before pivoting to do a PhD in social innovation and impact.

That led her into the research world and into researcher development. Another of my guests who didn't originally start out with any kind of aspirations to work in the research world is impact consultant Chris Pahlow. Now Chris started out as an aspiring filmmaker, and as he says, filmmaking is not a [00:07:00] great way to make money, and so started tutoring purely to find a way to fund his creative dreams, and that ended up to be the foot in the door that he needed.

Chris Pahlow: The film industry's a terrible way to make money, so I just kind of kept hanging around universities and eventually got asked to consult at the University of Melbourne a bunch of different media projects.

Melissa Hobson: I was lucky that I spoke to a, a shark scientist for advice and he was like, "Are you kidding? We have scientists. We desperately need communications people."

Sarah McLusky: The voice that you heard after Chris there was science writer Melissa Hobson. Melissa, like Chris, began her career in something very different. She started though in PR, but as her LinkedIn bio says that she just wanted to write stories about cool fish, and she realized, as you heard in that quote, that her different perspective was a strength rather than a weakness, and certainly that applies to a lot of the people who [00:08:00] have been guests on the podcast.

One of those who has used that difference as a strength is creative facilitator Mary Robson. She began her career as a theater designer and has found that whilst her journey might seem random at the time, it makes a lot of sense looking back and finding connecting threads

Mary Robson: But I've come to this place via a kind of circuitous route on one level, but then with a very clear line through everything I've ever done, I think, as a professional, which is that I fundamentally make things with people.

Sarah McLusky: Many of my guests have, like Mary, found that their career only really makes sense when they look back over it and find a way to connect up the dots.

Others have found themselves in a situation where they knew that they had to make a pivot, and a lot of those [00:09:00] are people who began their career by doing a PhD. So as I think I mentioned in the last episode, around about half the people I've had on as guests have done a PhD. So it's in no way essential, and as you heard from the examples that I've just given, none of those followed that academic route initially.

But one thing that does seem to happen with people who follow a PhD is that they come to a turning point where they have to think about whether this is something they're gonna continue on or whether they are gonna pursue a different path. So first up, I've got two people for you to hear from. They include physicist turned patent attorney Anthony Kavanagh, and then Matt Woodcock, who spent 20 years as a medieval history academic before, as he frames it, specializing in research impact.

Anthony Kavanagh: I just came to the realization that I didn't necessarily want to do this anymore. It wasn't a harsh call. It wasn't I suddenly needed to move. I just wanted to try other [00:10:00] things. And around about that time, by coincidence, I met someone who was training as a patent attorney. We met up, he described his role, and it sounded perfect to me.

Matt Woodcock: The word academic covers such a multitude of different activities and I'd been in that profession for 20 years and making that pivot to professional services enabled me to focus on elements that I really enjoyed.

Sarah McLusky: One of the reasons that so many people following a PhD path find themselves at a real turning point where they have to make a decision is because although they might start a PhD assuming that it is the beginning of a career in academia, only a tiny fraction will actually stay in academia for any length of time.

I think across the board, it's roughly around about one in four, and only about one in 10, I think, make it to be a full professor. So many of my guests have described how that scenario can lead them to having feelings of failure, loss of identity, [00:11:00] and lots of soul-searching. So it's not surprising that several of my guests have found their niche in helping PhD graduates to navigate that transition, including careers consultants Sarah Ashworth, and Holly Prescott.

But it also includes others like business relationship manager Simon Cutler and Papa PhD podcast host David Mendes, and you'll hear from those second two now.

Simon Cutler: Most people don't end up going down that academic career, and it's something that I talk to students now. It's not to say that the academic career isn't one that should be valued, absolutely, but equally, we should value all the other opportunities that, that we get.

David Mendes: And I thought if I share these stories, people who are in this doubt, in this fog of the end of the PhD, not knowing what comes after and being anxious, there's nothing better than hearing the story of someone who navigated that and actually came out on the other side happy and is fulfilled.

Sarah McLusky: Now, whether they are people who followed a PhD path initially [00:12:00] or did something different, one thing that I am already, I hope you are also picking up on all of my guests, is that whether by luck or by judgment, they are people who have proactively taken charge of their direction rather than passively waiting for good things to happen to them.

So, uh, for example, there's Anthony who went and found out about becoming and trained, trained as a patent attorney, David who started a podcast, others who... Chris Pahlow who started... He's also got a podcast and started his research consultancy business. There are people who went out there and looked for opportunities, and there are also quite a number of examples of people whether they're freelancers, whether they're people who are employed, who have essentially kind of created opportunities for themselves.

So for example, here are researcher developer Johanna Stadlbauer, and also knowledge exchange manager Orla Kelly.

