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What We Look for in an Early Career Ecologist

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This article aims to provide guidance to students and early career ecologists on the skill sets they might seek to develop, and how to set themselves apart from their peers in a highly competitive job market.

An earlier version of this article featured in *In Practice* in March 2017. It has been refreshed and updated at the request of CIEEM.

Background

Ecological consultancies vary in the way in which they are structured and the nature of the work they target. Some recruit large numbers of recent graduates or early career ecologists on a seasonal basis each year to respond to the high volume of survey work associated with e.g. major infrastructure projects. Others aim to secure more varied (often multi-sector) work in an attempt to be resilient to economic and policy changes affecting sectors and projects. These companies have a higher ratio of experienced to early career staff and show less seasonal flux in terms of employee numbers.



BSG falls into this latter category. We recruit relatively few 'entry-level' staff each year (and very few seasonal staff), but tend to retain and invest in developing the consultancy skills of those people we do bring in. This helps integrate them into our team and allows them to start contributing to all aspects of our commercial work.

This article represents a company – rather than a consultancy industry – perspective.

Prerequisites

There are few essential skills that an ecologist-grade recruit to BSG needs to have other than a good, relevant undergraduate degree and, preferably, a postgraduate degree¹. These include a clear and demonstrable interest in ecology, some broad-brush field skills (or an emerging relevant technical specialism), motivation and an ability to communicate well. We are not looking for the finished article. We are looking for someone who has an aptitude for problem solving, is likely to develop quickly (given training and mentoring), and will fit into our team.

There are lots of enthusiastic, well-qualified ecologists looking for a career in consultancy: job advertisements elicit a very large response. To set themselves apart, candidates therefore need to find ways to stand out from their peers. Starting to think about positioning yourself for consultancy work during your academic studies is a very good idea.

What field skills are attractive to an employer?

Botanical survey

Almost every site ecological consultants work on will require baseline botanical survey. There are two survey methods in common use, JNCC's Phase 1 habitat survey and the UK Habitat Classification. Use of the latter is becoming more commonplace, as it produces higher

resolution results that dovetail more easily with biodiversity net gain calculators. Both techniques involve classifying habitats based on the dominance/abundance of certain plant species. Both require additional information on habitat condition to be collected if they are to usefully inform biodiversity net gain calculations, and both can be 'extended' to collect additional information on the potential for protected species to occur.

Experience at interview is that many early career ecologists struggle with the identification of common and widespread plant species. While the botanical survey methods referred to above can be taught, if they are to be applied independently in the field we need to have faith that the ecologist is capable of identifying the species present. Otherwise our interpretation of habitat type and quality will be incorrect, and any conclusions based on them open to challenge.

For these reasons, those ecologists with a well-developed (or even a basic) botanical skill set instantly set themselves apart from their peers at interview.

Protected species

Much commercial consultancy work is driven by the legal and policy protection afforded to a relatively limited number of fairly widespread species/species groups. These include species protected under European law, such as hazel dormouse, great crested newt, otter and bats; and species subject to domestic protection including badger, common reptiles and water vole.

Early career ecologists who are familiar with aspects of the ecology of these species, have experience surveying for them, and in the case of bats, the use of data analysis software, have an advantage over their peers. Demonstrable experience can be gained through the selection

of applicable research projects during academic studies, membership of mammal, bat or other special interest groups (which actively undertake field recording), and through completing seasonal work at consultancy companies. Some applicants for ecologist roles have already secured European Protected Species survey licenses: to have done so is a clear advantage.

Experience with more regionally restricted and/or habitat-specific protected species, such as red squirrel, sand lizard, pine marten, white-clawed crayfish or marsh fritillary will be valued differently by different practices depending on the nature of their work and the areas of the country they are most active in.

Ornithological experience

The ability to identify birds by sight and sound is very useful in an ecologist grade recruit, as an element of bird survey work is typically required to inform all large-scale developments. Not all development projects require bird survey, however. Due to this and the number of technically proficient freelance ornithological surveyors, being an accomplished birder, while very useful, is less advantageous (when applying for early career ecologist positions) than having an equivalent level of proficiency in botanical or protected species survey.

GIS and remote technologies

GIS enables the transfer of georeferenced data within project teams, and is particularly useful for passing on information concerning ecological constraints during the development design process. GIS is also extremely useful for analysing and presenting large ecological data sets and for making the precise measurements of habitat area required for biodiversity net gain calculations. It follows that a good understanding of the applications of GIS is advantageous in a recruit, as it integral to the service we provide.

Experience of remote data capture methods is also very useful; in addition to bat data loggers, remote-activated and infrared cameras, thermal imagery, drone and CCTV footage are now all integrated into our ecological survey methods. We have used remote survey techniques for various survey work including demonstrating whether Bechstein's (and

other bats) cross gaps in hedgerows, how nightjar forage and golden plover behave at night in relation to operational wind farms, and for characterisation of cliff ledge vegetation within a Special Area of Conservation. Often automated data collection is completed alongside manual data capture to ground truth a proportion of the results.

Understanding and feeling comfortable with the application of remote technologies and with GIS are very attractive attributes in a potential new recruit. In combination they help us collect, interpret and present data better more robustly and effectively. New recruits with knowledge and experience in these areas will help us think more creatively about how to continue to improve our service to our clients.

The importance of effective communication

Most consultancies are heavily reliant on repeat work. Achieving repeat business requires effective verbal communication, an ability to develop positive relationships with clients and consultees, a proactive approach to project management and an ability to deliver high quality written outputs.

The first insight we will get into your ability to communicate in writing is through your CV. The primary function of a CV is obviously to showcase relevant experience, while the covering letter should clearly establish why they think they are suitable for the job as advertised. In combination, however, they provide initial insight into your ability to present and communicate information effectively.

Another critical role of a CV is to demonstrate the commitment of the candidate to working in the industry. It should detail how volunteering or other means of self-development have been relevant to growing the skill set needed for a consultancy role, which professional societies (including CIEEM) and nature conservation groups the candidate is a member of (and how they have contributed to them) and the training courses they have completed, along with their learning outcomes. Many early career ecologists will also have undertaken some seasonal work with consultancies, and the understanding gained should be outlined.

While it is reasonable to expect that the interview process (which may incorporate a written exercise) is the best test of communication skills, in a highly competitive job market, investing effort in refining a CV and covering letter is time well spent.

Conclusion

Graduate and entry-level opportunities in ecological consultancies are keenly contested, but there is much to be positive about as an early career ecologist looking for employment. Firstly, there are a lot of good employers out there; it is time well spent to do some research into who they are. Secondly there are plenty of posts to compete for; recruitment often takes place in the winter and early spring. Finally, if you have the drive to develop the right field skills to complement your academic qualification, and present yourself effectively through your CV and covering letter, you will set yourself apart from most of the other candidates competing with you. The earlier you recognise this in your academic study, the better your decisions will be around bettering your skill set, and the easier you will find it to get the right post for you.

Note

1. Note that there are other routes into the profession that do not require a degree, such as apprenticeships and vocational qualifications.

About the Author



Owain Gabb is a Director at BSG Ecology and leads the Welsh team. He has worked in consultancy since 2003, and at BSG since 2010. He has a wider-ranging remit

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