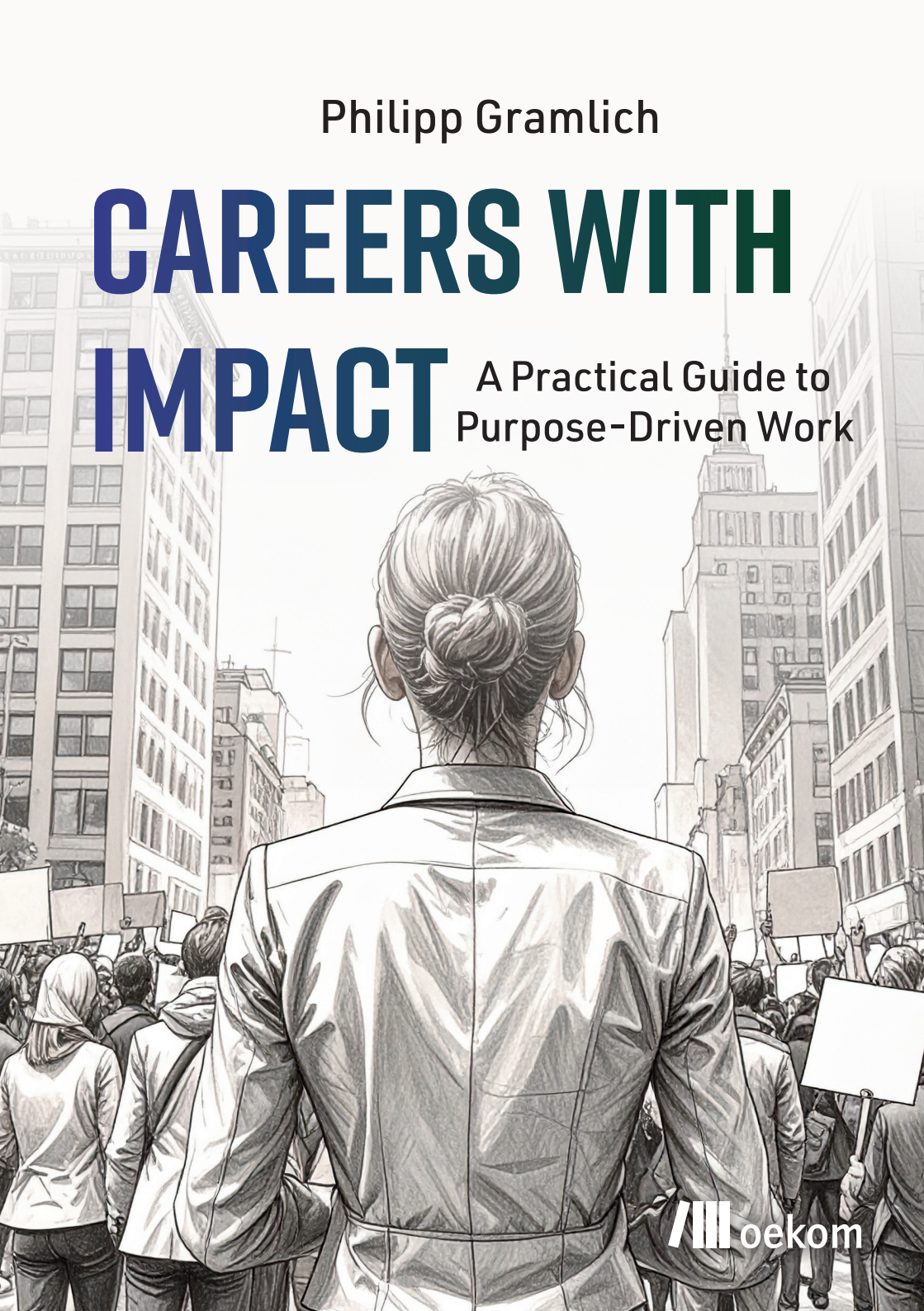
Philipp Gramlich

CAREERS WITH IMPACT

A Practical Guide to Purpose-Driven Work



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Thanks to everyone who helped me
remove unnecessary redundancy and
retain unnecessary humanity.

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Why I Wrote This Book

Intro story

John's (not his real name) father worked as a scientist at a large multinational company. John was an excellent student, earning a stellar PhD in chemistry from one of Germany's top universities. He followed in his father's footsteps, working as a scientist for large multinationals. I regularly talk with him about his career progression. He steadily climbed the ladder, leading 50 co-workers by the age of 34.

