Geography at work

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Royal Geographical Society

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Advancing geography and geographical learning

Sophie graduated from the University of Manchester in 2012 after studying Geography (BSc Hons) and Commercial Project Management (MSc). After graduation, Sophie joined global engineering consultancy firm Atkins and has worked across multiple sectors, before transferring to the Middle East to work as a Management Consultant in the energy sector in Abu Dhabi.



Please give us a brief outline of your current role and tell us a little more about the company you work for.

I am currently a Management Consultant specialising in project management for Atkins. I joined on a graduate scheme in 2012, and have since had the opportunity to move to the Middle East, where I am currently based. As a consultant, I interact with various clients and act as a project support officer, business analyst, and project manager. I am currently focussing on organisational design and workforce planning. This involves reviewing the organisational structure of a

company and supporting them in developing a sustainable plan for resources for the next five years.

There are multiple inputs of data that you need to review and understand to give a comprehensive workforce plan. It takes time and a good understanding of the data to create a plan that works.

What did you particularly enjoy about your degree course? What skills have been useful in your career to date?

I found geography was a unique and comprehensive course. It had evolved from what I had been taught at school into a subject with depth and variety, every year the modules were different. It is rewarding to understand the deeper meaning behind both quantitative and qualitative data. I learnt how to think outside the box, to understand the source of the information, how it can connect to other material and ultimately see more than the words or numbers on a page. This new way of looking at the information enhanced my critical thinking and problem-solving abilities and was one of the key skills I have applied to my current career.

Why do you think it is important for geographers to develop excellent quantitative skills?

Data analysis is an activity I regularly come across within my work. Project timelines, finances, or generic reviews of employee profiles. At university you have the ability to grow and develop quantitative skills and I think it's important for geographers to recognise it is a skill set that you will always need. If data is manipulated and presented incorrectly, it has a negative impact on any analysis.

How do you make use of quantitative skills in your current role?

Currently, I mostly use data presentation and data interpretation. Data presentation sounds simple, but it is an underestimated skill set. It is difficult to ensure that you are communicating the correct message. The

ability to present data to support an objective is a crucial one. How you present the information is not necessarily how others will interpret what they see. It is important to ensure that you are fully aware of any assumptions involved in creating the data, what the source of the data is and what is omitted. If you can interpret data it enables you to highlight and predict trends or see alignment between different data sets.

How do you think you might use data in future work / other projects?

The quantitative information I use most regularly is centred on cost, deadlines, risk analysis and the impact of these elements over multiple scenarios. However, there is never certainty regarding what skill set you will need for future clients as the working landscape evolves and changes.

What do you think you have learnt as a result of having opportunities to work in different countries?

Currently, my client base represents over 60 nationalities, this creates a large group of people with different cultures and approaches to situations. Understanding and respecting this diversity is one of the key skills I have learnt while working overseas. Communication between cultures, and the language barrier, can sometimes be difficult to overcome and if not handled correctly could create tension, but through practice you can learn how to effectively communicate. I have been impressed to see how connected global society is.

How is data used when undertaking business analysis?

When beginning any form of business analysis, you need to understand the current situation and this provides the foundations for analysis. Data is crucial at this point, assumptions are dangerous; if you do not have a clear picture of the current situation then the rest of the work could be factually incorrect. The next step of the analysis is to understand the future situation, and through this you apply different scenarios to the data you have. In both, the data is the key input and to undergo correct analysis you need the facts and data for support. Once you are provided with an accurate start and end point the pathway can be produced.

What information do you tend to display as maps and charts in reports? Why is it important to appreciate suitable ways of presenting data?

The majority of my quantitative data is presented as charts. This data has included financial numbers, project deadline, workforce numbers, and employee make up. Regularly, I create a report or provide information where the foundation is data, support by charts. Furthermore, one tool that is being used a lot more frequently is heat maps, showing the values or density of data as a colour scale. Raw data can be overwhelming and mislead. In order to effectively communicate your objective it is important to be able to represent the data correctly and display it in a way that is digestible.

What skills do you use to complete some of your non-technical tasks at work?

The majority of my non-technical work involves communication with key stakeholders, organising teams to effectively complete deliverables, or being presented with a problem to overcome. My work is very varied and it is surprising what skills have become important, but all three have provided me with good ground work to conduct my non-technical tasks.

How generally do you think the skills acquired by geographers are useful in the workplace?

I found geography a good stepping stone into my career. It's made me a well-rounded employee — beyond data skills I think I enjoy working as a team, presenting new ideas, showing leadership and meeting deadlines — all of which I learnt during my degree at Manchester. Whilst these skills may sound fairly generic, they're ultimately the building blocks for success in the working world.

Links

Atkins (Middle East):

www.careers.atkinsglobal.com/middle-east