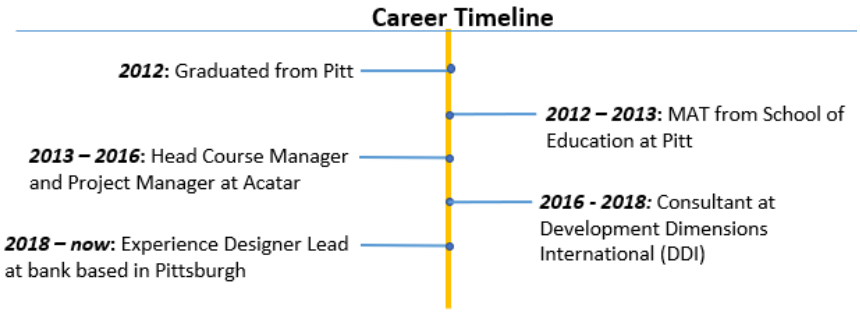
Joseph Friedman

Interviewed by: Susie Chen



Currently at:	Bank based in Pittsburgh
Position:	Experience Designer
Graduated:	2012
Degrees:	Psychology (B.S.); English Literature minor
Graduate Studies:	Masters of Arts and Teaching (MAT) from University of Pittsburgh School of Education

User experience; research

What do you currently do?

I am currently an Experience Designer Lead at a bank based in Pittsburgh. I work with a small team that focuses on user experience research and design. We do everything from strategy, qualitative research, and usability testing, all the way to product design, and user experience, including interface and architecture. There is also a little bit of product management and relationship building –and of course, everything is rooted in empathy and improving user experience.

I think narrative really defines everything that I do. This work is about researching people and synthesizing that research into something that creates a better narrative for the person experiencing it. In the perfect world, we would be creating better lives but for now, we should concentrate on building better experiences. The bank has been really empowering in trying to create financial wellness. We want everyone who interacts with the bank to have the best experience, and so our team strives to create that. My previous work [experience] is established in this narrative –who are you, how do you come in, how are you the hero of the story you're experiencing? What is the deepest emotion we're trying to access and how do we paint this metaphor for the user?

My Psych degree allowed me to look at everything with more of a scientific lens, and digging into the Drugs & Behavior, Brain & Behavior (more neuro-psych) courses, I was able to look at human behavior. Combine that with my minor in English, which really taught me about narrative structure, and helped provide for me an evidence-backed approach to establishing a proper narrative.

Did you graduate with any other minors of majors, in addition to your Psychology degree?

I minored in English Literature. I was really into feminism and how it shows up in American Literature. I looked at science fiction and feminism, as well as women in early American southern gothic writing. It's all about cultures of oppression. In grad school, I looked at what it means when we call someone educated, and how do we design for that kind of person who's not the typical White, male, suburban student.

What skills did you gain from completing a Psychology degree that helped in your career(s) after graduation?

I loved research methods; it taught me how to take larger datasets and how to derive significance from them. And from taking social psych courses, and courses around psych and media, I learned more about combining data with more qualitative aspects of research. There's a healthy marriage needed between quantitative and qualitative data to understand how people actually behave.

What did you do after graduating with your Psychology degree?

After graduating, I got into a Masters of Arts in Teaching (MAT) program at the School of Education. My specific area of focus was the Urban Partners Fellowship, where you work in urban or otherwise unequitable schools.

I was feeling really lost at the end of my graduate career and after teaching, I realized it wasn't the career path for me but I did have a love for user-experience design, how to create something for students. So that's how I got to this product route. I attended the Pitt tech career fair and found a start-up at CMU called Acatar through the Integrated Innovation Institute (then called Carnegie Innovations). From there, my career launched in user experience—but always rooted in the empathy and user centrism that I had focused early on.

Acatar sold, and I ended up finding a new job at Development Dimensions International (DDI), an HR consulting firm that focuses on talent/leadership management, in the South Hills. I was doing instructional design and user research, and that's what they were interested in, so I was able to spread some user-centric design awareness in the company. I then set my sights on an innovation team at the bank to really grow my practice.

What advice would you give to undergraduates pursuing or graduating from Psychology?

Find your favorite things, and then find the people who are in charge of them, and then go talk to those people. From your favorite app to your favorite food to your favorite thing that you work on every day, go find the person in charge and contact them. As you get older, your personality is much more defined by your job and a lot of people settle with jobs they're not really happy with without knowing there's so much more that exists out there. All you have to do is reach out. People love talking about themselves -it's a huge part of connection.

Any tips for undergrads who are interested in your career?

User experience is definitely a growing field right now, much more than it was when I graduated. It is really heavily tied to marketing and market research –things that a psychology degree and a background in research methods and quantitative testing start to build. But it focuses on using a different lens, so I would recommend pairing a Psych degree with some courses in computer science and information science. Also, if there are user experience courses to take, try some of those.

Also, you should be able to talk tech. Understanding some sort of technical field, like design, front-end languages, database management, even design-thinking, would be helpful for user experience (though it's not required).