I WANT A UX JOB!

HOW TO MAKE A CAREER CHANGE INTO UX RESEARCH

LAURYL ZENOBI

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INTRODUCTION

I first started writing about UX research in 2015. Since then, rarely a week goes by without someone reaching out to me seeking advice on making their own transition into UX research. UX researchers, also known as user experience (UX) researchers or user researchers, are the folks that speak with users before a product is built, and who test a product during and after it is built to make sure that it meets the needs of the people who will ultimately use the product.

After the first dozen or so emails and DMs and video calls, I realized there was a real hunger for more information on how to make this career leap. This made me curious enough to ask colleagues and peers how they got into UX research—and as I started asking around, I came to realize that my story was not that unique.

In fact, my story was incredibly similar to that of my colleague, Nichole Carelock.

Nichole fell into UX research accidentally as well. Her UX origin story begins when she was living in Houston, Texas. At the time, she worked

with a Community Technology Center (CTC) to bring computer labs and technology to under-served areas. When Hurricane Katrina hit, refugees from New Orleans and elsewhere in Louisiana started pouring into Houston, and the Center got involved in relief efforts. When Nichole showed up to the Astrodome with blankets, food, and other relief supplies, the scale of the disaster was almost incomprehensible. When she talks about that time, she says, "They housed thousands of people inside of the Astrodome." Poor African American communities were overrepresented in the refugee camps.

As Nichole started talking to hurricane victims, she kept hearing the same refrain: "Thank you for the blankets, but actually I don't know where my grandmother is?" "Can you help me find my people?" After many conversations like this, she realized there was a better solution.

According to Nichole, "The rescue effort was so disparate. People were in Seattle. People were in Houston. People were in Minnesota." What Nichole heard in these tense conversations were the real needs of these refugees. This prompted her to work with Yahoo to build a database so hurricane refugees could locate their family members. The CTC set up computers in the middle of the Astrodome for people to search this database for their loved ones, or add their own location so that others could search for them.

Nichole remembers how it felt when people started using the database: "People would go down to the floor of the Astrodome and try to find their grannies, find their uncles. When they found a person, they would have a huge cowbell to ring. That moment of ringing the cowbell was just *such a moment*.

It's the difference between what you think needs to happen, what seems obvious—blankets, food, and talking to someone—and realizing what is actually a better solution."

Because of her experience with Katrina relief efforts, Nichole decided to get a doctorate in anthropology, focusing on how people use technology. But while working in a post-doc position in Philadelphia, she started to experience the realities of finding a tenure-track position in the crowded and competitive world of academia. A steady trickle of no after no followed every academic application she put out. Meanwhile, the university's business school kept knocking on the anthropology department's door to see if any of the anthropologists there were interested in helping them run UX research studies. Nichole started to recognize that there was an industry need for the human-focused skills she had mastered during her doctoral studies. Not only was there a desire for research in technology and business, but there was value attached to her research skills. Nichole reflects, "It was like, 'We value what you do so much that we are going to pay you for this two-hour intervention.' Oh, well, sir, you had me at value."

Nichole started with small consulting gigs, gradually building up a skill set and branching out into larger projects. The need and desire for research skills in a business or technology setting became obvious.

But Nichole feared her application seemed too academic, so she started to market her skills in a new way. She says, "I made the mistake for a long time of saying, I'm an anthropologist who can do this research. It was very hard for me to detach myself from the work that I'd done for seven and eight years. My LinkedIn, my resumes, they all said, 'She's an academic.'"

Like Nichole, I came to UX research from an academic background in anthropology and archaeology. Most UX professionals enter the field from tangentially related careers, making either an intentional or accidental shift into UX research. Many of us found ourselves in these careers without much guidance, driven by necessity to figure things out as we went.

The longer I've been a researcher, the more stories I've heard like my own and like Nichole's. There's a knowledge gap between those who are in UX careers and those who are trying to break into the field. How do you get into UX research? How do you approach a career transition to UX? How do you reconfigure your identity as an academic, as a recent college graduate, as someone changing careers mid-life? How do you reinvent yourself? These are questions that this book will help you answer.

