

By Pedro Resende

# Learning how to pivot

**A**fter 5 years as a postdoc and co-principal investigator in an academic research lab, I am about to start my own company. It's a big step, and I'm excited—and a little anxious—about how it will work out. I am very aware that things might not go the way I envision. But pivoting does not feel as intimidating as it could—because I've done it before, starting early in my career. In doing so, I've learned that career changes should not be feared. Instead, they are valuable opportunities for professional development and growth.

When I finished my undergraduate training 14 years ago, I wanted to continue in academic research. But none of my applications for Ph.D. programs was successful. I wondered whether spending time in an industry job might help me stand out. At the same time, I worried that going to industry would compromise my chances of ultimately pursuing an academic career. Colleagues and professors told me that a move to industry would be a path of no return, and that big career changes could be rough. It felt like a momentous decision that would set the tone for the rest of my career.

Nonetheless, I decided to take the leap and accept a position at a biotech company. To my surprise, I loved working there. In fact, my experience was so positive that I changed plans. I did not want to do a Ph.D. anymore; I wanted a career in industry. I thought I had found my vocation, and that my path was clear.

But my position was just a 1-year contract, and when I started to look for my next industry job, I hit a bureaucratic obstacle. I was searching for jobs across Europe, and in many countries my undergraduate degree was not considered sufficient training for the positions I wanted. So much for that supposedly clear path.

It looked like it was time for another pivot—back to where I had started, applying to Ph.D. programs. Again, I wondered whether moving back and forth between industry and academia might put me at a disadvantage with potential future employers. But my previous transition had taught me I should be open-minded and embrace opportunities as they come, even if they are not my top choice at the time. You never know how things are going to turn out. So, I tried not to be too anxious about changing course again.

During one interview for a Ph.D. program, the selection



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committee focused on how uncommon it was for someone working in industry to want to come back to academia. I had played my cards right; I stood out! The program accepted me, and I enjoyed my Ph.D. experience. I loved the science, had a great mentor, and lived in a fantastic city. Even though I had pictured a different course, I didn't have any regrets.

When I finished my Ph.D., I still wanted to return to industry. I thought my previous industry experience coupled with my improved credentials would make the transition relatively easy, but that did not end up being the case. I wasn't getting any job offers. I was disappointed, but I took some solace in remembering how well pivoting had worked out for me in

the past. I was now much more comfortable moving from plan A to plan B—or even plan C.

So, I started to apply for postdoctoral positions. I got a great offer to start an independent line of research in a group with an outstanding working environment, and my time there has been great. In addition to my research, I've developed my entrepreneurial and leadership skills as co-founder and president of my Ph.D. program's alumni association. Looking back, plan B feels like a plan A—just as it did so many times before in my back-and-forth career. And now I'm ready to embark on plan C: setting out as an entrepreneur.

I accepted a job in industry when my mind was in academia. I found a job in academia when all I wanted was a job in industry. Yet I feel happy with my career path, and I look forward to the pivots yet to come. ■

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# Science

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*Science* **364** (6446), 1202.

DOI: 10.1126/science.364.6446.1202

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