

What Higher Education Can Do to Place History Majors in Fulfilling Careers outside the Academy

Patryk Babiracki and James (Jim) W. Cortada
patrykjb@gmail.com and jcortada@umn.edu

For over a half-century, universities, colleges, and the historical profession have faced a chronic problem: how to help all those undergraduate and graduate students with history degrees find jobs? This problem has been especially acute at the advanced level, with the number of PhDs vastly outpacing the number of traditional jobs available in teaching and research at four-year colleges and universities. The conventional career pathways for students with BA and MA history degrees (teaching, museums, archives and increasingly government) are few. And although such mission-driven careers can be intrinsically rewarding, they often offer uncompetitive remuneration and limited growth opportunities.

Yet, the skills that these students learn in history classes are highly relevant in the private sector where jobs are far more plentiful than the professors who teach them realize. And those trained in history who work in business in non-historian jobs do well and recognize the skills they have acquired and used are relevant. So the challenge today is to bridge the gap between the academy and the rest of the economy. Here we want to suggest how such bridges can be built.

Companies, universities, and history departments are well-positioned to partner to address each other's challenges. University leaders and non-academic executives can do more to:

- Learn about and communicate the value that historians can bring to businesses;
- Learn about and communicate the full range of industry roles and career pathways that build on the transferable skills acquired by those earning a BA, an MA and a PhD in history;
- Build internal programs and institutional bridges that would help students and companies navigate the transfer of talent between sectors that have evolved largely in isolation from each other.

The Challenge Company Management Face Staffing Their Organizations

We read constantly that there are more jobs than applicants in the private sector, but incorrectly, too, that most are low-paying positions. Millions of jobs require high levels of cognitive skills, i.e. exactly the kinds of skills that colleges and universities are good at developing. Salaries for these kinds of jobs are generally competitive in the industry, and certainly higher than those traditionally reserved for people with history degrees in teaching, archives, museums, etc.

Companies globally are trying to address a growing challenge: the rapidly changing nature of work and inadequate access to sufficiently trained employees. The increasing sophistication of AI is enabling companies to automate many processes previously carried out by humans. These are tasks that include not only many types of physical labor, but also data processing and even certain types of creative and intellectual work.

This trend is expected to grow. According to a 2023 World Economic Forum (WEF) report on the future of work, "artificial intelligence, a key driver of potential algorithmic displacement, is expected to be adopted by nearly 75% of surveyed companies and is expected to lead to high churn – with 50% of organizations expecting it to create job growth and 25% expecting it to create job losses."¹

Responding to these new technologies and the rapid pace of disruption, employers increasingly value employees who can adapt fast to new environments and who can perform tasks that robots and AI systems cannot: think critically and creatively, navigate ambiguity, manage complicated, sensitive projects, form judgments based on an understanding of layered contexts, understand various perspectives, "read the room" to communicate effectively with different audiences, and show empathy.

To quote the 2023 WEF report on the future of work: "Analytical thinking and creative thinking remain the most important skills for workers in 2023. Analytical thinking is considered a core skill by more companies than any other skill and constitutes, on average, 9% of the core skills reported by companies. Creative thinking, another cognitive skill, ranks second, ahead of three self-efficacy skills – resilience, flexibility, and agility; motivation and self-awareness; and curiosity and lifelong learning – in recognition of the importance of workers' ability to adapt to disrupted workplaces. Dependability and attention to detail rank seventh, behind technological literacy. The core skills top 10 is completed by two attitudes relating to working with others – empathy and active listening and leadership and social influence – as well as quality control."

The importance of cognitive skills is growing, with companies considering creative thinking and analytical thinking to be the most important skills in the next five years, ahead of technology literacy. Furthermore, the report identifies several "socio-emotional attitudes" of growing importance to businesses. Chief among them are "curiosity and lifelong learning; resilience, flexibility and agility; and motivation and self-awareness."

