

# PhDs in transition:

**What is the value of a PhD outside academia?**

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This interview series was achieved with the cooperation of ECOOM UGhent. ECOOM is the Flemish Community's Centre for Research & Development Monitoring.

ECOOM UGhent focuses on researchers' careers. All of the interviews were approved by those interviewed and represent their personal views

ECOOM Ghent University, Department of Personnel Management, Work and Organizational Psychology, Henri Dunantlaan 2, 9000 Ghent.

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# Preface

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The number of PhDs has been on the rise the last several years. In September 2013, headlines for De Tijd, De Morgen, and De Standaard read 'Flemish PhDs doubled in the last decade'. The number of tenured positions within the universities hasn't really followed the same pace, though, which means that increasingly more young researchers are developing their careers outside the walls of the university. A minority of the PhDs remain in the academic world, while the majority move on to work for the government, the corporate sector or the services sector.

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The recently graduated PhDs find themselves in a slightly unfamiliar position on the labour market. They sometimes bury their original dream of developing an academic career and immediately go in search of alternative prospects on the labour market. Others start a postdoctoral position after getting their PhD, which is a prerequisite for moving on to a tenured professorship at many universities. However, this is a precarious situation, given that a mere 3% of today's postdoctorates have been able to gain a tenured position at a Flemish university. Lastly, a third group starts working on their PhD with the intention of applying on the non-academic labour market right off the bat. They occasionally come up against preconceived notions and wonder how they're going to be able to position themselves in order to better highlight the added value of the PhD that they've obtained.

To date, we don't know much about the perceptions, stereotypes and opinions that the 'average' labour market has about PhDs. That is why ECOOM UGhent approached 30 policy-makers and asked them, during a series of interviews, about their experiences and vision concerning the added value of a PhD in their sector. So no comprehensive research project with complex data analysis, or tables with averages and standard deviations, but rather uncensored views held by policy-makers within the government, and the for-profit and not-for-profit sectors concerning job applications with a PhD. We planned to interview a diverse group of representatives on the Flemish labour market: managers or directors with an executive role; project, HR and R&D managers; partners or self-employed in private enterprises; senior researchers; political representatives; and labour market experts and experience experts. All of these people have specific experience with PhDs on the labour market, regardless of whether they have gotten a PhD themselves, and discuss their perspective.

The goal of the interview series is two-pronged: on the one hand, we want to offer an unadulterated, honest view of the labour market positions by allowing all of the stakeholders to say their piece. On the other hand, the interview series contains tips and suggestions for PhDs and PhD students to help them better utilise the added value of their PhD in their careers.

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# Jan Denys

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Jan Denys has been Director of Corporate Communication and Public Affairs at Randstad since 1999. In addition to this, the general public knows him as a labour market expert. He studied Sociology at KU Leuven. There, he gained years of experience as Project Manager at the Higher Institute of Labour Studies.

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"I think it is important to make a distinction between PhDs in the positive and human sciences. In the first group, PhDs are often projects set up in cooperation with the private sector. The transition to the non-academic labour market is therefore not a problem for that group of PhDs. Even more: the labour market is so appealing in that area that it may be more difficult to find PhD students. It is harder to find a suitable job for PhDs in human sciences, such as sociology, psychology and archaeology. But that also applies to Master's in those disciplines. The fact that there is a difference between PhDs in the positive and human sciences means that you cannot speak of the pros and cons of a PhD in general terms in any case."

"A second important point is the increase in of the number of PhDs. Due to this increase, a majority of PhD students cannot stay at the university. This requires, at least as far as human sciences are concerned, a much more explicit link with the labour market. That means, in my opinion, that you have to take this into account during the PhD studies by making contact with the business sphere, but certainly also by selecting a research topic that is important to the government or the private sector."

"Discussions on the added value of a PhD mainly rage in human sciences, partly because the competences you're required to have for a PhD do not automatically translate into better performance on the labour market. I do not know of any data that prove that a PhD in human sciences offers any kind of added value. In my opinion, there are two questions which are important in this discussion: what are the competences you acquire by getting a PhD on top of a Master's degree and do these offer you more chances on the labour market? The answer to that last question is, to put it mildly, definitely not unanimously positive. In some cases, a PhD may even have a negative effect."

"After postdoctoral studies, it is in fact rather late to move onto the non-academic labour market. You already have your PhD and you've already hit 30 when you add even more time to that. In that case, you are adopting a more expert position. You are at a critical age and you shouldn't wait too long to make the choice of leaving the academic world. I think it's a positive evolution that, in the curriculum that was built up in relation to PhDs, a lot more attention was paid to clearly communicating that a PhD title does not automatically imply that you can continue to work at the university."

"PhDs must be aware that in general - and certainly for human sciences - the private sector is not very keen on paying more to PhDs. They have not yet shown to the labour market that they are better than candidates with a lower university degree. During their PhD study years, people their age have already gained a lot of experience in the labour market and have acquired more competences because there's lots to learn in an interesting job.



"I cannot emphasise enough how important a network is to find a suitable job outside the academic world"

Jan Denys  
Labour Market Expert,  
Director of Corporate  
Communication and  
Public Affairs  
Randstad

So, as a PhD, you have to be able to demonstrate that you have other competences than those people who have been working in a business environment for years. No strong cases have been made for this yet. I have often read that companies must be stupid not to use the knowledge and competences of PhDs, but I prefer to see things the other way around: the PhDs are the ones that have to demonstrate to the corporate world that they are worth it and how they can actually help businesses. I think PhDs are good at conceptual and synthetic thinking, but I'm not, for example, convinced that their problem-solving capacity is by definition better than that of candidates with a Master's degree. And that's an important competence in the private sector: you have to be able to switch quickly. Universities should come up with a value proposition to show what PhDs can do additionally and what people with a Master's degree cannot do. In that respect, it would be interesting to ask PhDs working in the private sector what they

had to learn additionally. I think that everyone who decides to exchange the academic world for the private sector must be able to indicate which unique knowledge he or she has previously acquired. There are certainly opportunities for PhDs as experts in a very specific domain. The condition is, however, that they have to be able to sell themselves. It is the task of universities to support these skills in the study programmes."

"I also cannot emphasise enough how important a network is to find a suitable job outside the academic world. Indeed, you have to change networks in order to build up another career. Scientists sometimes forget that they really have to expand their network and move out into the world to find a job they can really relate to and be passionate about. Research has shown that your existing network often slows down your ambition to move on."



# Lieven Creten

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Lieve Creten has been Managing Partner at Deloitte Financial Advisory since 2006. In 1989, she graduated as a Business Engineer from KU Leuven.

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"In general, not many PhDs are working in the world of consultancy. A PhD could actually be an added value in certain specific contexts and niche segments. For example, in statistics and life sciences, and more specifically in the 'health economics' cell that we also have at Deloitte."

"Many employees in my own department hold a PhD. No one doubts their intellectual capacities or their expertise within a certain domain, but if they're already a bit older, and have no experience in the business world, it can cause some problems because they are too specialised, which automatically puts them behind in other areas. This also has certain implications for salaries and employee benefits. Plus, it's not always easy for PhDs to accept that they have to start from scratch, while their contemporaries are already managers and have already acquired these skills that PhDs are simply lacking. They have no actual idea what it is like to be a consultant, how to manage a team or how to deliver to customers. It is often difficult to properly pass on that message to PhDs. We know from experience that we have to walk on eggshells when it comes to that. We previously made the mistake of letting PhDs start at a higher level only to find out later that they couldn't live up to customer expectations."

"Managers in the 'health economics' department have to be able to establish good contacts with customers, understand what customers want, interpret these questions in a practical manner, and find practice-based solutions for this. Managers also have to be able to support, manage and evaluate teams, they have to be able to delegate, and their projects must be profitable for our company. All these things aren't so obvious for PhDs. PhDs really have to understand that there is a world of difference between business life and the academic world. They also need a certain mind-set. You don't do something because it's interesting; you do something because your customer wants you to do it. We have the drive to gain a larger market share, have more impact on the market, and search out new customers. That is part of the Deloitte DNA. For some people, this mind-set will come with time. For others, it never comes."

"You expect someone with a PhD to be able to go into certain problems in detail and to have comprehensive research skills. This involves interpretation of data - which is very important within the 'health economics' team - and the statistical processing of data."

"I don't want to generalise, but I get the impression that candidates who graduated and then did a PhD and then eventually looked for a job in the business world are searching for something and aren't quite sure what course to take with their careers. That's a bit difficult in our sector because the added value is limited compared to the efforts they made to get their PhD."



"Managers have to be able to support, manage and evaluate teams, they have to be able to delegate, and their projects must be profitable for our company. PhDs really have to understand that there is a world of difference between business life and the academic world"

Lieven Creten  
Managing Partner  
Deloitte Financial Advisory

"I can imagine that certain PhD students are actually forced to go into the non-academic labour market because they don't get the opportunity to continue to work in an academic context. In that case, it's not easy to appreciate this academic background in its true value in the corporate world. PhDs claim they already have four, five, six years of work experience, but businesses usually have a different point of view. This is certainly so for the consultancy world, where we have to invest strongly in additional training for our juniors. In other words, we are actually convinced that a Master's that we trained for six years has many more assets than someone who stayed at the university for six years. We only consider a PhD as work experience to a limited extent. We actually equate five years of doctoral studies with two years of work experience."

"It seems useful to me for PhDs to try and establish links with the industry they intend to work in during their doctoral studies. This allows them to connect the pragmatic to the purely academic, and maybe this can help close the gap between business life and the academic world."

"I think it's a shame that lots of intelligent people, who have studied for many years and worked hard to get their PhD, have trouble finding a suitable job. The universities allow people to start doctoral studies,

knowing all too well that not all PhDs can stay on at the university. That's why I think it's critically important to build more bridges with the business world during your doctoral studies."

"For example, I have been able to look at some PhDs of the faculty of economy in more depth. And even then I often wondered what the actual relevance of the research was for business life. Maybe universities should select topics that are explicitly suggested by the corporate world. That would be a bigger added value and make the step towards business life much easier. The research is often very academic in nature. Company managers have no idea what they should or even can do with these studies. And that's a shame because it means that PhDs who have worked very hard for five years can't actually reap the benefits through a matching job in the business world."

# Karel Verhoeven

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Karel Verhoeven is a journalist and has been co-editor-in-chief of De Standaard newspaper since 2010. He studied Germanic Philology at Ghent University and then got a Master's in Political Philosophy at the University of Hull in the United Kingdom. In 2006, he got his PhD in Germanic languages at Ghent University and did research on humour in novels.

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"It has been my experience that a PhD is definitely an added value, including at the newspaper where I work. A majority of the newcomers at De Standaard are also PhDs in the fields of exact sciences, economics, as well as literature and philosophy. You can sense a great intellectual maturity in these individuals during the application procedure. In our experience, PhDs who combine their academic knowledge with other work experience will have much better results on their application tests and interviews than other candidates. Of course I am speaking from the perspective of a newspaper that thinks highly of critical thinking and not for the media in general."

