



Aleksis Karme is juggling his PhD in palaeontology with running his own virtual-reality company.

was psychologically hugely important, since academia can be a soul-crushing experience. It was extremely liberating to find out I was appreciated in other contexts.”

### SMART WORKING

Adding ten or more hours a week into an already-busy schedule is not easy, so efficiency is vital. Researchers who have successfully managed the extra workload suggest making a schedule for each day. Anything that does not contribute to the goal of the research should be cut. Social media, e-mails, phone calls and other potential time-wasters should be restricted to certain hours.

Even so, scientists who are committed to a side pursuit say that they sacrifice their social life, and sometimes their rest. “I didn’t do much else besides my research and making chocolate,” says Adam Kavalier, a chemist who developed the logo and concept for his company, Undone Chocolate, during his postdoc at Weill Cornell Medical College in New York City. “I didn’t sleep much: I worked weekends and nights. I did not take vacations,” he says. “But I already had a passion for making chocolate, and once I decided to make it a business, that became an obsession.”

Passion also drew Aleksis Karme, a PhD student in palaeontology at the University of Helsinki, to his test project. He co-founded a virtual-reality company, and is now juggling that with his dissertation.

He admits to overworking, but the upside is that he can apply techniques that he creates for his lab work to real-world projects in

construction and engineering. “I can control my own career better this way,” he says. “I’m finding a way around the conveyor belt from a PhD to a postdoc.”

### NO REGRETS

Many researchers who eventually left academia for other jobs they’d sampled while at the bench say that they published less than they might have done had they focused on science alone. But that never worried them, because they knew that it would not matter in the long run. Meanwhile, those who stayed in academia say that they do not regret temporarily veering from the path.

As a postdoc, microbiologist Robin Kodner served on the board of a biofuel start-up and consulted for the biofuel industry. The experience assured her that academia was the right choice for her, and she is now a faculty member at Western Washington University in Bellingham. “Venture capitalists would ask me if I could have a product in two years, and I was like, are you joking? Being from academia, I was totally comfortable saying, ‘Well, we don’t really know that yet, and here are the caveats on what we do know,’” she says. “But that’s not how you talk with investors. I wasn’t a good fit. I’m still so glad I did it because I got a taste of what that life was like, and at the same time I didn’t really lose traction on my academic career.”

Junior researchers need to remember that looking elsewhere is not cheating. “My advice is that you have control over your life,” Aktipis says. “Know you can do this. Know it is an option.” ■

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## TRADE TALK

# Binational liaison



*After completing a PhD and postdoc in neuroscience, Sabine Blankenship took a job as the science liaison officer at the German Consulate General in San Francisco.*

*She describes how*

*she helps her compatriots to stay up to date with scientific developments across northern California and the Pacific Northwest.*

### What do you do?

I build professional networks, engaging researchers and learning about scientific developments. Recently, I participated in an industry day at Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory, California. Before that, I spoke to relevant researchers to learn about the CRISPR–Cas gene-editing technology and wrote a report for German government officials. When German delegations visit, I organize their agendas. I can spend a lot of time at the computer requesting meetings, but our work depends on getting out and getting to know people. The communicative part is something I totally enjoy — that and the ability to keep learning.

### How do you apply your training?

Very rarely is it factual knowledge. Anything in life sciences, I can follow in depth, but I’m also responsible for energy and information technology. What I really learned in graduate school was how to research something deeply and structure that information into a useful format. Also, self-management is important. I have to take the initiative and see that my projects keep running.

### How did you get the job?

What tipped me to this position was a conference run by the German Academic International Network, which helps German nationals to find jobs back home. I thought it was the wrong conference to go to since I wanted to stay in the United States, but then I found the job ad for the consulate. Friends introduced me to two people who work at consulates and I had coffee and lunch with them. Talking to them made me realize that consulate work is something I could be good at and love. And it proved to be useful for preparing for the job interview. ■

### INTERVIEW BY MONYA BAKER

This interview has been edited for length and clarity. See [go.nature.com/Zauauki](http://go.nature.com/Zauauki) for more.