When one of our conversations touched on values, John remarked sarcastically: "I have worked for the oil, car and industrial animal farming industries. Maybe I could produce chemical weapons next?" John is one of the smartest and most diligent individuals I know. He certainly doesn't have to work in these industries because of a lack of alternatives. I asked him carefully: "What was the driving force behind your career choices?" John took a long moment to think, almost as if he had never heard the question before. "Funnily enough, I don't know for sure. A high-level job in industry, money..." He earns an excellent salary but isn't a big spender. "Why do you need so much money?" I asked him. During the rest of our conversation, it seemed to me that his unclear vision for his career reflected his father's career more than his own inner drivers. At rare moments, John admits that he is not really satisfied with his situation, expressing jealousy towards people whose work reflects their values.

Lisa Poettinger was on track to become a teacher at a German high school. After five years of study, she was in a two-year training phase that would have made her a fully qualified teacher, a reasonably well-paid and potentially tenured position offering lifelong security and excellent workers' rights. Lisa is also an activist. However, being too outspoken doesn't sit well

with her employer, the State of Bavaria. When Lisa condemned the "maximisation of profits" of the car industry in a newspaper interview,[1] she was dismissed from the school service for using vocabulary that the State of Bavaria associates with communist ideology. This turned more than half a decade of intense study and work into a professional dead end.

I have written this book to help the Johns of this world add meaning to their work and to help the Lisas stay on track in their careers. The intersection of these two perspectives forms the core of this book.

The idealistic angle: We live in a world where ecological and social problems seem to grow ever more pressing. Many people feel the urge to help solve these issues, but don't know where to start.

The career angle: Professionals justifiably demand that their careers be stimulating and fulfilling, while they have to react flexibly to the changing demands of the labour market. This can lead to a feeling of overwhelm, with no clear idea of where to start when deciding which path to pursue.

Many people feel both the idealistic and career drivers. This book addresses the question: How can we contribute positively to the world while remaining satisfied with our work and avoiding professional dead ends?

Why is this topic important to me? Part of my income comes from delivering career workshops. The participants are scientists seeking careers that match their skills and interests and lead to success. Many are not only seeking jobs that support themselves and their families but also pursuing careers that align with their values or allow them to achieve these goals alongside their main jobs. They want to contribute to making the world a better place rather than merely pushing a company's next product cycle. Often, they are concerned about committing to something they cannot uphold when professional duties become overwhelming, or about being perceived as activists, which might deter future employers.

1 Käppner, Joachim (2025): Was ist Profitmaximierung?, in: *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 27 January 2025. Last accessed: 5 July 2026.

Alongside my work, I am engaged in the climate movement. There, I meet many campaigners and activists who are deeply committed to their cause. However, most of them juggle this with demanding careers, often alongside care responsibilities. Embarking on this journey without proper reflection can lead to burnout. With these activists, I often discuss questions such as "How can I do more, and do so more effectively? Does it harm my career prospects, or are there ways in which I could benefit professionally from my idealistic work?"

I examined the literature, including books and blog articles on the subject. I found plenty of information on questions such as "Which employer or employer type allows me to make a positive impact?" It seemed to me that choosing an employer was just one of many strategies people can use to align their careers with their values. I conducted 17 interviews with a diverse range of professionals who show a strong commitment to an idealistic cause, either alongside their careers or embedded in their work. We discussed the dilemmas they face in balancing idealism and career development. These interviews confirmed that employer choice was by no means the only way to align work with impact. Clearly, there was a gap in the literature. Therefore, employer choice is just one of twelve chapters in this book.

A book with 17 interview transcripts might be dull to read, regardless of how excited I was about what I learned from the interviews. Therefore, I have compiled all the information I gathered from the interviews, as well as from my own observations. I organised that information into two parts. In the first, I concentrate on the strategic approaches that can be adopted. You can choose an employer that aligns with your values, lobby your employer to change the way they work, shift your focus of work or research, start a company or other initiative, or design your work so that you have enough time and resources to pursue your idealistic activities independently of your job. In the second part, I aim to highlight specific topics that are central considerations for individuals seeking to make an impact in their professional lives. We will explore topics such as the qualities needed for these paths, the skills developed along the way, the reactions from your environment, how to achieve impact, and how to maintain good mental health on an activist path.