"Postdoctorates, on the other hand, will probably use their strong academic background to look at the world from a perspective that is too scientific. PhDs score well in our analysis because they have healthy thinking patterns, they are critical, and also have good verbal skills. They have strong personalities and there is a basic truth to what they say. But if thinking alone is becoming too weighty, which is often the case for PhDs, the pre-conceived notion that many hold against PhDs might just be confirmed: that they are unworldly scientists who are not pragmatic enough to solve problems in chaotic circumstances, which is of course of great importance in non-academic working conditions. You cannot afford to stay in a theoretical analysis thinking for too long about how to solve a situation like this. There is not enough time for that. PhDs are strong because they can be critical about their own thinking, analyse themselves, and constantly question their thoughts and the results. It is a matter of combining these qualities with a pragmatic approach. I have no experience with postdoctorates, but I can imagine that you are too far along on the academic track to switch to the non-academic labour market easily in such a position, although scientific research institutions or pharmaceutical companies do need these talents."



"In our experience, PhDs who combine their academic knowledge with other work experience will have much better results on their application tests and interviews than other candidates"

Karel Verhoeven  
Editor-in-Chief  
De Standaard

"We do not actually recruit PhDs specifically. But if you see all the candidates lined up, you do feel that PhDs are a bit more mature than those people with Master's degrees. I think it is important for candidates to have a solid background, or at least a background they can build on. In our editorial office, we often see that we made the right choice after the application procedures. The PhDs' attitudes allow them to quickly analyse and process the situation. In addition, they

are better at putting information into a context. The same applies for those with additional Master's degrees. That extra year can really make a difference. A Master after Master also presents clear added value."

"Lastly, it's true that a PhD has little relevant professional experience, but I think he or she makes up for that fairly well by learning quicker on the job too. All in all, I don't think you have to do a PhD to be better prepared for the labour market, you do so because it allows you to develop better thinking skills and a sharper critical mind."



# Jo Heirman

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Jo Heirman has worked for Schelstraete Delacourt Associates since 2012 and has been the Executive Search Consultant since January 2016. He studied Linguistics and Literature (Greek-Latin) at Ghent University and got his PhD in 2012 in ancient Greek literature at the University of Amsterdam.

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“Schelstraete Delacourt Associates recruits and selects candidates for management positions. Experience counts at this level and a PhD could offer an added value. And I am not talking about the added value of a PhD for external recruitments for customers, but about internal Research Consultant recruitments. A PhD is mainly decisive at the start of a career. It has less impact for Senior Consultants. I am one of the first people with a PhD who started working at the company. Under my influence, we started considering hiring PhDs more frequently because the awareness that a PhD could offer added value has grown. An important reason for this is that we work at a very competitive level. People with a PhD graduated with a high degree, after all, and they have the attitude to dig deep into their topics and are also highly competitive in 95% of the cases. On the other hand, we are also looking for people who can work independently and who can plan and organise their projects themselves. And that is a skill acquired by PhD students during their 4-year research, which is actually work experience. In summary, it's incredibly important for internal Research Consultants to have both cognitive skills and research skills and for their work to be very results-oriented.”

“On the other hand, our experiences with postdoctorates are not that positive. We work with targets and short deadlines. People who spend too much time in the academic world generally tend to go into too much detail. I think people should sit down and make a conscious choice after the PhD to see whether or not they want to go on in the academic world because it gets more difficult to adjust to a context where a quick response time is needed and deadlines are tight after dwelling in the academic world for too long.”

“Besides all the research skills, the PhDs are also expected to understand things quicker and that also seems to be the case in reality. They are better at working autonomously and on a project basis. They can find the right balance. PhDs are perfectly capable of making a move towards a commercial mind-set.”

“We work together with the Ghent University Doctoral Schools. We recently organised a training course on competences that you do and do not develop during PhD studies and on the ones you really need for the non-academic labour market. If you know that you're not going to stay in the academic world, we recommend that you do something else besides your PhD. For instance, a work placement as a business consultant in addition to the PhD is a major asset. It is also important for PhDs to be aware of the fact



“PhD often reason that they have to look for a job within their sector, but I suggest that all PhDs look at the options from a broader perspective and think about how they can use their competences outside the professional area in which they specialise”

Jo Heirman  
Executive Search Consultant  
Schelstraete Delacourt Associates

that the academic pathway is not open to everyone, although I don't think that is the main concern of students starting their PhD studies. Everyone starts with the intention of making it to the end and that is the main focus, naturally. I made the switch in the last year when I started to think about a career outside the academic world. I think that there are more opportunities in the non-academic labour market than generally assumed. PhDs also often reason that they have to look for a job in a sector that ties in with their PhD, but I suggest that all PhDs look at the options from a broader perspective and think about how they can use their competences outside the professional area in which they specialise.”

# Els Penel

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Els Penel has had a long career with Deloitte, including as Head of COO Office and HR Manager, and is currently Director of HR Services within Optimized HR Services, which is part of the Optimized Group. She studied Applied Economics at Ghent University and later attended a Master Class in Human Resource Management at Vlerick Business School.

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“Whether a PhD constitutes added value depends on the position you are applying for in the non-academic job market. Deloitte, for example, had some niches for specific topics that required real experts. The natural question here is whether candidates have been able to build up any expertise during their PhD studies and whether they can, without any business experience, offer enough added value. People from the academic world are usually far removed from the work floor in business life. On the other hand, I am convinced that academic research and scientific studies provide very interesting literature for business people. So there should be a balance. The question as to whether or not PhDs can have added value in an organisation is strongly related to the role that is assigned to them.”

“Contact with companies is always interesting for PhD students, because it gives them more concrete insight into the state of affairs there. If you want to work in the non-academic world, I think it is particularly important to build up experience in a certain domain and also, simultaneously, to be ambitious. This also means that you have to be prepared to start at a lower level, in fact, than your peers who already have business experience. That can be frustrating, but you must believe it's worth it, and assume that your organisation will soon learn to appreciate your qualities, and then give you chances for promotion.”

“You shouldn't forget that you might indeed be overcoming a first hurdle by convincing the recruiter, but that you may encounter a bit of resistance from colleagues who are doing a similar job and who aren't also trying to get their PhDs.”

“I personally think a PhD is a clear asset within HR. Lately, a lot has been said about disruption, the future of work and of organisations and about burnout, career counselling and talent coaching. Organisations that realise how sizeable the transformation they are currently facing is, may benefit from the fresh outlook of a PhD.”

“I expect PhDs, compared to employees with a Master's degree, to make a difference primarily using their expertise. Then it only concerns knowledge. And, additionally, their personality must also be a match for the company. Your ability to adapt is also important. If you end up in the business world after four years in an academic environment, you have to be able to adjust. Moreover, it is also important to underline during your recruitment interview that the PhD taught you to work autonomously. You have to demonstrate your added value yourself. You need to have a good story when you are applying about the reason why you chose to do a PhD and then still want to make the move to the non-academic labour market. It goes without saying that you'll be one step ahead if you've already established some connections within the business world during the course of your PhD studies.”



“If you end up in the business world after four years in an academic environment, you have to be able to adjust”

Els Penel  
Director HR Services  
Optimized HR Services

# Philippe Persyn

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Philippe Persyn is Global HR Director IDV (Infectious Diseases & Vaccines) and Global Public Health at Johnson & Johnson, where he started working in 1999. He studied Industrial and Organisational Psychology at Ghent University, Middle Management MBA at Vlerick Business School and attended an additional course in HR strategy and HRM at Cornell University.

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“A PhD is definitely a great asset in our pharmaceutical industry. The R&D department staff consists of 36 different nationalities. This means that our search for people with the right knowledge and competences takes us across our national borders. Many of the employees in the department I support are PhDs. We often recruit people with a PhD and, additionally, a few years of experience. We also often recruit people who work with us as postdoctoral researchers, often aimed at building up three or four years of experience outside the academic world. Within the R&D department, staff in highly specialised positions often hold a PhD. Within the clinical research department, 70% of the researchers are doctors in medical sciences, i.e. trained medical doctors. This doesn't mean that we don't recruit people with a Master's or Bachelor's in Science because the PhD is primarily required for researchers. Some of our employees not only work for us, but they also work at the university as visiting professors. In their case, there is no strict division between an academic career and a career outside the academic world. It can definitely coexist.”

“This makes PhDs interesting to us because they have more knowledge about a specific domain. A PhD definitely offers added value, certainly in scientific subjects. Compared to someone with a Master's degree, I expect PhDs to be more specialised. But we are mainly interested in the discipline they specialise in. That could be biochemistry or toxicology, for instance. PhDs, just like Master's, sometimes have more outspoken leadership skills and other times less so. This really depends more on the employee's personality than on his or her degree. We do, however, constantly emphasise the importance of teamwork because every research project involves multidisciplinary teams, where people with different personalities have to have their say. The added value of a PhD is not so clear for positions that aren't directly related to research. For those jobs, PhDs must also rely on their personality traits, just like Master's and Bachelor's. And that is the easiest when they also succeeded in building a solid network.”



Philippe Persyn  
Global HR Director  
Johnson & Johnson

“The added value of a PhD is not so clear for positions that aren't directly related to research. For those jobs, PhDs must also rely on their personality traits, just like Master's and Bachelor's”

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Jan Vliegen has worked for Umicore since 1996 and has been Senior Vice President since 2002. He got his PhD in Chemistry at Hasselt University and the University of Antwerp in 1983.

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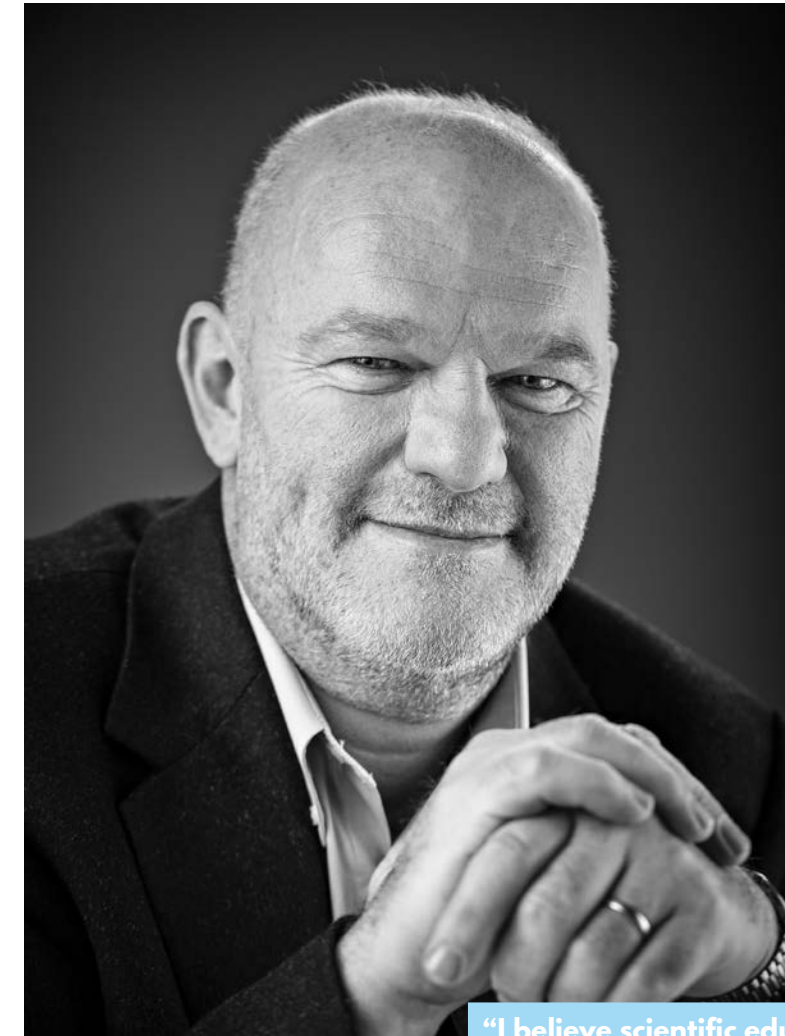
"In my opinion, the biggest advantage of a PhD - especially in a technical profession - is, first of all, that you are a bit older. Secondly, your scientific basis is stronger than someone with a Master's or engineering degree. You have mastered the foundations of science. Thirdly, PhD studies can often be combined with an assistantship. It teaches you to explain matters to young people with specific intellectual capacities. You learn to explain something to a large group, in a more didactic manner than you usually do."