A resulting gap also develops between the workers' skills and employers' demands. 60% of workers will require additional training before 2027. 44% of individuals' skills will need to be updated, noted *Fortune* based on the WEF

¹ World Economic Forum, "The Future of Jobs Report 2023,"

<https://www.weforum.org/reports/the-future-of-jobs-report-2023/digest/>

report.² The largest upskilling initiatives (10% and 8% respectively) are expected to address analytic and creative thinking. Developing workers' leadership and social influence skills, resilience, flexibility, agility, curiosity, and life-long learning skills is expected to remain high on employers' agendas. Of special concern are the obstacles that prevent young people globally from entering the workforce. Between 1999 and 2019, the youth population (ages 15 to 24) grew 30%, but their labor force participation decreased by about 12%, largely as a result of the disruption caused by the Covid-19 pandemic and automation.³

These trends point to:

- The urgency of formulating and implementing training and upskilling strategies that address the needs of workers and employers;
- The enormous potential for universities to help address this challenge through education in the humanities and the liberal arts;
- A special role that universities (together with other specific departments, especially in humanities) can play in helping companies to address the skills gap.

The problems faced by deans of arts and sciences / liberal arts and history departments are well known, but among them specifically of interest here is placing students in jobs, while the number of majors in the field has been declining.⁴ Undergraduate enrollments in history courses have been declining since the 2010s at an average rate of about 2% per year.⁵ According to a recent study by the National Humanities Alliance (NHA), university professors and administrators consider **students' concerns about job prospects the number**

² Jane Thier, "The Skills Gap Is So Big That Nearly Half of Workers Will Need To Retrain This Decade. These 10 Skills Are Most in Demand," *Fortune*, May 1, 2023:

<https://fortune.com/2023/05/01/most-important-skills-employers-want/amp/>

³ Mihnea Moldoveanu, Kevin Frey, and Bob Moritz, "4 Ways to Bridge the Global Skills Gap," *Harvard Business Review*, March 18, 2022: <https://hbr.org/2022/03/4-ways-to-bridge-the-global-skills-gap>

⁴ Benjamin M. Schmidt, "The History BA Since The Great Recession: The 2018 AHA Majors Report," *Perspectives On History*, November 26, 2018: <https://www.historians.org/research-and-publications/perspectives-on-history/december-2018/the-history-ba-since-the-great-recession-the-2018-aha-majors-report>; John K. Lauck, "Introduction: The Ongoing History Crisis," *Middle West Review*, Vol. 9, No. 1, Fall 2022: vii-xii.

⁵ Julia Brookins, "An Uncertain Trend: The AHA's 2022 Survey of History Undergraduate Enrollments," <https://www.historians.org/research-and-publications/perspectives-on-history/march-2023/an-uncertain-trend-the-ahas-2022-survey-of-history-undergraduate-enrollments>; Nathan Heller, "The End of the English Major," *The New Yorker* February 27, 2023, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2023/03/06/the-end-of-the-english-major>

one challenge to recruitment efforts in the humanities/social science disciplines (other factors that these respondents think are driving students away from the humanities education are: lack of understanding of humanities disciplines, discouragement from parents and other influences, and debt driving students to maximize immediate ROI).⁶ Many people in the US feel that the humanities are not a good investment in one's economic future. In some cases, university administrators decide to eliminate history programs and double down on more "career-focused" programs and discipline clusters, such as STEM.⁷ University leaders are eager to prove the usefulness of college education more generally, as public confidence in the value of a college degree declines in the US.⁸

These largely economic pressures make it harder for all the humanities disciplines to make a case for themselves. As a result, historians see the historical discipline as in a state of a "dangerous decline."⁹ Among the 3,787 history PhDs who graduated between 2014 and 2017, only 31.94% worked in tenure-track positions at four-year colleges.¹⁰ That left over two thousand possibly ineffectively deployed in the American economy. What a waste of resources.

Response of Academics and the American Historical Association—So Far

The AHA has developed a conversation about alternative careers ("Career Diversity for Historians") that includes a wealth of statistical information,

⁶ Scott Muir, *Strategies for Recruiting Students to the Humanities: Leveraging Scholarly Society Resources* (Washington, DC: The National Humanities Alliance, 2022).

https://d3n8a8pro7vhm.cloudfront.net/nhalliance/pages/2320/attachments/original/1644417320/SRSH_-_Leveraging_Scholarly_Society_Resources_-_FINAL.pdf?1644417320

⁷ Mitch Smith, "Students in Rural America Ask, 'What is a University Without a History Major?'" *The New York Times*, January 12, 2019: <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/01/12/us/rural-colleges-money-students-leaving.html>