How did I choose my interview partners? I aimed to feature a diverse range of professionals of different ages, at various stages of their careers,

from different disciplines, working on a wide variety of topics, and using different tactical approaches, so that we can learn as much as possible from their experiences. Some of them have achieved notable milestones that can inspire us. However, I didn't want to compile a collection of heroic stories that might seem out of reach for people like you and me. I aimed for relatable yet somewhat unusual cases to highlight a broad range of aspects.

I sought to maintain a clear focus despite the book's broad scope. One thing all my interview partners share is that they need to work on their careers. None of them is wealthy enough to simply do as they please. Nor are they so destitute that they have nothing to lose. This does not mean that the efforts of the very rich or the very poor are less valuable. I chose this focus because those who are financially between the extremes need to strike this fine balance: build their careers, safeguard their opportunities, and earn an income. This book is about people finding ways to make an impact while developing their careers. I wanted to learn from their challenges and how they overcame them.

I want to provide a reflective space for people who want to blend their professional growth with their idealistic motivations, ensuring both can flourish. When we consider the major problems the world faces today, we often hear the refrain: "It's a marathon, not a sprint". That's true. There's little benefit in being highly active on a topic for a year only to discover that your career is damaged or that you're experiencing burnout. This book aims to help you build a foundation so you can contribute to the issues you care about over the long term and, hopefully, find joy in doing so. I don't aim to encourage you at all costs. I prioritised creating space for you to reflect openly on your values, plans, and current situation. As a result, you might decide to get active – or not.

About the Writing Style

I mention the names of my interview partners whenever I have their permission. This makes the stories more relatable, and I hope you enjoy learning about these 17 remarkable individuals. In some cases, the interviewees agreed that I could share a story from the interview without revealing their names. In such cases, I simply omitted their names.

Sometimes, I draw on experiences from my own life and my attempts to strike the right balance between impact and career growth. Most of this work is done with my partner, Karin Bodewits, so you will see her name a few times in this book. You will notice this whenever I write in the first person.

I use gender-neutral language, preferably by randomising the gender of abstract individuals or by using the pronoun "they."

The content within the chapters and sections of the book is arranged to allow you to read the chapters in whichever order you wish or to just cherry-pick a few that most appeal to you.

About Activists, Advocates, and Campaigners

My interviewees described their impact-focused activities as those of activists, advocates, campaigners or action-oriented researchers. Some did not use any of these terms because their idealistic motivations were so ingrained in their paid work that making a distinction was impossible.

I don't want to be overly theoretical about the difference between these terms. It wouldn't even be possible to distinguish them clearly, as their definitions overlap significantly. However, some people prefer not to be associated with a particular term. For instance, being called an activist sits uneasily with many academic researchers, who need to appear unbiased (see section "Do as You Please: Professors" in Chapter 2, "Impact Within an Organisation").

If a distinction between these terms is required, here are the definitions that guided me.

- An activist organises direct actions, such as protests or civil disobedience.
- An advocate fosters change through debates, policy papers, and legal action.
- A campaigner prepares informational material for an awareness campaign and monitors political developments on that issue.
- An action-oriented researcher conducts research and produces knowledge and analysis that supports activism, journalism or policy change.
- Sometimes, when a distinction cannot be made, "activist" is used as a generic term.

Part 1

Strategic Approaches

In this part, I will show you the general setup of the work and the idealistic activities my interview partners chose. This is also the part where I tell you their stories in a bit more detail, so you get to know the people behind these stories a bit better.

1. Which Employer to Choose?

"Philipp, are private-sector employers only concerned with chasing profits?" was a question a career workshop participant asked me a while ago. "Of course, they are," I smugly replied, then countered with a question of my own: "Is academia less materialistic?" After a lively discussion, we concluded that all employers are materialistic, but in different ways and chasing different "currencies." The private sector chases profits; academia chases publications; and even nonprofits define their own success criteria, which can be pursued gently or ruthlessly.

One might conclude from this discussion that all employers share the same character, merely wearing different guises. Were that the case, your choice of employers would be irrelevant. Quite the opposite. However, it indicates that jobs with both positive and negative effects exist across all general employment sectors. For example, the sharp decline in the cost of producing solar and wind energy has been driven by fundamental academic science, which has been scaled up and optimised by a network of small and large companies. Scientists and, later in the process, other professionals have therefore made a positive impact throughout the entire development process, from basic research to the point where the customer can hold the finished product in her hands.