"First of all, someone with a Master's degree is younger and must go through a longer learning curve. But a PhD has been in the academic world for a long time and must also learn how it works in the business world. In that respect, they start out on equal footing. But I do expect better, stronger scientific input from a PhD. And these people often have a good network - national and international - in the academic world."

"I believe scientific education is becoming an increasingly stronger asset on the labour market. Recent graduates also quickly acquire tunnel vision in certain technical, specific industrial sectors. In principle, PhDs are supposed to keep a greater distance. You are a good scientist and you take that with you the rest of your life."

"I don't think it is necessary to pursue a postdoctorate. A lot of PhDs quickly take an MBA after that, while I think it's better to wait until you've worked a couple of years."

"Based on my experience, I know that I would certainly do a PhD again, although it wasn't easy for me to start working in the industry after that either. It requires some adjusting. You go from a nice, clean university lab to wading through the mud, so to speak. The first year wasn't easy. You do need time to adjust. Although I was lucky to end up in a big company that gave me the time to do so."



Jan Vliegen  
Senior VP  
Umicore

"I believe scientific education is becoming an increasingly stronger asset on the labour market"



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Ellen Volckaert has worked at Hudson since 2007 and became their R&D Manager in 2014. She got a Master's in Economics and Multilingual Business Communication at the University College Ghent and Ghent University.

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"Within Hudson's R&D department, we do our own in-house research and development. The PhDs in our team have the necessary background to conduct sound scientific research. Knowledge of the methodology is obviously a must in an R&D department. It is also good for other, non-research-related departments to have a scientific view of things and to not always look from a purely business point of view. But employees do have to be able to establish the link between research and business. That is not always easy for PhDs. Digging deep in the private sector can be useful, but at the end of the day, something has to come out of it. You shouldn't get stuck in a philosophical approach. In other words, a PhD can certainly offer added value to organisations, provided they use it wisely. A team ideally contains a combination of several profiles. I cannot imagine teams composed of only PhDs, but a team with a few PhDs can certainly have added value. A football team with nothing but Lionel Messis will not work either, but one Messi on your team does provide incredible added value. In addition, Hudson believes that quantitative methodology and quantitative research are incredibly important. It gives customers more confidence when they know that PhDs are working on it."

"Compared to people with a Master's, PhDs are much more aware of what is actually required to set up a high-quality research study. If we look at other tasks, like contact with customers, the difference is not so significant. In that case, I think a PhD will have more trouble mastering the pragmatic business thought patterns. We notice that there are actually two types of PhDs in reality. The first one is able to combine research with other tasks, feels good in his or her job, and will continue to work for the company or other businesses; while the second one really wants to get into the research deeply, does not always have the time to do so at a company, and usually quickly returns to the academic world."

"I look upon the years that someone worked on a PhD as experience, but in another area. So we have different expectations with regard to PhDs than recent graduates, like you also expect more from employees with years of experience. Postdoctorates have even more experience and contacts in the academic and business world. They aren't just buried in their research, but have been around a bit more. I also consider this to be additional experience. In that area, there is not a lot of difference between a PhD and a postdoctorate."

"Compared to recent graduates with a Master's degree, I expect PhDs to display farther reaching research competences and, in addition, I hope they understand the world better. Even if you work on a very specific project, I assume that you have already been in contact with other companies and organisations also working in that domain. People with a Master's degree come straight out of school and I don't expect the same things of them. Getting a PhD is therefore a specific and very useful work experience that we can definitely appreciate in our company."



Ellen Volckaert  
R&D Manager  
Hudson

"We notice that there are actually two types of PhDs in reality. The first type feels good in their job and continues to work for the company; the second type wants to get deeper into research and usually quickly returns to the academic world"



# Bart Lambrechts

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Bart Lambrechts is Human Resources Director at CarglassBelux. He studied Commercial and Financial Sciences at Hasselt University and then got a Master's in HRM from Vlerick Business School. He received a number of distinctions as an HR Manager, including a nomination for HR Manager of the Year in 2012 and 2013.

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"I think recruiting PhDs can certainly be an added value. I have generally had positive experiences working together with researchers and universities. We often use our gut feeling and experience in our work, but it's always interesting for an organisation to have an academic framework or theoretical model. This is how PhDs can offer something extra. The same goes for postdoctorates. But for them, the step to the non-academic labour market is really big after so many years at the university."

"I am a big supporter of cross-fertilisation between the corporate world and universities, allowing researchers to gain experience in the business world and learn the practical side of things. Companies that can attract people with that 'hybrid' profile are definitely doing good business, but it is also a good thing for universities that these people return to the academic world after a few years."

"I expect PhDs to have strong strategic insights and the skills to test the theoretical basis against the practical situation and against the reality of corporate life. As a company, we are open to working together with the universities for research. We have conducted some studies with Vlerick Business School and we work together with the HEC in Liège on customer centricity. It is an enriching experience to interact with an academic who looks upon things from an academic point of view and based on the research he or she conducted on a certain topic. This supports the gut feeling that we use in our work, while our pragmatic approach can then reinforce the theoretical basis."

"We recently wondered in a work group of HR Directors what the perfect background for an HR Director would be. We came to the conclusion that people with an economic background or a broader business background are actually more successful in a position like that. In my HR job, I also have my strategic business cap on. My background in commercial science helps me to understand the figures well. In that sense, PhDs could also be suitable for this job. Our work is very people-oriented, but we are of course a public limited company with shareholders that expect us to make profits. This will automatically be the case if you have a targeted HR policy that offers employees the space to utilise their talents."



Bart Lambrechts  
HR Director  
Carglass Belux

"We often use our gut feeling and experience in our work, but it's always interesting for an organisation to have an academic framework or theoretical model"

# Ana Dos Santos

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Ana Dos Santos got her PhD in Chemistry in 2010 in the Department of Organic Chemistry at Ghent University. She was a postdoctoral researcher at the same university until 2013. She is currently head of the Preparations Department at the start-up company Agrosavfe.

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"AgroSavfe currently employs fifteen people. Seven of them have PhDs from different universities in different countries. The company decided to assign positions involving the coordination of research to PhDs or postdoctorates. When we started recruiting people, we specifically looked for people who had previously completed research projects from start to end, thus proving that they were capable of successfully and independently completing a project. The PhD title is less important than the fact that these people have already shown that they can work consistently, and precisely in getting their PhD, they have already proven that they can successfully complete a project. Managing a project successfully for four years requires a major investment. Applicants who have also gained postdoctoral experience in the academic world aren't necessarily at a disadvantage during the recruitment process. I sometimes hear other organisations say that if someone has been in the academic field for too long, their way of thinking is just not practical enough, and that their attitude may be too academic. But I don't think that working at the university for a longer period of time has a negative impact on your performance in other sectors."

"Being able to manage a long-term project and supervising a team while you are doing so should actually be easier for PhDs than for a Master's. The latter were never required to manage a team or group. Not many Master's programmes include leadership skills or conflict management in their curriculum, for instance. A PhD who has had to work with a group of people definitely has a big advantage in that area. He or she is trained in skills that are more important than lab or research skills, for example. You have to learn to be critical towards the members of your team, you have to be fully informed when you manage a team, and soft skills are also obviously important to have. We see increasingly more employers that are interested in those leadership skills, and in conflict and project management. These skills are even more important for some employers than scientific skills. Agrosavfe definitely also expects PhDs to have the necessary soft skills as well."



Ana Dos Santos  
Head of the Formulation Department  
Agrosavfe

"Not many Master's programmes include leadership skills or conflict management in their curriculum, for instance. A PhD who has had to work with a group of people definitely has a big advantage in that area"

# Roel Evens

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Roel Evens studied Bio-engineering sciences at Ghent University and got a PhD in Applied Biological Sciences/Environmental Toxicology in 2011 at the same university. He became Scientific Coordinator at SETAC Europe four years and a half ago.

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“I work for a large European association with 2,000 scientific researchers, 70 to 80% of which have a PhD. The reason my job exists is actually that we are giving these people a platform to disseminate their scientific research results and to reach a consensus about what is going on in specific environmental-scientific disciplines, as well as to identify new research questions. It goes without saying that I think PhDs are valuable assets. So, I’m not the most objective person to answer questions about the added value of a PhD. A large part of the researchers in our association are still working for the university, while others are employed by chemical companies, environmental consultants and Flemish, Belgian or European authorities. The employees who do not come from the academic world still work according to principles that are very similar to those of the universities. They conduct lab research, write and review papers, etc. So a PhD can actually be a stepping stone into our non-profit organisation (the association’s registered office). Knowing how to do research, write papers and conduct peer reviews will definitely help you understand what is going on in the world of research on a European level!”

“Our core business consists of organising scientific meetings with the intention of solving environmentally technical problems and identifying potential, new research questions. These meetings are organised together with researchers in the field, who are expected to do this on a voluntary basis. Postdoctorates are one step ahead because they are still closely involved in scientific research and - compared to PhD students - have a broader view of environmental-scientific issues, as well as a greater insight into the applications of scientific research results. Postdoctorates who are still partly working at the university are our ideal candidates. Professors often don’t have the time to be dedicated to organising the meetings, and postdoctorates have a sound scientific background with often a broader vision than a PhD student.”

“However, SETAC doesn’t offer them a paid job, the meetings and projects are attended on a voluntary basis. This usually isn’t a problem since benefits can be derived from the new scientific insights and the network expansion. It definitely increases the chance of finding a permanent job inside or outside the academic world. The SETAC administrative office coordinates all these voluntary activities. Two PhDs, who have the final, scientific responsibility for the projects, work there. Other employees have good administrative or IT skills.”

“I have a PhD myself, and when I applied here, it was definitely an asset because it counted as extra relevant experience. I have to know what people are doing and what research involves; I perfectly understand what lab research is about. Understanding how research works, how to set up a lab, and how to process and publish results is, apart from the scientific technical knowledge itself, important in my job.”