⁸ Karin Fischer, "Americans' Confidence in Higher Ed Drops Sharply," *The Chronicle of Higher Education* July 26, 2022: https://www.chronicle.com/article/americans-confidence-in-higher-ed-drops-sharply?cid=gen_sign_in

⁹ Daniel Bessner, "The Dangerous Decline of the Historical Profession," *The New York Times*, January 1, 2023: <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/01/14/opinion/american-history-college-university-academia.html>; David A. Bell, "So You Want To Be A History Professor?" *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, January 5, 2023: https://www.chronicle.com/article/so-you-want-to-be-a-history-professor?cid=gen_sign_in

¹⁰ The American Historical Association, "Where Historians Work: An Interactive Database of History PhD Outcomes, 2014–17," [https://www.historians.org/research-and-publications/where-historians-work/where-historians-work-\(2014%E2%80%9317\)](https://www.historians.org/research-and-publications/where-historians-work/where-historians-work-(2014%E2%80%9317))

examples, informational interviews, and other resources designed to help history graduates find jobs outside of academia.¹¹ But arguably, the reach of such initiatives may be limited for at least three reasons:

1. The AHA is a professional organization of historians, and one generally has to be familiar with it in the first place to find (and trust, and even understand) the resources it makes available. Historians know about the AHA (in North America, at least), but the organization's name or mission means little to most executives or hiring managers. And they won't visit its website to learn about the practical value that historians can bring to their companies.

2. Structural and cultural factors make it harder for students to "explore alternatives." As the historian David Bell noted in 2023, the non-academic fields are rich and diverse, "and history-department faculty generally have expertise in none of them," so they're not ideal mentors for students wanting to learn about alt-ac jobs.¹²

3. Academics often remain unconvinced that training history students to do something else than research or teaching is a good thing. Within the context of today's political theatrics in the United States, the force of the academic pushback against what some see as a "careerist" turn of US universities is certainly understandable. But, as Anthony Grafton and Jim Grossman of the AHA noted correctly, there are good historical precedents for opening up the work of historians to other opportunities. They reminded us that "in Germany—the country that gave us the research university—doctorates in history and similar fields have traditionally been considered appropriate preparation for jobs in publishing, media, business, and politics."¹³

We conclude that:

- The private sector offers many opportunities for those students with history degrees who are eager to pursue them;
- The students who choose to pursue work in the private sector can make a tremendous impact on societies and communities by leveraging private/public-industry resources at scale, and by helping to humanize

¹¹ The American Historical Association, "Career Diversity for Historians,"

<https://www.historians.org/jobs-and-professional-development/career-diversity-for-historians>

¹² Bell, "So You Want To Be A History Professor?" https://www.chronicle.com/article/so-you-want-to-be-a-history-professor?cid=gen_sign_in

¹³ Anthony Grafton and James Grossman, "No More Plan B: A Very Modest Proposal for Graduate Programs in History," <https://www.historians.org/research-and-publications/perspectives-on-history/october-2011/no-more-plan-b-a-very-modest-proposal-for-graduate-programs-in-history>

business practices. History has been used to tackle big challenges in international politics; we should remain open to the notion that historians can apply their training to help businesses solve problems, big and small.

Characteristically, business and tech have played a marginal role in the discussions among historians about non-academic careers. And yet, graduates with a BA, MA or a PhD in history have a great potential to contribute to the private sector. And, business and tech can offer tremendous opportunities to those history graduates (on all levels of training) who want to build meaningful careers, secure higher salaries and make an impact on the world.

Observations and Recommendations for Department Chairs and Deans

- Historians are well equipped for a wide range of careers that draw on their expertise and transferable skills, not just those that are closely related to specific careers in history. But, information about the full range of options available to them isn't easily accessible.
- Historians and history departments could do more to articulate the value of historical training, especially about the transferable skills acquired during the study of history. Today, the value of studying history to careers outside the traditional spaces in which historians worked (teaching, academic research, museums, archives, etc.) is little known. The inability to articulate—and promote—the value of history makes this discipline less attractive as a subject of study and more vulnerable to political attacks and de-funding in favor of more "practical" disciplines.
- Economic concerns are central to the future of history education, and they are intimately tied to the economic concerns of trained and prospective historians and history students. Also, business, tech and public administration are the sectors that align with many transferable skills acquired by historians, and offer the highest salaries. And yet, business and tech, for example, remain marginal to the discussions about possible career pathways. The same applies to management consulting.
- Certain humanities disciplines forged successful bridges to the business world (an example is EPIC people, "a global community of practitioners doing ethnography for impact in businesses and organizations:" <https://www.epicpeople.org/epic/>; or the Society for Applied Anthropology). But historians in business, technology, and the public sector (and outside of academia more generally) don't seem to have an institutional center of gravity. This absence prevents those historians working in the private and public sectors from successfully popularizing the value of applied history and from building bridges between academia and industry.