Choosing an employer is a crucial decision with a significant impact. Most professionals earn a lifetime income of well above a million euros. How you allocate that resource is one of the most influential choices you can make in your career. Your employer's actions can either align with your values or quietly erode your sense of purpose.

However, there is also a counter-argument to this reasoning, which takes variations of "If I don't do the job, someone else will." Does that mean it doesn't matter who you work for, as empty positions will be filled sooner or later anyway?

I don't think so. Especially during periods of labour shortages, the impact of your choice of employer is significant. For example, fossil fuel companies attract considerable negative media coverage because of their harmful role in the climate crisis. As a result, these companies must offer higher wages than comparable employers in other sectors to attract talent. By choosing where

to work, you effectively vote with your feet, making it easier for employers that offer meaningful work and have a credible track record of ethical management to attract skilled staff.

This chapter examines how individuals used their choice of employer to align their work with their values.

Leo: From Scientist to Activist and Back

In the early 2010s, Leo had not yet formed strong views on the fossil fuel industry and was hired by Shell through a contracting firm. Early in his career, it seemed like a good place to learn. He hadn't yet developed a deep understanding of the climate crisis. However, when Shell signalled it might offer him a permanent position, he declined and looked for positions elsewhere. Leo felt that a long-term commitment to Shell would pose a risk to his development. After two years, he moved to Utrecht University as a programmer and later pursued a PhD there.

During this academic period, Leo's awareness of the multiple ecological crises grew. He became a vegetarian and then a vegan. His first act of activism was to take part in a "Cube of Truth" demonstration against the animal industry. Soon after, when Extinction Rebellion (XR) was established following Greta Thunberg's rise to global prominence, Leo found his calling in climate activism. He co-authored an open letter on the climate crisis, signed by over 2,000 scientists, which led to the founding of Scientists for Future (S4F) in the Netherlands.

In 2022, Leo joined Fossielvrij NL (English: Fossil FreeNL), working on campaigns against fossil fuel companies, including his former employer, Shell. Although Fossielvrij NL aligned well with his values, he couldn't stay there for long. Firstly, he realised he didn't enjoy organising campaigns and wasn't fit for the job. Secondly, he felt he could no longer disengage from the climate crisis. There was always news about the climate crisis and always more work to do, which led to stress. Needing a better balance, Leo took a few months off and then changed careers into pesticide research. This work still allows him to focus on ecologically relevant topics; however, these are less closely linked to his activism. He found it easier to mentally detach from the climate crisis when needed, which helped him find time to recharge.



Leo van Kampenhout

Leo's journey demonstrates that employment isn't a trap; it can be adapted to support sustained, long-term involvement. He initially attempted to blend paid work with activism to ensure all his efforts reflected his values. Recognising the risk of burnout, he later transitioned to an environment that lets him pursue topics he cares about in a less emotionally draining context.

Pieter: Leaving the Ivory Tower With One Foot to Make Impact

Pieter's career began with a passion for nature. He studied geology primarily for his interest in fieldwork, but found the science-focused curriculum too narrow. He then switched to a Master's in Environment and Resource Management, followed by a PhD in Climate Policy at Utrecht University.

Initially, Pieter believed that greater understanding would naturally lead to better outcomes: "If we just understand how the world works, our leaders will respond." However, he soon realised the gap between knowledge and action. Many researchers focus too much on methods rather than the outcomes or actions that should follow from our knowledge. "It is like research models show that the house is on fire," he explained, "and everyone is discussing the assumptions about the type of material used in the roof."

This realisation made him reconsider his position within the academic system. When his university contract wasn't renewed, it was a harsh shock, but it also prompted reflection. He joined a think tank, the German Development Institute (now called IDOS) in Bonn, where his work shifted towards research-based policy advice. This role gave him the freedom to write opinion articles, also called op-eds. His first major article started a journalistic career that has complemented his academic research and policy advice work ever since.

Pieter uses his academic reputation to bolster his journalistic contributions, focusing on writing about climate issues for mainstream media. He intentionally chooses not to affiliate with any environmental organisation, fearing that such ties might diminish his credibility with reputable public outlets that prefer unbiased perspectives.

While working for the think tank, he was asked to help organise one of the major international climate conferences, the Conference of the Parties



Pieter Pauw

(COP), scheduled to take place in Bonn in 2017. In this role, he worked for a German ministry, which enabled him to learn how scientists interact with the political world. He discovered how ministries gather information from the scientific community. Policymakers rarely read scientific papers. They prefer to take up information in meetings or in the form of short policy briefs.