“I believe in the higher purpose of PhD research because it can contribute to a scientifically founded, rational environmental policy”

Roel Evens  
Scientific Project Coordinator  
SETAC Europe

“On the other hand, I know that many organisations don’t consider PhDs and postdoctorates as additional work experience. For us, it does count, and after having worked with thousands of PhDs and hundreds of postdoctorates, I can say that the latter generally have expertise and management capabilities and that they are also more mature, both in Belgium and across the European Union.”

“PhDs in environmental technology, for example, usually have better research competences than people with Master’s degrees; they can look at research results more critically and usually have more thorough scientific knowledge. They also have a larger technical background and have proven that they can write and present papers. This also justifies a higher salary.”

“A PhD is definitely an added value in my sector. And if you look at engineering sciences and biology, you will see that the PhDs have a better background to get a job. If an employer says that a PhD is a waste of time, it means that the PhD is simply not relevant for that employer. Some employers have no need for PhDs; others do. In any case, I believe in the higher purpose of PhD research because it can contribute to outlining a scientifically founded, rational environmental policy.”

# Danielle Krekels

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Danielle Krekels is the founder of CoreTalents and the Alprocor recruitment agency. The latter has existed for more than twenty years and is the only one in Belgium specialised in recruiting Master's and PhDs in (applied) engineering sciences. She studied History and General Law at the University of Antwerp and has a Master's in Human Resource Management.

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"After more than 25 years in this business, I think I can honestly say that a PhD is not an added value on the labour market. Even more: if we look for managers or R&D managers - or everything to do with innovation - and as long as it is not purely about R&D research, a PhD and a fortiori a postdoctorate is more of a handicap. PhDs and postdoctorates will definitely find their way in pure research jobs, but there aren't that many of those around. In my opinion, investing in more PhD and postdoctorate jobs is not really the way to go. It should be expanded towards MBAs, language training, development of leadership capacities, presentation skills, etc. Topics that are closer and more pragmatically related to what the corporate world needs."

"I may be jumping to conclusions, but I think most companies are terrified of theoretical nerds who have no business insight, which is exactly the prevailing perception about PhDs and even more so about postdoctoral researchers."

"Don't get me wrong! This doesn't mean that a PhD is totally useless. PhDs who specifically seek out companies that could benefit from their research can build up a great partnership right from the start of their doctoral studies. This is how companies get to know the human side of these 'nerds' and this certainly gives them more opportunities on the labour market. PhDs or postdoctorates who have no experience whatsoever in working with companies can forget it. I think this is even more applicable for the hard sciences, as opposed to human sciences. In hard sciences, you are expected to be able to apply things and see the commercial benefits. Company managers and HR managers still strongly believe that PhDs are unworldly and that they're only working on details with no commercial added value up there in their ivory towers. Even if they recruit a highly experienced PhD, the PhD will still be a handicap. Companies still wonder whether this person will not get lost in theory, even if he or she has previously gained experience in the corporate world."

"PhDs who decide in advance that they want to move on to the non-academic labour market have an advantage because this choice already reveals a strong Core Talent for business. If they make sure to work together with companies during their doctoral studies, and certainly during their postdoctoral research, they can gather references and build up a network, that will definitely give them the support they need. The handicap will not be totally eliminated, but it will help."



"No matter how you look at it, the most important thing for companies is eventually the figure at the bottom of the balance sheet. If you are unable to translate your own in depth knowledge into added value, you will definitely not make it"

Danielle Krekels  
Founder CoreTalents  
and Alprocor recruitment agency

"I think it's actually an advantage in the psychological sciences to get a PhD, given that this isn't a hard science. Psychology is often considered guesswork, and if you get a PhD, you are demonstrating that you are going about it scientifically. PhDs who can work according to a strongly evidence-based method and can handle figures to indicate what an adequate HR policy could mean financially will certainly get opportunities on the non-academic labour market. After all, no matter how you look at it, the most important thing for companies is eventually the figure at the bottom of the balance sheet. If you are unable to translate your own in-depth knowledge into added value, you will definitely not make it. If you were to run a company, you would also only hire the people who more than earn their salaries? The same applies

for PhDs; they have to show employers that they are literally worth it, what value they give to the company so that employers are willing to invest in them."



# Olivier Onclin

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Since February 2015, Olivier Onclin has been a member of the executive committee and Chief Operating Officer at Belfius Bank. He started out working for Dexia Group as Head of Strategic Projects back in 2007. He gained experience at Belfius Bank as Head of Payments & Accounts Operations, Chief Marketing Officer and Public & Wholesale Banking. In 1997, he graduated as a business engineer from KU Leuven.

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“A PhD can absolutely be an added value in the banking sector. We are actually looking for PhDs for very specific positions in risk management and market research. A total of about forty PhDs are working at Belfius now. In general, I've had positive experiences with PhDs, who obviously have some specific competences, although I can't say that those working in IT, for example, are spectacularly different from the lower skilled employees.”

“A PhD or postdoctorate will certainly not be a disadvantage for a candidate here. The fact they stayed at university a bit longer isn't frowned upon either.”

“Of course, the expectations are partly based on advantages, but you do expect a PhD to have a high level of academic and research competences. I don't think there are any fundamental differences in other areas compared to those people with a Master's degree. I assume that everybody with a university degree will score high enough for the required competences.”

“In my opinion, the period of the doctoral studies is like work experience. Belfius analyses and processes high amounts of data, which is a big challenge. I'm honestly quite surprised that we have so little contact with PhDs who are working on this topic. It is a pity, actually, because we could start up some interesting dialogues about it. Shorter lines of communication between universities and banks could facilitate a dialogue.”

If we have a better idea of which universities have researchers working on specific themes that are interesting to us, a win-win situation could be created because it would allow researchers to come into contact with what lives in our sector. In my opinion, the universities could work more proactively and together with the business world to develop a vision about data analysis, for instance. It would be very interesting to get a sounding board composed of people who are researching this topic on a daily basis.”



Olivier Onclin  
COO  
Belfius Bank

“If we have a better idea of which universities have researchers working on specific themes that are interesting to us, a win-win situation could be created because it would allow researchers to come into contact with what lives in our sector.”



# Michel Georgis

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Michel Georgis is Chief Human Resources Officer at Proximus. He has worked for this telecom company since 2000. He studied Economy at KU Leuven.

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“A university degree is indeed important, but a PhD is not necessarily an added value in my sector. When selecting the candidates, we first look at how the interview goes, their personality, their standards and values, and our assessment of how they will integrate into our organisation. It is my experience that building a career is not only about a high IQ and grand degrees. A command of languages is also essential in my opinion. That is why we have hired staff without a university degree, but who are perfectly trilingual. When I have to choose between two candidates with an equivalent university degree, I will always choose the person with the best command of languages. In addition to languages, I also feel that personality, values, team spirit and the preparedness to take risks is very important.”

“I consider getting a PhD as just another way to study longer. It sometimes gives the impression that it is hard to say goodbye to the academic world or student life. I do know that universities ask their PhD students to get a feel for the business world, but a PhD is still a very theoretical thing. There is still a huge difference between academic life and the reality of the business. In all honesty, I would put a PhD at the same level as a Master's degree. People with Master's degrees acquire four years of valuable business experience in the time that PhD students get their degree, and I think that gives those with a Master's a lead.”

“Although, obviously, it all depends on the individual. At Belgacom, we also offer management trainee programmes. People from the best universities start with a two-year programme. We select them on the basis of personality. This programme offers great opportunities, but of course they have to be prepared to take them. And that's when attitude becomes important: they have to show that they can work together and listen to colleagues, they shouldn't give the impression that they know everything. Finally, I want to say that communication and presentation skills in business life are a must today. Employees have to be able to sell themselves, in one way or another, through presentation for top management - during which the content of the presentation is what we look at, of course. This allows us to see the real difference between good employees and top performers.”



Michel Georgis  
Chief HR Officer  
Proximus

“When I have to choose between two candidates with an equivalent university degree, I will always choose the person with the best command of languages”

# Filip Baptist

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Filip Baptist started working for Securex in 1999. He is currently their COO and has built up solid experience as HR Director. He studied Industrial and Organisational Psychology at KU Leuven, and after that got another Master's in Human Resource Management at Vlerick Business School and a PMD General Management at the IESE Business School.

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"I think PhDs are people who are capable of working on a project-basis, autonomously, methodologically and in a structured manner. They have some clear competences, which are important for a number of specific jobs. They don't have a lead on other candidates in terms of social skills and motivation. PhDs do, however, have experience through teaching practicals and seminars, as well as by assisting in dissertations."

"But the added value of a PhD for the non-academic employment market is rather limited, I think. Only a handful of people with a PhD work at Securex, and then only in expert positions. For us, PhDs who apply for a job at university level have the same assets as other candidates with university educations. The intellectual capacities are only one of many factors we take into account."

"Unfortunately, postdoctorates shall have to fight the perception that applying for jobs in the non-academic labour market is second choice because they didn't succeed in following the university path of their preference. They have to prepare for the questions about why they are looking for a job outside the university now that they are older."

"If you know in advance that you won't be staying at the university after your PhD studies, it is essential to choose a PhD that is extremely relevant in the business world, which allows you to start making business contacts during your studies. This increases your chances of being hired."

"If you really want to become a professor, and it doesn't work out, it's important to be well prepared for a job interview, just like someone with a Master's degree, and to show that you can be an added value for the organisation. And personality and attitude are more important than a degree in that respect."



Filip Baptist  
COO  
Securex

"If you know in advance that you won't be staying at the university after your PhD studies, it is essential to choose a PhD that is extremely relevant in the business world, which allows you to start making business contacts during your studies"

# Philip Buskens

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Philip Buskens became in March 2013 the Vice President of Verbund Site Development & Optimization within the Antwerp branch of the German multinational chemical group BASF. In addition, he is a visiting professor at the University of Antwerp. He obtained a PhD in Applied Biological Science - Catalysis at the KU Leuven.

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“In the industry I work in, and more specifically the company I work in, PhDs are quite useful for certain positions. A PhD is even used to be a requirement for being hired for certain positions. In a sector where positive sciences play an important role, a PhD can definitely offer an added value.”

“When recruiting executives, we obviously not only consider the (doctorate) degree and the institution where it was granted, but the soft skills and attitude will also be taken into account.”

“So for BASF, everything covered by the word ‘entrepreneurship’ is an additional asset. Employees should be autonomous to a great extent, but they should also be able to work in a team. This can easily be found out because universities are increasingly integrating group work into the different programmes and offer internships in their curriculum. As a recent graduate, you have to find a way to stand out based on actual experiences, just like any other applicant. This could be by means of activities outside your study area. This could be very general as well: playing a certain sport, volunteering, or organising events. The experience gained during the doctoral studies already indicates to what extent these competences are available.”

“We are also trying to anticipate whether a candidate has the necessary leadership capacities and whether future employees will have the right safety attitude when performing their tasks. Safety is an absolute priority in the chemical industry.”

“I think PhDs have entrepreneurship, maturity and persistence in their DNA anyway. Because they report to their promoter and give direction to the Master’s students they assist, they also often have the qualifications to work in a team. We don’t usually recruit PhD holders based on their doctoral research topic, but rather because we assume that they will have a certain level of maturity. It is a kind of proof of concept.”

