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Case study

Information & Communications Technology Research

Name:	Nathan
Age:	25
University:	Nottingham
Course:	MSci Physics (Hons)
Current job title:	ICT Graduate Researcher



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How did you get your current job – what were the steps you took from graduation?

“I had decided to take a couple of years out after university to go travelling and gain some ‘real world’ experience. At the start of looking for graduate jobs I researched a number of very different, mainly technology based companies. I had heard of GCHQ before but didn’t know the type of work they performed and was surprised to find a range of research and technology focussed roles detailed on the website. Although the website didn’t provide many details of specific project focuses, it sparked my curiosity in this area and the range of interesting sounding research areas convinced me to apply.”

Why did you decide to join GCHQ?

“There are many research disciplines in both public and private sector industry but GCHQ’s position is unique – offering varied research opportunities with new and emerging technologies but also being part of national security and the joint intelligence services, which really defines a fulfilling purpose and importance to the job you do everyday.”

How relevant was your subject of study in securing your current job?

“I found that a degree in Physics taught me a methodology of learning and understanding new concepts and then applying these to a real problem in a scientific manner. This is almost exactly the work I undertake in my job as graduate researcher! I regularly investigate something new, apply a scientific method to research, analysis and drawing conclusions from my results and write technical research papers on my findings. The main difference is that my job now allows me to take my successful findings and use them to develop something from them, such as a new prototype that can be quickly deployed to intelligence analysts for testing and evaluation.”

Describe a typical working day in your current job.

“I am working in a research team whose job it is to research and develop new high speed processing technologies and techniques and apply these to solve real organisational problems. We work very closely with operations and other in house R&D teams, other agencies, industrial partners and academia. I generally work on research projects that are divided into 2-3 month tasks, which means I get a good variety of different types of task that keeps me interested and that I get to see many of the outcomes of my tasks come to fruition. Many of our research projects and prototype techniques make a real difference and influence other areas of the organisation; although not all research projects will conclude with the outcome you may have initially hoped for!”

What skills are necessary to perform well in the role?

“The most important skill for the role is the ability to solve problems and use a research type methodology. Many of the more specific skills can be picked up through on the job learning and other training. Communication and team working is just as important, with an aptitude for learning.”

What’s the training like?

“The specialist nature of some of the roles means that there’s lots of on the job learning and my colleagues at GCHQ have been fantastic in helping and supporting me throughout my continuing development process. I’ve also been on internal and external training courses for some of the more generalist skills such as software development.”



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How has your role developed and what are your career ambitions?

“I’ve been in my current role a little under a year now and have been enjoying the work greatly. My role has developed from starting with a few smaller and quite focussed research tasks to undertaking tasks which are much broader, allowing plenty of room for my own innovations and requiring more engagement of stakeholders and contributors from across other parts of the organisation and its partners. My next career ambition is to move on to managing my own small group of researchers and to manage and steer their projects.”

What do you enjoy most about your job?

“I like the variety of work and freedom to go about each task in a way that suits me and the way I like to work. The most gratifying part of my job so far has been having my work used operationally by analysts with some exciting outcomes.”

What are the most challenging parts of your job?

“Tasks can be very in-depth or initially broad and it’s mostly up to you to determine how to focus the work around the objectives and outcomes that need to be achieved. It can also be very technical work, but the more experienced colleagues around have always been more than happy to provide support as I have developed my own technical subject knowledge.”

What are the best things about working in this sector?

“I can’t stress enough how unique a role at GCHQ is compared to most other public and private sector companies. The work is always changing to keep up with changing priorities, current threats and emerging new technologies, which means there’s always something very interesting happening.”

Finally, what advice do you have for other students and graduates who would like to get into this career?

“Many students choose to apply for the summer undergraduate technologist (SUT) scheme, which is a fantastic way to gain experience and insight into what it’s really like to work at GCHQ and many choose to come back as full time employees after completing their degree.

Graduates interested in technology or research should seriously consider applying, as there are some unrivalled opportunities and very engaging work. Don’t be put off by thinking you don’t have the correct skills or aren’t technical enough for a role, you can pick up specific skills quickly on the job and you’ll probably be surprised just how applicable all your current skills and experience really are.”

www.careersinbritishintelligence.co.uk