What is a Policy Brief?

A policy brief is a concise, digestible document that summarises research findings and can serve as a basis for informed decision-making by policymakers. A good policy brief is actionable, translating research implications into policy options. For scientists, this step of translation is often challenging. The effects of a policy lie in the future and are always multi-factorial. Therefore, no one can provide exact scientific proof of what will happen in any given scenario. However, a brief can show which outcomes and problems are possible or likely. An additional difficulty is that the policy brief is written to advise people who hold different kinds of positions, operate in a political environment in which multiple interests must be balanced, and have different ways of working.

As with all communication settings, understanding your target audience is key to writing an effective policy brief. Your readers, for example, policymakers or political actors, always need to assert their positions within the political sphere. For example, ministries compete with other ministries for recognition and resources. Therefore, the policy brief should show how the reader's political unit can use the recommendations to distinguish itself from other units. Such self-marketing is vital for demonstrating the significance of your work to decision-makers who will allocate funding. Describing only the real-world outcomes of the various policy options would be too limited.

As his next step, Pieter moved to the Frankfurt School of Finance and Management. There, he focused on climate finance, continued publishing op-eds, and began receiving media requests. After four years in that role, he returned to the Netherlands, driven not only by his career but also by family reasons. He didn't want his children to be uprooted by relocations later in childhood, when they would already have formed friendships.

Back in the Netherlands, he drew on informal conversations within his extended network to gain insight into the job landscape.[2] This led to a position at TU Eindhoven, where he now researches systemic change in finance and supports policy innovation. The media requests he receives have increased over time, and his current position complements them perfectly. Alongside his academic role, he became the editor of an academic journal. He was drawn to that journal for introducing a new feature in its articles, a bullet-pointed list of concise policy advice. This enables Pieter to apply his previous journalism experience to help researchers communicate in such condensed formats.

In addition to these two roles, he is affiliated with the Dutch think tank Clingendael Institute and continues to publish four to five opinion pieces in quality newspapers a year. He has eased the pressure on both his journalistic and academic output. "I've built a track record," he says. "I no longer need to be the top performer."

Pieter managed to integrate his professional roles with public influence in such a way that his academic background lends his words extra weight without compromising his credibility as a neutral seeker of truth. He sees his main impact in the work that earns him the least money, his newspaper articles. This work may be the most cross-sectional, where the lines from many of the other experiences seem to come together. "Particularly when giving interviews, it helps to be able to draw on all these experiences."

Leo's and Pieter's stories show that employment is a tool rather than an immutable definition of who you are as a professional. Choosing your employer carefully and knowing when to move on are among the most strategic and impactful decisions in your professional life.

2 See the section "Expert Interviews and Pitch Emails as Central Networking Tools" in Chapter 11, "How to Do Activism, the Dos and Don'ts."

2. Impact Within an Organisation

In the last chapter, we examined how your choice of employer can shape the impact you can make and how switching employers can be used to enact change in your professional life. Finding an employer whose values align with yours is not the only leverage you have when choosing employment. Most organisations offer multiple roles, each varying in how well they match your aims and skills. After discussing how to select and navigate between different roles within an organisation, we will examine professionals who influence the way their employer operates. We will conclude this chapter by considering a special case: Professors, who can choose quite freely what to work on.

Peter: Choose a Role Within an Organisation – or Craft Your Own Job if There is Non

Peter's journey to find a role aligned with his values didn't begin with a neatly advertised job. Instead, it began with curiosity and a bold step.

After completing his studies in Liberal Arts and Sciences, specialising in Gender and Queer Studies, Peter wondered whether he could earn a living working on these topics outside academia. I met Peter during a talk I gave on gender in science at his university. He was working as a student assistant, helping speakers with the technical setup of the lecture theatre. At the time, he was seeking orientation for his own career: as a man in the female-dominated field of gender studies, an academic career seemed to be the only option. At that event, he saw that it might be possible, at least in theory, for a man to earn money from this topic. Peter decided to apply openly to NaturalScience.Careers (NSC), the company I co-founded.

We weren't planning to grow our team, but Peter's initiative was impressive. He reviewed the entire written record we left and proposed three new ideas in his application documents. One proved unfeasible for reasons he couldn't have known. Another showed promise but was never put into