As a student, I was drawn to physics and geology, because to me these two disciplines epitomize the many important and varied real-world applications of science. Every experiment I did in my classes, from lighting up a pickle by running an electrical current through it to using Play-Doh to illustrate the major tectonic plate faulting styles, brought new revelations about how integral science is to everyday life.

So, with only vague notions about what I would do afterward, I continued to pursue my love of science by going to graduate school to study geophysics, with a focus on seismology. Once I was there, fulfilling my teaching assistant requirements confirmed my preference to avoid teaching, ruling out a future in academia. Ultimately, my fieldwork provided the biggest clue about a potential career path. The hands-on approach to science that I employed while deploying seismometers deep in the wilds of Georgia and Florida set my thoughts toward a possible career in industry, where research, getting your hands dirty, and real-world applications coexist comfortably.

Yet, I struggled to figure out whether I could do work that wasn’t directly related to my degree—and, perhaps more to the point, whether I should. I worried that I would be throwing away years of training—that going into any field that wasn’t directly related to earthquakes would make me a highly educated ingrate. But after some soul-searching, I concluded that I would rather try something outside my comfort zone than potentially languish in postdoc purgatory for the next few years.

I cast a wide net and applied for jobs in nuclear seismic monitoring, signal processing, and technical writing, to name a few. But at my interview for my current position, I fell in love with product testing. Since starting my job, I have worn expensive smart watches for a weekend, tasted chocolate melted in a slow cooker, and used smartphones to play with party-themed smart lightbulbs, all in the name of science. My job combines rigorous research with seeing scientific principles play out in real time, and even after a year, I still find this work as fun and engaging as when I started.

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When I was in graduate school, I never thought that this is what I would be doing with my Ph.D., but my training hasn’t been wasted. My job calls for the mental flexibility, tenacity, and curiosity that I developed as a graduate student, and I am still honing those skills, even though I’m no longer in academia.

At times, I even get to draw on some of the specific knowledge I gained as a geophysicist—understanding heat flow, for example, is crucial for oven and cooktop testing—and when this happens, I get a little extra skip in my step. I am still chasing my dream of investigating and sharing science with the world; I’m just approaching it from a different angle than I expected.

Applying my geophysics knowledge to decidedly nongeophysical problems has also broadened my outlook about—and, I hope, my suitability for—the types of jobs that I might pursue in the future. For now, though, I’m happy to be learning and telling the world about the science behind the products we use every day, one robot vacuum testing run at a time.

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My seismic career shift
Julia MacDougall

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