



WHAT CAN PHYSICISTS DO?

Toni Feder



Interviews offer a glimpse of how
physicists get into—and thrive in—
myriad nonacademic careers.



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Physics students are told their degree is a ticket to, well, anything. But elaboration is rarely forthcoming. Part of the problem is that physics professors are often ill-prepared to help: They simply don't know—and don't have time to find out—about options for their students. Despite departmental efforts such as hosting alumni to give talks about their work, the message to US physics graduate students tends to be that anything other than following in the footsteps of one's adviser would be a failure.

Even if everyone who earned a PhD in physics wanted to be a professor, job seekers vastly outnumber tenure-track job openings. Of an estimated 43 050 working-age, US-trained physics PhD recipients across the nation in 2023, about one-third (14 500) worked in educational institutions, according to the National Center for Science and Engineering Statistics; the rest were in business or industry (24 450) and the government (4100). Typically, about half of bachelor's recipients pursue graduate studies in physics or other fields; many of the others enter the private sector, according to the American Institute of Physics' (publisher of PHYSICS TODAY) statistical research team.

So where do physicists end up? Surprise: Physicists can do—and actually do—(almost) anything. They join startup companies, do research in the private sector and at national labs, and work in finance, data science, policy, museums, and the film industry. They are teachers, lawyers, science writers, and much more.

In a new interview series, PHYSICS TODAY is profiling physicists who opted for careers outside of academia. They discuss what motivated their decisions, how they got into their fields, how their physics backgrounds come into play, what skills they need, and how they like their jobs. What follows are eight interviews selected from this series. Going forward, look for more profiles to be published online and in these pages.

To suggest a physicist (bachelor's degree or higher) for PHYSICS TODAY to highlight in this series, please email pteditors@aip.org.

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