Johanna Stadlbauer: I basically created this job myself. So it's not a [00:13:00] surprise that it encompasses everything that I like to do. I have an innate love of talking and writing and creating knowledge and imparting it, and also engaging with people and doing stuff collaboratively and getting to, set my own agenda a little bit.

Orla Kelly: It's kind of right place, right time, opening doors for myself, you know, creating opportunities, and working with people that are really quite good at championing you and pushing you to do things and encouraging you to expand, which is a really, really positive thing.

Sarah McLusky: Now, just because some of my guests have been very proactive, they've made a real success of their career, that's not to say that these are all people who have gone out of their way to create change, to create opportunities. Instead, it's pretty clear that many of my guests have found themselves where they are because they were dealt a difficult hand, and they had to figure out [00:14:00] how to make the best of it.

Redundancy is a common theme, and, again, if you want to find out some of the stories of people who've gone through redundancy, including Ged Hall, John Elvin, others whose names are escaping me right now. But they also include NHS research manager Helen Riding and exhibition designer David Wright.

Now, Helen made her first career pivot from graphic designer to midwife after being made redundant, and David found himself having to change organisations and look at different projects after redundancy gave him the push to do something different. Here is a little bit from Helen and David.

Helen Riding: I think one of my major hurdles was becoming a mature student in my early 30s when I got made redundant, and I think that was a challenge because I don't come from a family with a strong academic background. [00:15:00] And I've often felt that imposter syndrome, I think particularly in the research world. But I think as I've got more experienced and I undertook my master's and my confidence grew.

David Wright: The first project job that I did at Seven Stories was all about picture book illustration. And I loved it so much, and I worked on that project for a year. I felt like I was doing really good work. I really didn't want it to end, but there wasn't a way to extend the funding and extend the project.

So that was it, and I was gutted. But I think with hindsight, going through that experience, it is actually quite useful being forced to move on forced to get a job somewhere else.

Sarah McLusky: As well as redundancy and coming to the end of a PhD, [00:16:00] health challenges is probably the next most common turning point that my guests have told me about. There is a number of people in the podcast archive who have either had a health issue come up that has led them to choose a different path, or that has led them to lean into something and to find new meaning in it.

First up, here's visual storyteller and director of Nifty Fox Creative, Laura Evans-Hill.

Laura Evans-Hill: So I got super burnt out and needed to take some time out to work out how I was gonna, fix myself again and make a life that felt like it aligned my academic research passions with the creativity that was slightly beaten out of me in the institution. So the reason that I got into it was because I had ex-colleagues get in touch and say, "You know those stupid little doodles you used to do when you were teaching? Um, can we pay you to do them? We think there's value [00:17:00] in them."

Sarah McLusky: A cancer diagnosis is also, of course, an incredibly life-changing moment. But, thanks to developments in research and new discoveries, more and more people are surviving cancer and going on to live fantastic lives afterwards. But that can lead people into finding new work opportunities there. And so here I've got a couple of guests to tell a little bit about their story.

There is patient involvement manager, Sam Rose, who works for the charity Bowel Research. Sam has Lynch syndrome, which is a genetic condition which predisposes her to a number of types of cancer, and she has had multiple diagnoses over the years. And I also interviewed Helen White and Danni Estler, who have both had experience of womb cancer, and they now work with a charity called Peaches Trust to advise research teams.

So you'll hear first from Sam and then from [00:18:00] Danni

Sam Rose: I started doing some guest blogging for them, sort of on the side as a patient, just my sort of patient story and experiences. And then one day our CEO rang me up and said, "Hey, there's this job as PPI manager. I'd really like a patient to be in the role. I think you'd be perfect. What about it?" And yeah, six months later, here I am.

Danni Elster: I wasn't looking for a support group. That's not my thing. I'm very resilient. I was able to support myself. What I was looking for was a way to use my experience in a really practical way. I don't believe that everything happens for a reason, but I do believe that when you do go through experiences, you can do something with it. And it doesn't justify you ever getting cancer, but it means, well, I got it. I'm still here to tell the tale. What can I do with the fact that I've lived it?

Sarah McLusky: So although some of my guests faced huge life-changing upheaval, whether that was, as I say, a health challenge, redundancy, the [00:19:00] kind of identity shift that can come at the end of the PhD, sometimes, some of my guests, it was an entirely more pragmatic choice. As we heard earlier, Chris Pahlow just needed money to fund his filmmaking habit, and I also loved Kath Burton's honesty about how she ended up working for the publisher Routledge and Francis. Here's Kath

Kath Burton: I found myself in academic publishing, yeah, really by chance. My partner was moving from one university to another, and really, the trains weren't as good from where we were when we were living in Bristol, to get to Southampton. And yeah, there was a job advertised, and it made sense to go for that given where we were thinking of going to live to try and get my partner onto a train to Southampton. So yeah, that's how I got to work for Routledge and Francis. It's all down to what was ... It wasn't British Rail then, but the rail system in the UK.