Our primary recommendation is that institutions of higher education and their students promote intrinsic skills that go to the root of what is learned in a history major. Management is not interested in hiring an expert on the American Civil War, but they will hire people who can understand complex

political, economic, social and operational activities set into the context of the time—exactly what historians do. In other words, there are skills taught using history as the teaching mechanism and those are what should be the focus of higher education placing their graduates.

History students develop several skills that are highly valued by employers outside the academy. With the caveat that there are no "firm" guidelines or language, let's use a short essay featured on the AHA website as a starting point. It's titled: "What Skills Should You Have When You Leave a History Class?"¹⁴ The author lists five types, which can be easily translated into more general skills, all of which resonate with those that companies consider to be crucial in their employees:

1. Chronological Thinking, (thinking about change over time);
2. Historical Comprehension ("reading creatively, so that you can imagine yourself in the roles of the men and women you study," empathy);
3. Historical Analysis and Interpretation ("following and evaluating arguments and arriving at usable conclusions based on what evidence you have);"
4. Historical Research Skills (finding, evaluating, and contextualizing different kinds of data);
5. Historical Issues: Analysis and Decision-Making (being "able to identify issues and problems in the past and to analyze the interests, values, perspectives, and points of view of all of those involved" to understand and evaluate causes and effects of decisions, as well as alternatives to the decisions that people have made in the past).

We'd like to add another key skill to the list that students learn in history classes:

6. Students learn to communicate their ideas, hypotheses, findings, and critical feedback to different kinds of audiences (professors, classmates, and overtime experts and the general public) orally, in writing, and increasingly through an array of other mediums such as blogs, podcasts, images, films and social media posts.

Students of history develop these diverse and sought-after skills over the course of their training in addition to historical knowledge and geographic or thematic expertise. As they grow, many enter graduate programs, where they engage with more theoretical work, assume greater responsibility, work more independently, and come to manage complex research projects. These projects are most often MA theses or PhD dissertations, which require sophisticated

¹⁴ The American Historical Association, "Historical Thinking Skills,"

<https://www.historians.org/teaching-and-learning/teaching-resources-for-historians/teaching-and-learning-in-the-digital-age/the-history-of-the-americas/the-conquest-of-mexico/for-teachers/setting-up-the-project/historical-thinking-skills>

analytic skills, knowledge of languages and ability to communicate research to various audiences, interpersonal and entrepreneurial skills that make it possible to liaise with archivists, librarians and other scholars, and to supervise graduate student assistants. Many develop sophisticated social media strategies to promote their research globally.

Further, management in the private sector relies on human relationships, given the unprecedented complexity of today's business organizations, the scale of global connectedness, the reach of mass communication, and the availability of tools for investigating human behavior.

For example, management in finance, retail, and service companies are turning to human-centric research, as they're trying to understand changing company values, customer preferences, stock market shifts, and stories behind brands. Consulting firms doing qualitative research on cultural strategy thrive and multiply (Christian Madsbjerg, the founder of one such firm, Red Associates, is also a professor of applied humanities at the New School for Social Research in New York). Silicon Valley tech companies, such as Google, hire Chief Philosophy Officers to help them navigate through thorny questions about ethics, meaning, and strategy.¹⁵

With the wealth of transferable skills they have acquired during their studies, people with history degrees are well-positioned to address challenges that companies are facing in such areas as growth strategy, business management, intercultural communication, consumer behavior, sales, and human resources. Many are already doing such work; some mention their history background in their social media profiles, but many do not, because the full value of a history degree outside of universities is not always clear.

