

Q&A from Webinar Viewers

Careers Webinar 1: Understanding jobs in sustainability

Question 1: *How did Michelle manage to find and secure all these different and really good jobs all over the world?*

Michelle Brown: For me maybe it was a combination of luck, hard work and willingness to take a risk. I have always had an interest in people, culture and travel and sustainable development and human rights. I did my Masters in Development Studies which was an interdisciplinary approach across economics, politics and sociology as well as a lot of practical Project Management experience. I was very lucky to get an internship via the World University of Canada and the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) when I graduated which was a springboard into professional employment in sustainability.

Question 2: *Michelle – her story sounds fascinating. I would love to live in different places as well and manage to work on things that I am passionate about such as sustainability. What would her advice be to achieve that and where to start from?*

Michelle Brown: As mentioned on the webinar, if you are interested in working in sustainability it makes sense to keep your job hunting open to jobs that might not have sustainability in the title. For example, when I was in my 20s and wanted to bridge from working in International Development to working in Corporate Social Responsibility and Sustainability I took a job as a Business Analyst with a multinational pharmaceutical company. It did not have CSR or Sustainability in the title but it gave me the opportunity to learn about a big company. My boss knew my areas of interest and assigned me to work on pricing of pharmaceuticals a critical social issue. Sometimes you just need to get a foot in the door somewhere and then you can find opportunities to connect what you are passionate about.

Question 3: *Michelle – after working abroad for so long, did she find that her connections and contacts in the UK were lost and it was more difficult to come back or the contrary because of her experience?*

Michelle Brown: Yes and no. I see the world as more and more connected so when I moved to Edinburgh in 2010 I did not have hardly any local contacts. However, I was lucky to have an international network and some previous colleagues globally introduced me to a few people locally. I am Canadian. I did my undergraduate degree in Canada and then did my masters degree in the UK. I have been lucky to make friends and connections in North America, Europe, Asia and Africa.

Question 4: *I would like to know whether you pursued a Master degree after completing undergraduate education or did you first start gaining work experience? As an international undergraduate final year student applying to environmental jobs in the UK, I would like to know your perspective if it is better to gain as much education as possible before starting work or better to gain work experience first?*

David Fairhurst: This is a difficult question to answer and will depend which area of sustainability you wish to go into. Work experience in the area you select is invaluable. However, a well selected Masters which provides the right qualifications for your area is also a very valuable asset.

Michelle Brown: I think it depends on individual circumstances. I took a year out between my undergraduate degree and masters to work full time, save money and think about what I wanted to do.

Question 5: *What advice would you give to students or recent graduates with the business background (not technical) aiming to work within sustainability? If possible I would like each speaker to share their advice.*

David Beards: Finance knowledge and/or qualifications can be very useful – there are many different ways of financing sustainability projects, often using complicated financial arrangements. You might need to be able to understand, communicate and even manage one of these to progress your project.

Management/Business skills – generic skills like governance and risk management are often relevant. It's helpful to be able to understand and negotiate management hierarchies, and mitigating risk might be a key 'selling point' for your project.

David Fairhurst: I would suggest try to get experience in the area you wish to move into, try to convince your current business that they need to do more on sustainability and offer to do it, IEMA qualifications or possibly a Master. Or maybe a combination of all these!

Michelle Brown: I think your business background can be your strength. As per my answer above you can use that to get a foot in the door and then to think about how sustainability adds value to that organization. All organisations in all sectors need to think about sustainability!

Question 6: *What qualification best prepares people for a job in sustainability?*

Russell Payne: I have an undergraduate degree in geography and an MSc in Energy. I think that work experience is more valuable i.e. the actual 'doing' but would suggest looking at IEMA's website for courses.

David Fairhurst: Look for qualifications in the area you wish to work through the relevant institute. The IEMA qualifications such as Associate or Practitioners membership of the institute are very valuable and demonstrate good commitment to your own professional development. The Energy Institute offers specialist courses in the energy field and many the options exist.

Question 7: *Do you think that start-ups would be a good start for an early sustainability career? Would they be open to sustainability so early on?*

Russell Payne: You may find it easier to go with an established company with established environmental/sustainability programmes and activities.