Sarah McLusky: So although there are some common themes, it's pretty clear that everyone has taken incredibly varied paths to end up where they are today. [00:20:00] So if everybody does have such varied paths, is there anything that we can all take away from these conversations? Well, here are some of the things that I personally have taken away from nearly 100 conversations with different research adjacent professionals.

The first one is that a lot of my guests really either understood what they were really good at, what they... skills that they had, and that were you know, marketable, saleable in a research environment, or they followed something that they enjoyed. So it was either, as I say, pragmatic strengths approach or just following a passion, following enjoyment.

And I think that is always a good sign to lead you in the right direction. Another thing that I have found from the interviews, I have done my best to cover a huge variety of different workplaces, and I think there is an [00:21:00] assumption sometimes that this podcast is only about people who work in universities or only about people who have PhDs, which is absolutely not the case.

And research adjacent professionals work in lots of different places, including many of the guests that I have had on. Research adjacent professionals work in charities, they work in private companies, they work for the civil service, the NHS, professional organisations, training organisations, learned societies, all kinds of different places.

So if this is something either you're, are looking at getting into this world or you are looking at your next step, then I would encourage you to cast your net wide. Another thing is that there is no standardization with job titles. So if you are looking for a job, then sometimes the best indication of, for example, the level of seniority is the salary, and then also looking more at the detail of the job description will help you to understand what people actually do.

[00:22:00] Because sometimes the job title isn't really much of an indicator. Also, I encourage you to follow your instincts and just the things that feel like they might be the, the right path for you. And remember, all you can ever do is take the next right step for you, and that is something that will be different for everybody.

Because you can build a long and successful career in the research-adjacent world. Many of my guests have done exactly that, but it will be down to you. As things stand no one is gonna hand you a promotion and nobody is gonna tell you what to do next because honestly, nobody knows.

Nobody knows how AI is gonna change things. Nobody knows how changes in funding priorities, things like research culture initiatives, they are all going to change this work. And as I've said before, impact [00:23:00] jobs, for example, didn't really exist 15 years ago. There might have been something a bit like it, but it was called something different.

Nobody knows what the future holds. And here's something that blew my mind when it first happened. My dad said to me... So I had a job in a university on a five-year grant-funded research project, and he said that that was the most secure job that I would ever have. And at the time, I didn't really understand what he meant 'cause I was like, "What do you mean? I've

only got five years. Like, it could be a permanent contract. That would be much more secure, surely." But the thing is, if you're on a permanent contract, this is the point he was trying to make, if you're on a permanent contract, you can be made redundant any time, and I have seen it happen to colleagues.

Fortunately, I've never been made redundant myself, but I have chosen to walk away from permanent contracts because the job wasn't a good fit for me. But with that five-year grant-funded project, it meant that the money [00:24:00] was definitely, definitely there to pay my salary for four years. So even though it took me a while to get my head around it, he was right.

Short-term contracts, some of them are toxic. Six months, part-time, some of these things can be very problematic. But in and of themselves, short-term contracts are not the end of the world because all of us will change jobs. And like many of my guests, many, many of my guests have done lots of different things.

I've done lots of different things over the years, and I don't regret any of them. The squiggle has made me who I am, and it makes you who you are, and it makes us resilient and resourceful. We are multi-talented, and we are hardworking. And with those kind of skills, you can thrive in any workplace and no matter what the world throws at you.

So with that, if you want to dig into any of the career journeys that you have [00:25:00] heard about today, you will find all of these episodes in the podcast archive. You will find it wherever you are listening to this episode. With so many to choose from, I hope that you find somebody whose story resonates with you.

So whilst you are mulling over your squiggly career, do tune in next time for episode 99. Episode 99 is gonna be a deep dive into the magic wand question. So we are gonna find out if you put research adjacents in charge of the world, what would they do with that power? Tune in next time to find out.

I'm gonna be on holiday, so there's gonna be a little bit of a longer gap than usual. But that one will be coming out in early September. For now, thanks for listening, and I'll see you next time.

Thanks for listening to Research Adjacent. If you're listening in a podcast app, please check you're subscribed and then use the links in the episode description to find full show notes and follow the podcast on LinkedIn. You can also find all the links and other episodes at [00:26:00] www.researchadjacent.com.

Research Adjacent is presented and produced by Sarah McLusky, and the theme music is by Lemon Music Studios on Pixabay. And you, yes you, get a big gold star for listening right to the end. See you next time .