Historians are well-placed to excel in other roles. Some become corporate historians. As such, they apply their skills to maintain company archives, write company histories, and also select and evaluate marketing content, help organize anniversaries, consult with crafting corporate messaging, curate company museums, and help shape the corporate brand. Others go into historical consulting and work with governments and private clients on diverse projects that span issues such as cultural heritage, ecological preservation, and water rights to organizational management, brand strategy, corporate exhibitions, company histories, and family histories. According to existing (and tentative) data 6.91% of people who earned history PhDs in the US between 2004 and

¹⁵ Sally Percy, "Why Your Board Needs A Chief Philosophy Officer,"

<https://www.forbes.com/sites/sallypercy/2018/03/09/why-your-board-needs-a-chief-philosophy-officer/?sh=43a11d2b42e3>

2013 went on to work in the private sector. For the years 2014-2017, the percentage was 8.46%.¹⁶

Historians think and arrive at conclusions differently than, say, MBAs, engineers, and most consultants or economists. Because they ask broader more varied questions of situations and avoid relying on one simple set of hypotheses or case studies, they avoid the classic mistake made by so many analysts, the sin of narrowly constructed deductive reasoning. Their skills should be emphasized to provide insights into:

- Previous attempts by a company to do something specific;
- Industry track records;
- Previous experience with government regulators (for example, antitrust or environmental considerations);
- Patterns of customer responses to specifications;
- Key adversaries and how they might react to a proposal (crucial in merger talks);
- Cultural and political trends in another market, which is particularly useful to those who sell products and services in another nation.

Companies would benefit by hiring history-trained staff to do the following:

- As staff members, participate in key staff meetings, providing feedback on previous patterns of behavior;
- Research the history of specific issues that a company is facing;
- Collaborate with strategy teams to "define new markets, identify which strategies work in a particular industry, and help prepare the financial business case for a proposed initiative;"
- Research other issues than history and report results;
- Publicize key corporate messages;¹⁷

How to Get More Tactical in Linking History Majors to Good Jobs Outside the Academy

Persuade students and faculty that there are good jobs outside the academy. Inspire both communities to work together by promoting concrete examples of people who built careers in business, business cases that benefitted from the application of historical methods, concepts, and skills which advanced company goals. Open up conversations about the positive impact that companies and

¹⁶ The American Historical Association, "Where Historians Work: An Interactive Database of History PhD Career Outcomes," <https://www.historians.org/wherehistorianswork>

¹⁷ James W. Cortada, "Learning From History: Leveraging Experience and Context to Improve Organizational Excellence," *Journal of Organizational Excellence*, spring 2002: 26-27.

industries *can* have on people and communities. Demonstrate that the breadth of options is vast. Such promotional work should be done on the levels of university departments (in collaboration with other humanities disciplines and universities) but with heavy assistance from the dean's level to the top of the university's administration. Departments know best the needs of their students and can engage with alumni networks more effectively than larger organizations.

Think in terms of "applied history" as an initial step in that direction. The premise of applied history is the idea that historical knowledge can help formulate insights for present-day challenges. Most applied history initiatives now address social and political issues (an example would be Harvard's Applied History Project at the Belfer Center, inspired by Richard Neustadt and Ernest R May's pioneering 1986 book *Thinking in Time: The Uses of History For Decision Makers*). But since business leaders grow and learn, companies' cultures evolve, and customers' preferences change constantly, change over time (and therefore historians' skills) are of great relevance to key strategic issues within industries and to the world.

Chairs and deans should reach out to local and national business institutions and create opportunities to get to know each other and learn about each other's needs and strengths. This could be done through networking events, intentional data collection (about careers of alumni, the future of work, etc.), presentations, conferences, etc.

Universities, history departments, and companies should collaborate on creating curricula that will help interested students apply historical methodologies to concrete business challenges. When done over the past half century they have been effective. However, since they never fit within the mainstream of what higher education does, they were not sustained over the years. So even institutional memory of such experiments/pilots/programs disappeared. Within universities, such initiatives can begin with the cross-listing of courses between traditionally isolated departments, such as history and business. This should include encouraging students to minor in relevant fields, such as business administration, environmental studies, etc., particularly if related to the subject of their theses and dissertations.