“PhDs who started their doctoral studies with the intention of working outside the academic world already display entrepreneurship, but they will also have to distinguish themselves through extra skills, some amount of practical experience, or a certain attitude.”



Philip Buskens  
VP Verbund Site Development  
& Optimization  
BASF Antwerp

“For BASF, everything covered by the word ‘entrepreneurship’ is an asset. Employees should be autonomous to a great extent, but they should also be able to work in a team”





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Dirk Van Damme has been head of the Centre for Educational Research and Innovation of the OECD since 2008. He got a PhD in Educational Sciences in 1989 and has been a professor of educational sciences at Ghent University since 1995.

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“Even though not everyone agrees, I think a PhD can actually provide an added value for the non-academic labour market. And I am aware that employers have some persistent ideas about applicants who hold a PhD: they generally think these people are too specialised and that they don't have the competences that are really needed for the corporate world. I can understand this up to a point. There is probably a risk of over-specialisation when you spent the first four or five years of your career on a PhD. I do think, however, that the benefits outweigh the costs, especially for organisations that are looking for employees with strong methodical competences, who know how to translate a scientific question into a sound methodology and who also have a clear, scientific view of things. In my opinion, the discussion of whether doctoral studies should also provide general professional competences that are necessary on the labour market is justified. And I am referring to competences like communication, working in team, etc. Doctoral studies should at least increasingly take into account that only a minority of the students continues to work in the academic world and that academics should therefore be adequately prepared for the non-academic labour market. Although I have the impression that a lot of attention is being paid to it in recent years. But I have no idea whether the efforts that are made really meet the demands of the market.”

“Overall, I think the balance in doctoral studies is positive. The figures on the labour market also seem to show that a PhD increases your job opportunities and could result in higher pay. Although no one has actually done the econometric analysis of the return on investment and studied whether the added value in employment and wage development really outweighs the investment made by students to get a PhD. Such a study would definitely be very interesting.”

“In my opinion, postdoctoral experience will only have an added value in a specific discipline that is directly related to the business world. I can perfectly imagine that postdoctoral research in chemistry or biology offers added value if the research is later continued in the company. Although, I am afraid that this isn't the case for many disciplines. My intuition says that you have to be prepared to ask yourself whether a postdoctorate in human or social sciences is meaningful and can provide added value.”

“The OECD is a very specific case and has a good market value. Hundreds of candidates with brilliant profiles apply for every vacancy because the jobs are highly valued and pay very well. When I recruit someone - and this may be because of my own academic background - I consider a PhD to be an asset because these are people who have worked hard on a specific theme for years. In addition to research and methodological skills, I also associate this with competences like perseverance, coping with setbacks, dedication, and



“Doctoral studies should at least increasingly take into account that only a minority of the students continues to work in the academic world and that academics should therefore be adequately prepared for the non academic labour market”

Dirk Van Damme  
Department Head  
Centre for Educational Research  
and Innovation, OECD

being able to translate questions or hypotheses into research projects. These questions can come from anywhere and have to be translated into a justified research design, a schedule and budget management. This involves several competences that are not only cognitive. These are common activities for our staff. I see that PhDs as well as people with a postdoctorate, are usually quite good at all that. However, I sometimes catch myself making certain associations with PhDs, while I notice that not everyone in my panel thinks the same. I have a positive attitude towards PhDs who apply for a job with us, especially for positions that explicitly require a PhD. If someone with a Master's degree applies, we won't exclude them, but we will check more extensively whether they have the required research skills. However, the OECD requires more than just academic experience; policy experience is also important. An academic background combined with strong policy experience will definitely leave an impression.”

“When you write a PhD, you have to specialise, working on a single theme for four to six years. But additionally, it is important to work on your 'employability' and thus safeguard your chances on the labour market. You should not lock yourself inside a scientific ivory tower. General skills are also important. A broad outlook on society and the social problems and questions is definitely an asset because nobody benefits from narrow-mindedness. I advise everyone to build up other experiences. Not necessarily in the field of policy-making, but just experience in many different fields. It is important to keep the window to the world open when you're working on a PhD.

“I definitely consider a PhD period to be work experience. It is obviously a very specific type of work, but it's not just idle hours, like some might say. I can understand that employers might wonder whether PhDs are lingering between the walls of the university for too long, but I would advise them to take a look across the border and see how things are done there. In Germany or Italy, for example, everyone thinks it is quite normal that students stay at university until they are 29. That is why I think it is important to make it clear that the PhD years are not study years, but actually form part of a professional career, in their own specific way.”



# André Oosterlinck

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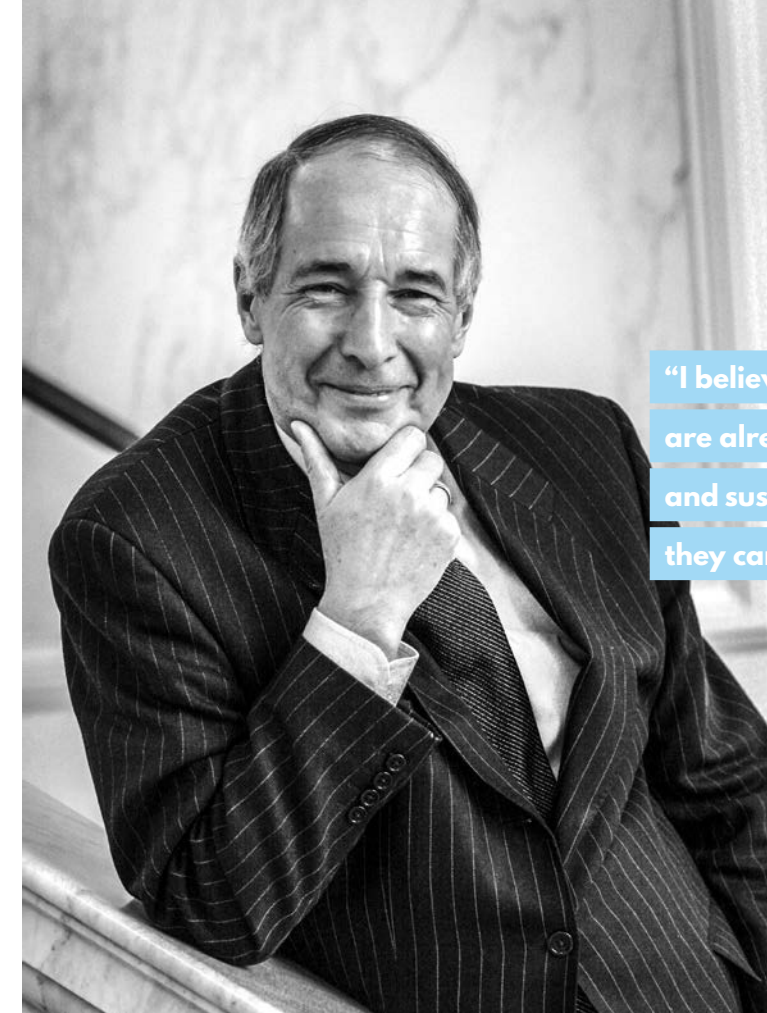
André Oosterlinck is Honorary Rector at KU Leuven. During the period he was a rector at the university, he was very much concerned with developing fundamental top research, stimulating spin-offs, and expanding networks with other research institutions.

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"A PhD should be an added value. However, I think the non-academic labour market does not yet fully appreciate and recognise this. I am president of a number of KU Leuven spin-offs that are almost always headed by a PhD. This choice is no coincidence because a PhD has proven that he or she is an innovator. In order to make a good and original doctorate, you have to be aware - sooner rather than later - of existing studies and find a good topic, together with your promoter. Then you have to work on your topic in great detail while making sure you stay ahead of the competition. Much the same as in the ever-changing business world when developing new products, no matter what industry you are in. So I think doctoral studies provide very good training for doing innovative work in a very specific domain. A PhD also involves requirements related to excellence, international fame, international connections and cooperation with others. That is why it is a huge learning experience. Although it is a fact that not all doctoral studies are run the same way. I come from the engineering and medical sector, which teaches you, as a PhD student, to work well in teams. This is often the opposite in human sciences. All PhD topics are usually completely separate, while in labs - I have run some myself - there are systems where a first year PhD student is assisted by a fourth year PhD student or by someone with a postdoctorate. The same skills are expected in business life: being capable of working together, exchanging information and managing a team. The last-year PhD students from the engineering and medical sector often supervise a group of researchers who report to them, while this is less the case in human sciences. In human sciences, this is partially compensated for by means of courses on team work, for instance. PhD students also increasingly take additional courses from other disciplines, like on how to make a business plan or about protecting intellectual property rights."

"The certainty that you could stay on at the university after a PhD is now as good as gone. Future PhDs realise this fact very well and increasingly tend to make arrangements for a career outside the academic world by acquiring additional skills that should enable them to fully participate in their job right from the start. As a PhD, you learned to deliver original work by a specific deadline, for which you established contacts at an international level. These are all assets for a career in the corporate world, which also includes the care and cultural sector, for that matter."

"The need to give PhD students additional training has now been understood by all universities. Programmes are developed everywhere, and that's a learning process for universities, too, which is why it's important for us to get feedback about it. The universities should spend more time questioning the work field and graduated PhDs when evaluating their programmes. Where do PhDs end up? What did they actually gain from their specific training and what did they lack? I also want to emphasise that doctoral studies should not become an actual management or psychology education, but it seems only logical to spend



"I believe that production companies that are already constantly seeking innovation and sustainability will gradually realise that they can definitely use PhDs"

André Oosterlinck  
Honorary Rector  
KU Leuven

10 to 15% of the time on developing additional skills. This is already partially integrated because teaching preparations and presentations will also be very useful for PhDs in the business world."

"How I see it is that, in exact sciences, most students start a PhD out of a genuine interest; but in human sciences, the motivation is sometimes that the salary is higher than in the work field. That's obviously not the right attitude. I do want to emphasise that I am only speaking of the differences I noticed while I was a rector. I have seen doctoral studies evolve in a positive way. Nowadays, PhD students are also involved in writing publications. That is also very important. A PhD student needs publications and large companies with a major research department working on special products really appreciate that. I believe that production companies that are already constantly seeking innovation and sustainability will gradually realise that they can definitely use PhDs."

"People who start on a PhD with the idea of working in the non-academic labour market after that have a good attitude because the chance of staying at the university has become very small, partly due to the fact that universities are also attracting more and more international specialists. This is already 30 to 40% at KU Leuven."

"The universities and even the PhD students themselves are already looking at a PhD from a very different perspective. This is why it's important that the business world's perception of PhDs changes.

A PhD proves to me that someone can come up with innovative ideas. While the cultural sector, the care sector and hospitals, as well as some other sectors still don't seem to realise that highly educated people will be needed to face future challenges. Bachelor's, Master's and PhDs can provide the necessary cross-fertilisation. Countries we like to compare ourselves with, still produce almost twice as many PhDs per 10,000 inhabitants than we do and I don't hear them saying there are too many PhDs there. In my opinion, the government should also create an executive job level for PhDs."