> One of the most unexpectedly daunting parts of transitioning to UX research was coming to terms with my new professional identity. I had spent six years identifying as an architectural designer and researcher.
>
> Preeti Talwai, UX Researcher at Google AI*

WHAT IS UX RESEARCH?

At its core, UX research is about spending time with the "users" of a product, learning about their needs and taking those insights to improve the product. That product might be laundry soap, an iPhone app, a car, or a website—UX researchers work in all these industries and more. While the term "user experience research" is certainly more common these days, it's not a well-understood job to most folks outside of tech companies. Like many researchers, when asked what I do, I'll respond with something along the lines of this: "I talk with people about how they use websites so that we can make them better and easier to use."

It's not just the general public that struggles to understand what UX research means—even those who may have heard of UX research aren't entirely sure how to move into the field. Until very recently, UX as a field wasn't an official major in college, and programs teaching human-centered design (HCD), UX design, and UX research are still relatively

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* Preeti Talwai "Finding a voice as a non-traditional UX researcher" www.medium.com/ google-design/finding-a-voice-as-a-non-traditional-ux-researcher-d58e66c3f80b

rare. It's increasingly common to get post-educational training through bootcamps or micro-degree programs, which provide a crash course on research and design fundamentals to those preparing for a career change into UX. The majority of new UX professionals, however, have to learn how to leverage their non-UX experiences and training to get hired into their chosen research or design role. The process of moving into UX isn't particularly challenging or inaccessible; rather, the problem is that there is no single resource that defines what that process looks like. Every single person who reaches out to me asks, "You did this, now how do I do this?"

The more conversations I had with folks wanting to transition to UX research, the more I saw a need to talk about my experiences with the process. There are dozens and dozens of books on how to do research, but there aren't many resources outside of blog posts and the occasional conference talk on how to get into research. My hope is this book will be that resource for you.

If you are reading this book, you are likely in a state of in-between, moving from one space to another. For many people, these transitory periods in life can be difficult to navigate emotionally. This is because moving from one space to another by nature requires you to change your identity and how you perceive yourself, even in a minor way.

For some of you, this transitional space might be that you just graduated from college and are looking for your first job. Perhaps you are finishing up your graduate work and aren't sure how your prospects on the academic market will pan out. Or you might have picked up this book because you are in the depths of a career you no longer find satisfying, and you're interested in exploring a new field. Whoever you are, I ask that you read this book with an open mind, take what works for you, throw out what doesn't, and be gentle with yourself. Moving into UX research requires a lot of learning, bravery, and a sense of adventure!

Each chapter of this book will give you tools and ideas to guide your transition into UX research. Along the way, I've included interviews from UX researchers who have come from all walks of life and have agreed to share their stories in this book. UX research is a storytelling profession, and it would be equivalent to malpractice if I didn't include others' voices. Hopefully, some of my interviewees' stories will resonate with you.

While the book is meant to be read sequentially, each chapter can stand alone, so if you need to read up on building a portfolio but aren't yet interested in how to interview or look for a job, you can easily bounce back and forth between chapters. You will, however, gain the most by reading the book cover to cover, since it's organized to map out your journey into UX research.

My hope is that this book will allow you to take a step back and enjoy this roller coaster of a process while giving you concrete steps and insights that allow you to make measurable progress towards your goal of moving into a career in UX research.

WHAT DOES THIS PROCESS LOOK LIKE?

This book is set up to mirror the process that I, and many other researchers, have taken. Each chapter focuses on a critical stage of the process, building on the previous material as you progress through the book. At the end of each chapter is a "What to read now" section that gives you additional resources that go deeper into the subjects covered in that chapter. While those additional resources aren't required readings, they add a lot of context and give you exposure to other researchers.

> The links to "What to read now" chapter resources and any other websites I cite are organized by chapter at

www.iwantauxjob.com