

Notes about A Career Transition into the Financial Markets

Development of my goal: After 13 years of not being excited about my previous industry/profession, I decided to explore other professions. Having grown up in Chicago, trading (i.e. futures & options traders) seemed to always be a part of many of my social experiences. From that, I initially thought to explore/pursue the “financial markets” looking to get into a derivatives trading/sales/analyst role. After gaining an understanding of the business through time and through the means listed below, I later changed my focus to exploit my education and work experience in Chemical Engineering.

Previous positions: Chemical Process Engineer, Water Treatment Equipment Sales Engineer, Industrial Controls Sales Manager, Process Controls Product Manager

Academic background: BS Chemical Engineering, I.T.T.; MBA, Loyola University Chicago; CFA Level III candidate

Landing spot: KeyBanc Capital Markets, Cleveland OH as Associate Analyst on the Specialty Chemicals team i.e. sell-side fundamental analyst

Key Steps in Progressing Toward my Career Change:

1. *Review job postings from the CFA website to identify key qualifications that are being sought in the industry.* I was able to gain the following from this on-going exercise:

- The importance/recognition of the CFA designation, which prompted me to begin the program
- An awareness of the technical skills sought after, such as database skills, which were limited for me, prompting me to qualify positions for these related tasks
- The range of responsibilities for a typical position (from quant-focused positions to positions with a broader range of work including channel-checking and meeting w/ management teams)
- The type of firms that are hiring at the given moment and the type of firms that offer related positions. I learned that I would not fit the profile of Associate at a bulge-bracket firm, instead I focused on boutique.

This taught me to quickly identify where I could effectively pitch myself versus where I shouldn't.

2. *Be willing to do projects for free for anyone who works in the industry with a goal of creating more-relevant work to interview with.* I used a trader-friend's clerk badge to spend time on the floor of the CME. I made an effort to learn all I could and talk to anyone who would share info w/ me. About the same time, from an ad in the newspaper, I was also able to get involved (for free) with a private equity broker where I created a valuation model that I could later display in interviews. While finishing my MBA, I accepted a greater role in some class projects so that I could develop a body of related work.

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3. *Make a conscious effort to build a portfolio of work from your current position that highlights skills that will be required in the new position.* Be prepared to present tangible (printed) samples of completed work or projects that you've been involved in. Prospective employers can better understand a display (versus description) of work when trying to understand the skills you've developed through working in an industry they may not be familiar with. This will help them see the link between your past and your future. Depending in your presentation, the effort can also be interpreted as an indication of your desire to get into the new position.
4. *Do not be shy about expressing your interest and passion in the position you are seeking; be prepared to do almost anything.* It became clear to me that many people were willing to consider hiring me despite my lack of experience because they could see my sincere interest in getting into the business. One example: my first interview with my current Senior Analyst was in a cab from the airport to downtown. I met him there because it was going to be the only time he would have for me while he was in Chicago. I knew I needed to get in front of him to show my work and to make my impression. He was impressed by my willingness to make the meeting happen despite the unorthodox circumstances.
5. *Use any possibility to create an opportunity for an informational interview with people in or aligned with the position/industry.* The goal is to learn the specific language, procedures and issues of where you are going. Not only will this help w/ future interviews, but also in assessing your offer, when it comes. I developed many contacts who later approached me about potential opportunities. Through a presentation at my graduate school, I met an MD from a locally-based, regional muni-bond firm. I convinced him to let me sit on his sales-trading desk for a morning. From the experience, I learned about the bond market and that I was not interested in bonds. On my Metra/Pace commute at the time, another regular commuter saw me studying the markets and started a conversation. His friend was a VP at JPM who I convinced to spend 15 minutes with me at their offices. From that meeting, I conveyed my interest and passion (see item #4 above). Over the following 2 years, he contacted me about several positions that led to numerous interviews (Unfortunately I was not qualified and/or interested in any of these positions.)
6. *Identify clearly and prepare to accept the "costs" associated with the change; position this in perspective of your greater goal.* My greater goal was to assure myself of a position working downtown in a major city (New York or Chicago) which was not possible in my prior profession. Knowing I was not going to start off in a bulge-bracket firm (through point #1 above), I knew that I would probably have to relocate from Chicago to a medium-sized city before coming back to Chicago or before moving on to New York. Prepare for the financial and emotional/psychological changes. (My fiancée has remained in Chicago and moved into my condominium; I fly back most weekends. This will continue for 2-3 years while I am an Associate. We accepted that this could happen long before the opportunity developed.)

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7. *Accept the fact that good (or potentially good) positions in this industry are often gained because of personal connections.* Any person with whom you have a personal relationship and works even remotely with the industry may be able to help you. My cousin works for KeyBanc and called me when my current position came open. Over the previous 2 years I developed a friendship with an analyst who is a major client of ours; KeyBanc interviewers recognized my friend and/or his account. My friend provided me with information about his experiences with KeyBanc and that was helpful in interviews. I developed propriety through my interviews by discussing my friend's experiences working with the bank.
8. *So many positions in the industry go to students from top schools/MBA programs – but academic credentials do not have to be everything and there is a place for everybody with talent.* I came across several firms who were focused heavily on grades, test scores and academic pedigree. My current firm tends to view these elements in the concept of “mosaic” theory: its only a piece. Regardless, top MBA program students do have available great networks (items #5 and #7) and their placement offices get their students in front of banks allowing them to facilitate meetings (item #5). My current Senior Analyst wondered why, being from Chicago, I was not able to land a spot in less than 4 years. After 35 years as an analyst, he forgot the impact on the local market of programs like Chicago and Kellogg. Do not get discouraged by this hurdle.
9. *Be patient and stay focused! My fiancée and friends often had to force me to remember these basic “rules of life”: All hard work is rewarded (eventually) and everything happens for a reason.* It took me over 4 years to make the transition during which I did an incredible amount of work (passing two levels of the CFA exam is just the tip of the iceberg). I often wondered if it would ever pay off. I often lost opportunities for seemingly insignificant reasons and at the same time was offered good opportunities in my old profession, leaving me to question if the change was meant to happen. With the help of friends, I kept a patient, steady pursuit going.