"We do have to make PhDs more aware of the importance of communication skills and the need to display their own skills, while trying to expand their network as early on as possible. As a PhD student you have to work innovatively, make your research understandable and demonstrate its economic and social relevance, build up a network, and work on competences like languages and social skills."

# Vincent Van Malderen

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Vincent Van Malderen studied Clinical Psychology and Cultural Sciences at Ghent University. He then attended an Organisations and Diversity post-academic education at KU Leuven. Between 2003 and april 2016, he worked as Product & Innovation Manager at SELOR, the interview was therefore done from this position. He currently holds the position of Managing Director at Jobpunt Vlaanderen.

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“We don’t have a separate channel for PhDs or postdoctorates within the Federal government. We have four position types: A, B, C and D, with A being the university level. Some countries have so-called fast tracks that allow PhDs to start off at a higher level. PhDs start working here at the university level. In other words, no specific demands are made. We do know that PhDs score higher on our reasoning tests. This is an added value because intelligence is a strong predictor of professional success. PhDs have a strongly developed ability to learn and have experience with translating complex matters. They are strong in recording, processing and presenting complicated information. In addition, they usually have more international experience and often speak and write excellent English. They are expected to display creativity and analytical thinking skills that make them able to tackle projects. Many PhDs also have experience in teaching and giving presentations. PhDs all have assets that they can use to their advantage on the non-academic labour market, both in the private and public sector.”

“During the first module of the SELOR selection tests, we see that 50% of the PhDs succeed compared to 42% of participants with a Master’s degree. This is a significant difference. This difference is mainly noticeable in abstract reasoning exercises. SELOR does not consider postdoctorates to be a separate group. Even though the Federal government does not pay PhDs more than the salary for an A-level position, it still remains a popular employer for this group. Specific competences are required depending on the position, but in general we expect all candidates, with either a PhD or Master’s degree, to meet a number of core competences: self-development, customer-orientation, working in team, being reliable, and meeting objectives.”



Vincent Van Malderen  
Managing Director – Jobpunt Vlaanderen  
(position until april 2016:  
Project & Innovation Manager SELOR)

“PhDs all have assets that they can use to their advantage on the non-academic labour market, both in the private and public sector”

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Fons Leroy has been Managing Director at VDAB since 2005. He studied Law and Criminology at KU Leuven, with a Master after Master's in Public Administration and Public Management.

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"The VDAB is not often called in to help PhDs find a job. They easily find their way to the labour market. People with a university degree automatically have a good profile on the labour market. The higher your degree, the higher your chances of employment. An economic crisis will extend the period during which people with a Master's degree can't find a job. The residual percentage remains under 5%, which means that after one year, less than 5% have not found a solid job. Due to the great supply, companies can choose from any number of candidates who are overeducated. In times of economic crisis, people often work below their educational level, but if they are prepared to start off like that, they can quickly work their way up. Not a problem in itself, really. It could become a problem when the economy recovers and these people continue to work below their level. We notice that one in three continues to do so. And thirdly - although this isn't supported by scientific evidence - PhDs have a more holistic vision, and many organisations are looking for people who are highly educated and also have the competences of the future, i.e. being able to think holistically, being critical, innovative, establishing links and thinking outside the box. These are competences that can be found in PhDs."

"Personally I don't meet a lot of people who have done six to nine years of additional research and therefore have a postdoctorate. I do know people who stay in their field of interest and do research. More specifically, social scientists, statisticians and economists in this situation don't always have an easy time finding a job, even though the public sector often does provide a safety net."

"However, I think that some employers, like internationally oriented companies that engage in in-house research and development, also specifically look for PhDs. But for others, I think the PhD might be a disadvantage. A 30-year-old entering the labour market for the first time might - I think - raise some eyebrows and there will be some suspicion."

"I don't think it is a good idea for the VDAB to make major investments in job-seeking PhDs. It's just not one of the priorities of the labour market, in my opinion. The VDAB should mainly use its scarce resources to help low-skilled young people, the disabled, and people over the age of 55 to find a job. Highly educated individuals will eventually more easily find a job through spontaneous reorientation and digital support, even though they studied something that isn't exactly in high demand in the labour market."



"People with a university degree automatically have a good profile on the labour market. The higher your degree, the higher your chances of employment"

Fons Leroy  
Managing Director  
VDAB

"In any case, Flanders needs solid investments in research and development for the future economy, but I'm not really in favour of transferring the funds for research and development into target group discounts. The masses of money that we have are used for the three target groups above and that is it."

"I wrote a book about the competences of the future. Developing these competences is, in my opinion, the biggest challenge for the labour market. The question is whether PhDs have these competences of the future. If that turns out not to be the case, it's obviously important to ask ourselves how they could then acquire these skills."



# Elke Tweepenninckx

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Elke Tweepenninckx is currently HR Manager at Antwerp Management School. Before that, she worked at KU Leuven for 10 years, where one of her tasks was the coordination of a research group. She studied Social Sciences at Thames Valley University in the United Kingdom.

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“Like with everything, you shouldn’t make generalisations about whether a PhD is or is not an added value. Personality also plays a large role when it comes to one’s professional life. Contrary to the widespread perception, I also meet PhDs who are business-minded and have a very commercial attitude. At Antwerp Management School, we don’t recruit people on the basis of diplomas, but on the basis of competences. PhDs are usually more analytical, but we assess everything on a job by job basis.”

“I used to coach PhDs in my previous job. I found that many people had a hard time getting into the non-academic labour market. In particular, people who worked on a postdoctorate after their PhD had trouble finding a job. This is only logical; they are so specialised that a match is hard for them to find in the business world. It only works when the post-doctorate also made efforts towards personal development or when they have worked both sides by simultaneously adopting a role in a business environment. The successful people I know either set up their own business or started working as consultants during their PhD.”

“I therefore want to advise future PhD students to not only focus on their PhD, but to also take time for the widest possible development, including leisure activities. People who specialise run the risk of tunnel vision. In the end, you will see that PhD students go different ways. Some stay focused and head straight for one goal, others continue to search for solutions in a broader context, despite their specialisation. The latter is really important if your ambition is to have a career outside the academic world. Both the universities and PhD students themselves have to aim for the greatest possible cross-fertilisation between the different faculties to enable and facilitate this broader view. A more systemic view of everything is indispensable here.”



Elke Tweepenninckx  
HR Manager  
Antwerp Management School

“I want to advise future PhD students to not only focus on their PhD, but to also take time for the widest possible development, including leisure activities”

# Danny Van Assche

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Danny Van Assche has been Managing Director at Horeca Vlaanderen since April 2010. He obtained a PhD in Political and Social Sciences from the University of Antwerp in 2005.

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“I think a PhD doesn't really have an added value in my sector. For me personally, my PhD studies didn't contribute to getting my job at Unizo or my current position either. However, I can imagine that mentioning a PhD on your CV certainly leaves an impression. Conversely, I can also imagine that hiring someone with a PhD may be considered overshooting.”

“A PhD may be useful when you have to do research for your job, like in a knowledge centre. After all, as a PhD, you definitely learn to work autonomously and successfully finish a study. This goes for all doctorate holders. The study techniques are the same for everyone. But, otherwise I don't see much difference between the competences of people with a PhD and people with a Master's degree.”

“I don't think postdoctoral research makes much of a difference. I see a PhD as added value, as proof of your capabilities. However, a postdoctorate is just more of the same. When you suddenly end up in the business world after your PhD and postdoctoral studies, you realise you have spent a very long time in a totally different world and you will definitely need a significant adjustment period.”

“For me it is not enough to just have a PhD to qualify for a job. The rest of a candidate's CV should also show that he or she is a perfect match for the position we are trying to fill. Besides, the relative value of a PhD is going down. Universities are increasingly receiving grants on the basis of the number of doctorate holders they enrol. That is why efforts are made to increase the number of PhD studies. Lots of PhD students can't obtain a position at the university and end up on the non-academic employment market. The academic world has changed enormously and the emphasis on publication is so strong that, in my opinion, not enough attention and appreciation is given to other academic tasks like teaching, social work and the like. Don't get me wrong! I also think publications are important, but the tenure should not depend on that alone. This huge pressure to publish is unacceptable. Your research is still what matters most. Moving ahead in your research is more important than reporting.”

“No two PhD titles are the same either. You see a big difference between exact sciences and human sciences. In chemistry, for example, it is quite normal to do a PhD. You don't do this as much when pursuing an academic career, but more from the point of view that a PhD can actually be an added value in the chemical world. You show that you have professional knowledge and that you can conduct autonomous research. Within human sciences, it is a lot less common to do PhD studies, although this is changing now. A PhD within human sciences does use the same research methods, but the value of the diploma will be a lot lower than a PhD in exact sciences. Then you have the PhD studies in social policy, like at the Centre for Social Policy in Antwerp. If you apply for a job at the



“I think it's incredibly important to take what you want to do next into account when choosing the topic of your PhD”

Danny Van Assche  
General Manager  
Horeca Vlaanderen

NSSO, FPS ELSD, a trade union, etc., it will definitely give you a major advantage. You did your PhD studies in a relevant matter and at a famous research centre.”

“Universities have to conduct fundamental research and it is the task of companies to apply it. I sometimes have the impression that this is forgotten when the university is commercialised. I think it's incredibly important to take what you want to do next into account when choosing the topic of your PhD. It's important that you can demonstrate exactly what you've been doing: concrete, relevant things like giving lectures or using certain techniques. In other words, you have to name the competences that are outside your doctorate, but which you have mastered thanks to your PhD studies.”

“First of all, I expect doctorate holders to have research abilities. I would gauge the level of the PhD by presenting concrete problem cases and by seeing what solutions they come up with. You expect someone with a PhD to be smarter, too. However, that is not always the case. Besides, you also assume that this person is more theoretical and more mature. However, it is possible that another applicant with a Master's degree gained relevant work experience when the PhD student was busy finishing his or her PhD studies. All in all, the expectations we have for PhDs, Master's and Bachelor's are often biased, which really shouldn't be the case. That a candidate for a specific job also has a PhD is no reason for me personally not to invite him or her for an interview because PhDs know how to conduct research, how to read other research, and how to report. This is an asset, but it's not a free pass to relegate candidates who only have a Master's degree to mere followers or exclude them.”



# Stefanie De Man

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Stefanie De Man has been Expert Project Manager at bpost since 2009. After getting her degree in Industrial and Organisational Psychology, she completed her PhD in Applied Economics at Ghent University in cooperation with Vlerick Management School.

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“Honestly, a PhD only has a limited added value in my line of work. In principle, you will already have four years of work experience after a PhD, but the non-academic labour market doesn't always see it that way because they often consider a PhD as an extension of your study time. When applying for jobs, you repeatedly have to explain that pursuing a PhD is not just studying, it is working. A lot of recruiters still have the impression that PhDs are unworldly theoreticians. Unless you end up in market research, for example, a PhD won't do much for you in the non-academic labour market. For my application at bpost, it was actually more of an obstacle than an extra asset because the perception was that my attitude would be too theoretical. Thanks to a good selection procedure, I eventually got the chance to prove myself. Your aim should be to get invited to a job interview to prove yourself, but that turns out to be a difficult hurdle.”