Courses on applied history should feature business cases. Business courses can engage more intentionally with historical concepts and methods, through centers for applied humanities,¹⁸ applied history minors, and certifications that

¹⁸ Kathryn Strong Hansen, "Why We Need Applied Humanities," *Inside Higher Ed*, April 5, 2023: <https://www.insidehighered.com/views/2023/04/05/why-we-need-applied-humanities-approaches-opinion#:~:text=Since%20the%20term%20%E2%80%9Capplied%20humanities,rather%20than%20only%20in%20theory.>

combine history and professional training in "hard" skills that are both valued and immediately recognized by employers.

Universities, history departments, and companies should work together on creating certifications and credentialing systems that would help interested history (and humanities) students obtain credentials they could use to pursue careers in specific industries. Such certifications (sometimes tied to credential-as-you-go programs), having an added value of promoting equity (by recognizing all types of learning and by giving students more flexibility), have been successfully adopted by some educational institutions, primarily in the technical fields.¹⁹ Such certifications could be adopted for the humanities and history in particular and used as credentials for careers in tech, marketing, communications, finance, consulting, human resources, and other industries where historians' transferable skills are increasingly valuable.

Conversely, companies and universities should partner to help non-academic leaders appreciate the value of the humanities through curricula in which history would play an important role. A recent example of such initiative is Virginia Tech's Institute for Leaders in Technology, led by entrepreneur, former Google and Twitter executive Rishi Jaitly (who also earned his A.B in history from Princeton). Jaitly is seen as someone who appreciates promises and potential perils of Big Tech. He credits history and the humanities for enriching his perspectives on technology.²⁰

Universities, public and private sector organizations can further work together to help history (and other humanities) students become familiar with the environments in the private sector through internships, fellowships, and mentorship programs. Such initiatives would help students on all levels learn about industry-specific roles, work cycles, industry-specific languages, and career paths, and help them consolidate networks of peers and mentors, which are key in any career. Such programs would help companies identify the most promising candidates for permanent hiring initiatives. These can include engaging with local Chambers of Commerce, as these are motivated to help to fill staffing needs. National job recruiters should be approached, too, but probably less by department chairs and more by academic administrative functions.

Finally, we are convinced that department chairs are not the only pool of management to launch and sustain an effective outreach program. We question

¹⁹ Matthew J. Mayhew, Emily Creamer and Susannah Townsend, "Abandoning the College Minor for Certification," *Inside Higher Ed*, March 20, 2023:

<https://www.insidehighered.com/views/2023/03/21/it-may-be-time-rethink-college-minor-opinion>

²⁰ Jenny Kincaid Boone, "Humanities At Core of New Professional Institute for Technology Leaders," *Virginia Tech News*, April 25, 2023: <https://news.vt.edu/articles/2023/04/clahs-institute.html>

if department chairs are properly skilled to carry on such programs. Rather, at a minimum this should be initiated at the dean level, and more realistically at the provost/chancellor levels so they can reach out to peer executives in the public and private sector, have staff that can be partially dedicated to the initiative, and that can be learned from to address job placement needs in other parts of the social sciences and humanities disciplines. In short, senior management will need to “pull” history departments and their chairs and students into such initiatives. These efforts should be committed to for a half-decade or longer to gain traction, to establish reliable and trusted outlets for graduates who in turn can become additional recruiters of historians within their institutions, and to learn from the experience how to become effective.

James W. Cortada completed a PhD in Modern European History in 1973 then immediately went to work for IBM—the largest information technology firm of the twentieth century, where he worked for nearly 4 decades in sales, consulting, management, and executive ranks. He also continued to practice history, publishing books on business and computing history with such publishers as Princeton, Oxford, MIT and Columbia, and books on business management, with such presses as McGraw-Hill, Wiley, and the Financial Times. He has served on history and business journal editorial boards and foundations, and in community organizations. He is currently a Senior Research Fellow at the University of Minnesota—Twin Cities.

Patryk Babiracki is an associate professor of history and MA advisor at the University of Texas at Arlington. He earned his PhD at Johns Hopkins University in 2008 and published widely on Russian, European, and global histories and contemporary affairs. Interested in the applications of historical methods and perspectives to contemporary issues, he is starting a monthly audio podcast titled "ChronoLab: Conversations about the Value of Historical Thinking in Business, Tech, and Beyond."

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