“The biggest obstacle for a PhD is still the fact that the outside world sees you as an unworldly researcher. That is why you should clearly include what you've been up to in your CV. I especially recommend that you show that your work was useful for society. As your career progresses, a PhD may be less significant because actual work experience is gaining in importance.”

“During your doctoral studies, you do learn to work very independently and take initiatives. In addition, I obviously expect a PhD to have more scientific competences. It's sometimes frustrating to have to convince people that the research done outside the academic world is sometimes insufficiently founded. It's not always accepted that it is sometimes necessary to work more thoroughly. As a PhD, you have learned to work on a project basis because you have to be able to properly structure your own work. In addition, you have a very critical attitude. While others may skip over things too quickly, you continue to scrutinise every detail, although you will have to learn that not every detail is equally important on the non-academic labour market.”

“In general, I believe a PhD is an advantage on the labour market because you have another way of thinking and a different approach. You have also proven that you can work well in a team. That gives you some valuable background. But you also have to see for yourself where your added value can be useful. That is why it's important to expand your network during your doctoral studies and to establish contacts with the corporate world. In other words, the PhD is not an advantage in itself, but if you handle it well, you can turn it into a weapon that can be used to your advantage.”



Stefanie De Man  
Expert Project Manager  
Bpost

“As a PhD, you have to see for yourself where your added value can be useful. That is why it's important to expand your network during your doctoral studies and to establish contacts with the corporate world”

# Philippe Vandekerckhove

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Philippe Vandekerckhove has been CEO of the Flemish Red Cross since 2004. He studied Medicine and got his PhD in Microbiology and Immunology at KU Leuven in 1994. Between 1995 and 2003 he worked for the University Hospital Leuven (UZ Leuven), including as head of the Haematology lab and as Clinical Director.

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“For questions about the added value of a PhD, it’s important, first of all, to emphasise that there is a big difference between different jobs. PhDs will definitely be better prepared for jobs where scientific research must be conducted. For example, they already know how to write a paper. Someone with a Master’s degree still has to learn this skill. Therefore, we hire PhDs for research activities and sometimes also provide doctoral programmes. For normal production purposes, like the preparation of blood products, we do not explicitly look for PhDs. A PhD is sometimes even at a disadvantage. A PhD’s CV usually states that they have experience with managing a lab, but that’s not true in practice. There’s absolutely no guarantee that they will be capable of managing a group of lab technicians, for instance. Not to mention being able to attend the works council to discuss matters with the trade unions. A PhD may be at more of a disadvantage instead of an advantage for positions requiring these skills. Universities try to get students enthusiastic about getting a PhD, but I don’t know if this is the best choice for every student. PhDs who start working for us have to be prepared to switch gears and start afresh. They don’t know the routine of lab work because they’ve become attached to the research context, so to speak.”

“The Red Cross only has a limited number of places for researchers: at the lab where blood platelets are studied in Ghent and at the Centre for Evidence-Based Practice (CEBaP) in Mechelen, where we do evidence-based work. After completing their PhD, I think many people eventually do something that doesn’t necessarily require them to have a PhD. As such, during my last class at the university, I always give students an overview of the options they have after graduating.”

“You will always have to make choices in your career as well. Kim Clijsters was able to reach the top because she was fully dedicated to tennis by the time she was 10, but if she had broken her ankle at 16, we probably never would have heard of her. You have to complete postdoctoral research for an academic career, and if you don’t succeed, you have to change the course of your career. This is a disadvantage because you will have lost time and because you will have less relevant experience for the non-academic labour market.”

“I think a PhD isn’t relevant for a policy position. If that’s what you want to do, you don’t need a PhD, you need to master your profession and learn how to convey your knowledge. You can learn to do this working in the field too.”



“PhDs who start working for us have to be prepared to switch gears and start afresh. They don’t know the routine of lab work because they’ve become attached to the research context, so to speak”

Philippe Vandekerckhove  
CEO  
Flemish Red Cross

“IQ and knowledge are much more important in a research career than in most other careers. Only the university (and specific research centres) evaluates merely on the basis of your intelligence. Even a brilliant physician with a difficult personality and limited social skills can become an excellent scientist. Companies are more interested in your personality and whether or not you can work in a team. The reasoning behind this is that someone with a balanced personality can still be taught technical skills, while someone with all the required knowledge, but an unbalanced personality, cannot change that personality. And the requirements in that respect are different from organisation to organisation and from position to position. If you have to program on your own all day long, it is not so bad that you are lacking social skills; however, this may be a major problem in another context.”

“I also believe we should not see this as just black and white, and that people should get the chance to experiment until around the age of 30, and then decide what they are passionate about. It is difficult to know in advance whether you will like something or not. There are chances on the labour market for everyone and I think it’s never been the intention to get as many PhDs as possible on the market as a goal in and of itself.”



# Bruno Lambrecht

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Bruno Lambrecht has been the Deputy Head of the Cabinet of Economy and Innovation for the Minister of Work, Economy, Innovation and Sports Philippe Muyters since 2014. Before that, he was head of the KU Leuven Research & Development legal department. He studied law at that same university.

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"I can see many advantages to getting a PhD. Of course a PhD is different for each field of study, but in general getting it indicates, first of all, that you have a high degree of creativity, that you are capable of seeing correlations and that you can be focused for a long period while producing quality work. The focus on a certain domain in which PhD students make progress also involves being faced with permanent challenges by peers; those permanent challenges can also be found in any professional environment. This ensures a critical perspective during the course, which is useful for many professions. Secondly - although this is not true for hard scientific disciplines - PhD students will also acquire specific scientific skills. The industry today is clearly looking for people with in-depth knowledge in a specific field in combination with creativity; although I am not convinced that companies initially turn to holders of a PhD for this purpose. On the other hand, recruiters will trust in the fact that no one is granted a PhD just because."

"In my opinion, a PhD is the perfect mix of learning and working in a technological scientific environment. It is not purely work and not purely study either. It is a course that gives you the necessary skills to work in the field."

"In order to pursue a postdoctorate, you have to be willing to take further steps in the academic world. You can choose to do further research in your field or additionally you can explore other fields and gain international experience. I am convinced, though, that you have to look into the mirror when making this choice: are you doing this because the academic world is your thing or are other motives, like an expected lower salary or other work challenges on the non-academic work floor, playing a role? It is also possible that you want to stay at the university because you want to make the transition to various jobs and then work together with companies or perhaps even start up a spin-off. In other words, postdoctoral research does not mean that you automatically have to become a professor. In my opinion, that last one is a preconceived notion that's still too prevalent. I do agree that both the holder of a PhD and the promoter or research group have to be encouraged to think about this."

"I also wonder whether it is a healthy situation that postdoctorates are kept in limbo for so long and do not know when they will be granted tenure. I think, in any case, that the academic world could do with more transparent communication and a clear vision concerning personnel planning and career opportunities. This is how the smart research groups do it. It could be one of the criteria to assess professors and I think that the heads of a research group should also get an evaluation."



"A degree confirms the skills, but I'm not interested in the title alone"

**Bruno Lambrecht**  
Deputy Head of Cabinet  
Economy and Innovation

"Compared to someone with a Master's degree, I would expect a PhD to at least be able to effectively apply the skills he or she is supposed to have, like the permanent aim for quality. In addition, I notice, just like everyone else does, that each switch from the private sector or the government involves a new learning process. It is especially important to be very flexible and constantly make adjustments. I have seen PhDs who knew a lot about one topic, but got caught up in it. They excelled in it; but on the other hand, they just weren't flexible enough. Outside the academic world, this type of PhD will not immediately be presented with dozens of job opportunities."

"Only specific scientific positions are required to have a PhD in order to work at a ministry cabinet. In any case, I think it's very important

for professors to acquaint their PhD students intensively with other organisations. There should definitely also be more exchange between the private industry and the universities. These worlds are still too far apart and have undeserved preconceived notions about each other."

"To conclude, I can say that a PhD in itself does not guarantee added value in the general employment market, but someone with a PhD does have some specific competences, based on the doctorate he or she completed, which may prove useful in a variety of organisations. A degree confirms the skills, but I'm not interested in the title alone. In addition, universities should cast a more critical eye upon the quality of publications instead of maintaining the prevailing culture where quantity is more important."



# Katrijn Vanderweyden

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Since June 2014, Katrijn Vanderweyden is Head of the Foundation for Innovation & Labour at SERV. She got her PhD in Sociology at the University of Antwerp, after which she stayed at the university with a postdoctoral research mandate for another few years. She started working for the government in 2005.

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“PhDs can only fulfil a limited number of positions within the research institutions of the Flemish government. A PhD is not a requirement to be a candidate for other positions, nor does it translate into a higher salary. It doesn't make a difference for us either. What counts for certain jobs is the whole of your competences and your profile. A PhD can be an added benefit. Some recruiters see it as a quality label, but that's not a general rule.”

“You can learn quite a lot by working at the university and gaining expertise about how to conduct and interpret research. In addition, the development of analytical thinking skills is very valuable for many positions. But on the other hand, organisations have no use for otherworldly academics. I think that no matter what, a PhD or research experience is not a bad starting point. The PhD is just a piece of paper; what matters are the skills you developed to get there.”

“Last year, we recruited a new employee, and although PhDs also applied, the job went to a young woman without a PhD, who clearly demonstrated during the last jury interview that she had a sound feeling for dealing with the social partners. That is unrelated to the PhD. You may build up this experience quicker thanks to other work experience or in another work context. PhDs who engaged in broader personal development during their leisure time can also develop these skills and thus have a better chance on the labour market.”

“A lot depends on the candidate's interests. Doctorate holders who can prove that they are using the space they have for further development, for example by being involved in politics, increase their chances on the labour market. They may end up in a ministerial cabinet or a research department. Everyone has to find his or her own way, a way which may and must start from one's own assets and interests, although it is important to leave your comfort zone every now and again.”

“I don't think postdoctoral research can make that big of a difference. It is useful to leave the university on time, especially when you are not learning anything new. For social sciences, it's good to master both quantitative and qualitative research, and it is also interesting if you have worked with different topics. It is important to develop yourself in the broadest possible sense. Of course, some people will be able to benefit from in-depth specialisation, but you do need to be lucky enough that this is something that is currently needed in the labour market.”

“PhDs are in an excellent position to learn, which, as far as I'm concerned, can also be considered work experience; but on the other hand, those without a PhD can gain the



“The PhD is just a piece of paper; what matters are the skills you developed to get there”

Katrijn Vanderweyden  
Head of the Foundation for  
Innovation & Labour  
SERV

same experience on the job, by working with interesting people, for example. And in any case, employers are usually looking for people with a broad mix of competences. If you worked as a volunteer during your PhD studies, for example, you will definitely have more assets in the labour market.”

“I do believe there is a difference between hard and human sciences. It's also the case that when you work for the social partners or for the authorities, researchers should be prepared to take into account different interests and stakes and be aware that you are not always free to express your personal opinion. The context is different than in a university setting. A PhD is just a piece of paper that doesn't entitle anyone to think that he or she is better than anyone else. In the end, the underlying competences are much more important than the degree. In that area, I expect PhDs to realise that and to be able to cope with it.”

# Stephan Vanfraechem

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Stephan Vanfraechem got his PhD in history in 2001 at Ghent University and continued to work at the same university until 2005 as a researcher and doctor-assistant. He then started working at Alfaport, where he has been General Manager since 2014. He is also a Director for the Maatschappij Linkerscheldeoever (MLSO), Lillo Port Centre, Railport nv and Alfapass.

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“I think a PhD is an added value for the non-academic labour market, but not in the way that’s usually meant. I don’t think there are many employers - except in rather specific sectors like the chemical industry - who absolutely want to hire PhDs. There are not many job vacancies that require a PhD. You can’t expect to get preference over other candidates without a PhD. However, in my experience, you develop a number of competences during your doctoral studies that are very interesting for potential employers. In my opinion, the four main ones are working independently, good communication skills, ability to manage projects and maintaining a critical mind-set. Someone with a Master’s degree may not always have these competences, while they are actually a must for a PhD. I strongly believe in these qualities. I am aware that many PhD students and PhDs wonder if that’s what they need to make it with on the non-academic labour market, but these qualities are absolutely not so obvious. Someone with a PhD excels in these things. Naturally, not everyone does so in all competences, as that would depend on the person. But they are qualities that everyone should have in order to defend a PhD. Being critical in an organisation and in a team are essential for me, and if you successfully completed a PhD, it should be second nature to you.”

“When I applied outside the academic world, I initially made the mistake of sending my CV with an overview of all my publications and conferences. Only afterwards did I realise that this had little or no relevance outside the academic world. PhDs should therefore be able to make a kind of translation of the references to their skills. I tried it out once. I asked my manager at the time what it was that made me different from my colleagues, and he named exactly those characteristics that I listed above. Working independently is definitely not an obvious skill. I notice a clear difference among PhDs in this regard. And independence is pure luxury for an employer. It means time and time is money. When I have to supervise and coach someone on my team at a high level, it means that I can spend less of my time on other things.”

“I expect every applicant to be able to work independently, but because it’s not obvious, I would be more inclined to hire a PhD. A difficult issue is, of course, the salary. If a PhD switches to the non-academic labour market, chances are that he or she will have to take a pay-cut. You will be considered someone who has indeed gathered some years of experience, but in a very enclosed environment. You don’t have any business experience yet. You will definitely come across the same prejudices I’ve had to fight against: ‘the prig of a researcher in the ivory tower who makes too much money at the university’. It’s up to you really to negotiate and to show that your PhD or postdoctorate will be a major added value for your employer.”



“When I applied outside the academic world, I initially made the mistake of sending my CV with an overview of all my publications and conferences. Only afterwards did I realise that this had little or no relevance outside the academic world”

Stephan Vanfraechem  
Managing Director  
Alfaport, VOKA Chamber of  
Commerce Antwerp - Waasland

“The choice for a postdoctorate position should not fully depend on the next step. Personally, I am glad I did it. Firstly, it allows you to validate your research even more and it also gives you an opportunity to broaden your research. It also allows you to think about your future because a wrong choice is often a hastily made choice. Never choose a job that you don’t really love; rather, choose something that you really want to do. It’s important to realise that a PhD outside the university is not automatically a win for life. But you do have some qualities that may seem obvious to you, but which aren’t so evident in the non-academic labour market. I think it comes down to really emphasising these qualities.”

# Kurt Vandaele

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Kurt Vandaele is Senior Researcher at the European Trade Union Institute (ETUI). He has been working there since 2007. He got his PhD in Political Sciences at Ghent University in 2004, after which he held a postdoctoral research mandate for another three years.

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“The Trade Union Institute consists of two departments, i.e. research and education. There are three units within the research department, including Europeanisation of labour relations. Almost all the researchers working here have a PhD. Because we are a link between the European trade union and the academic world, a PhD is definitely an added value for us. We set up networks for academics and look for academics who, for example, can help with book projects. It is obviously an advantage if you know something about the methodology or the topic. Almost no one in the other department has a PhD. It is not really an added value in that case.”

“A PhD or postdoctorate provide a clear difference in experience. Completing a PhD is also symbolic; it lifts your self-confidence and makes you capable of working more pro-actively. During a postdoctorate, you start acquiring experience and making contacts; you are not aiming for a new degree. Whether it is harder to find work as a postdoctorate depends on the sector or employer, although you may have acquired more work experience. A PhD is often more independent and autonomous than someone with a Master’s degree. Of course, it’s dangerous to generalise because personality and character also have a major impact on how someone functions in the labour market. In any case, my experience is that PhDs are often entrepreneurial individuals, with strong expertise in their professional area, who find it easier to cope with methodology and see the bigger picture. I certainly consider a PhD or postdoctorate to be work experience, which allows people to put into practice what they have learned, including outside their specific area of research.”

“Within the ETUI, we provide training, research and social services. Findings are quite often covered in the press and some colleagues continue to teach at the university or have connections with leading universities. A major part of the job also consists in continuing to publish in academic magazines and taking part in workshops and conferences. We can focus strongly on our core tasks thanks to the excellent administrative support and documentation centre. This job remains very academically oriented and is actually pretty close to a career in the academic world. There is no doubt that a PhD is definitely an added value in this case.”



Kurt Vandaele  
Senior Researcher  
ETUI

“A PhD is often more independent and autonomous than someone with a Master’s degree. Of course, it’s dangerous to generalise because personality and character also have a major impact on how someone functions in the labour market”



# John Crombez

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John Crombez has been Chairman of the SP.A (Flemish Socialist Party) since 2015. He also teaches Public Finance at Hasselt University and Ghent University and is a member of the Ostend municipal council. He got a PhD in Economic Sciences at Ghent University in 2001.

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“Besides the potential advantages a PhD could bring for the labour market, I think it always has a great deal of added value to offer. You are given the time and space to engage an independent study and specialise within a single domain; it doesn't really matter what domain that is. Wherever you end up in your professional life, there is no doubt in my mind about the added value of a PhD. It is something special that allows you to work on your own personal project. So it seems to me to be a positive trend that the number of PhDs in Flanders is going up. Also, apart from the impact of the PhD on your situation in the labour market, finishing your doctoral studies will definitely contribute to the creation of great opportunities for yourself. A PhD about a specific topic certainly adds value to your profile in the industry. This is certainly true for exact sciences, but you can definitely say it is worth more even in human sciences than a Master's degree.”

“Aiming for a postdoctorate is less important for the non-academic labour market than if you were to pursue an academic career. Since academic assignments are split up into social services, lecturing and publishing, as well as considering all the corresponding evaluations, a postdoctorate is an excellent way of looking beyond the academic specialisation. You can compare this with the training to become a doctor, where you have to study longer to specialise. This is essential for the academic world, but I'm not convinced that it's necessary for the non-academic labour market.”

“There is certainly a place in politics for PhDs, too. A ministerial cabinet is always looking for employees who are able to combine two things: one, they should be able to assimilate or process a lot of information in a short time and, two, they should be articulate enough to clearly communicate this information. This has not always been an easy combination to find. It's not because you have a PhD and because you are also able to process a lot of information that you also have the skills to clearly and understandably explain everything. PhDs often internalise their knowledge and find it hard to communicate it to the outside world; while the non-academic labour market, and certainly the political world, is looking for precisely those people who can combine both these skills. It is important to disseminate and share information, but it is also important to analyse information and determine what is relevant to society based on that. The fact that you are good at interpreting statistics does not necessarily mean that this should also have policy implications. No matter how you look at it, PhDs are always well-equipped to have these analytical insights.”



John Crombez  
SP.A Chairman

“Wherever you end up in your professional life, there is no doubt in my mind about the added value of a PhD”



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Ann Brusseeel has been a Flemish Member of Parliament for Open VLD for six years now. She studied Linguistics and Literature at the Vrije Universiteit Brussel, working as a translator and crisis manager after her studies and before her political career.

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"I think that someone who conducted solid research has acquired knowledge and skills that will definitely be useful on the labour market, although this knowledge cannot directly be applied in every job. PhDs get to know the world in different ways. This is always a great asset for the labour market. The academic environment doesn't seem to me to be the easiest of environments. Because you are in that world, you can learn things from it that can be useful. And, additionally, you also acquire research skills and a critical view. You can compare sources, make a synthesis, defend your topic before a group of critics, etc. That gives you some valuable background. It must definitely be frustrating not to be able to use it immediately because you have to work below your educational level, but I think it comes down to continuing to have faith that everything will work out fine in the end. No matter what, I feel that you should look at a PhD from more than just an academic perspective."

"The same applies for postdoctorates: the only problem, in my opinion, is that there's a risk of getting caught up in an ivory tower. But postdoctorates can also find work in a non-academic context, I'm sure. I understood that postdoctoral researchers themselves are asking for help to find jobs in the non-academic labour market. Although, I think it's strange that you would be more helpless after a PhD than before. And if the labour market doesn't consider the period of the postdoctorate as work experience, this is actually an image problem for the academic world. Maybe companies more easily turn a blind eye when it comes to recent graduates and expect PhDs, who are about 30 years old, to have a broader outlook on the world or much more (practical) experience. Although I still assume that people who spent so much time at university didn't just thumb through the archives all this time."

"I think researchers have the perseverance it takes to focus and to get into the details of a subject. They also have a lot of self-discipline. Each one of them is an asset for the labour market."

"People with these qualities are needed in the HR departments of political parties and for policy-making in the government, although they might get frustrated because politicians are constantly working on their personal branding. The competences of PhDs might be less of an asset for organisations with a strong focus on communications and marketing."

"We do need PhDs in politics, that's for sure, especially in the HR departments. Not just because of their specific knowledge, but also because of the network they often have in different sectors."

"Good research competences are the most important, I believe. I have no time to search through everything and distil the most important information from it, make a synthesis



"I think researchers have the perseverance it takes to focus and to get into the details of a subject. They also have a lot of self discipline. Each one of them is an asset for the labour market"

Ann Brusseeel  
Flemish MP Open VLD

and see the opportunities and weaknesses. PhDs, however, are very good at this. In my experience, they work schematically and are well organised. That's a very big asset. That's why I think it is a pity that PhDs aren't given enough appreciation, both within and outside the academic world. I find that strange. What's holding the organisations on the non-academic labour market back? Are they afraid that they will have to pay someone a decent salary even if they don't have a lot of experience yet, and will have to value that person correctly? I think it's regrettable at times. And maybe the labour market doesn't give people enough time to prove themselves."

"The labour market isn't easy for anyone these days. But I think it's always important, for everyone, PhD or not, to have some social skills in order to develop a view of the world. During a job interview, you must have something to tell and show that you are not unworldly. The same applies to everyone. But if you specialise in a certain domain for a long time, you also have to detach yourself from certain frames of mind. Politicians who want to do something else after ten years also have to adjust."

"Organisations are obviously granting more learning time to recent graduates because they only get paid a starter's salary. Someone with more experience will get less time to adjust. Maybe the idea prevails - which is rather presumptuous - that people who have spent a long time in an academic environment are a bit rigid, that they can't be trained for anything else and that they aren't flexible enough. I think it is a real shame to be thinking like that."



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