

Wege in den Beruf

#12 – From International Student to Freelance Coach

Nesli: There is this not knowing what you don't know and the fear around it. It's like, oh, but, you know, what am I supposed to do? What exactly needs to be in my CV and which order is right and what topic is right and what skill is important to put in? And I think it's very often also fear of the unknown, like what do I not know maybe that might be holding me back?

Intro: (music) ... Studying? Check. Career plan? LOL. If you're wondering what to do after graduation, you're not alone. As a career service, we're here to help you find the answers to your questions. In our podcast *Wege in den Beruf*, *Path to a Career*, we ask different people about their personal career histories and the highs and lows they have experienced along the way – for more guidance and tips on starting your career, you're in the right place. Let's Go!

Sonnhild: Hello and welcome back to *Wege in den Beruf*, our podcast about career biographies. My name is Sonnhild. I work as a student assistant at Career Service of University Potsdam, and I will guide you through this episode in which we will explore how people navigate their career in Germany. Most episodes will be in English, but depending on the invited person, also in German. I'm very happy to welcome today our first guest, Nesli Sakoc. Hi, Nesli. So, a quick question first. Ferris wheel, freefall tower or mirror maze, which of these images describes your career path best?

Nesli: I love that question. Hi, Sonnhild. Thank you for having me here, first of all. And very funny question. I think I have to say it's a Ferris wheel, because it's something that is always going around, around, and there are ups and downs, and it sometimes shakes a little bit with the wind, and you don't know where it actually goes. And when you're in the ups, there is just a beautiful view, but also somewhat a little bit makes you a bit nervous. But you know, it's going to come down again.

Sonnhild: And do you feel like you can see far on what is to come?

Nesli: Well, sometimes when I'm on the ups, I could see a bit further. Some days it's cloudy, although I'm up there, it's like I'm not so sure where this goes. But sometimes I do see, and sometimes I don't. And I think it's also the fun of it.

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Sonnhild: Yeah, I think that's very natural. Okay. Yeah, thank you for these first insights. And now, introduce yourself and tell me about your educational background and your current job.

Nesli: I'm happy to. I am Nesli. I studied economics back in Turkey. I'm from Turkey. And then I moved to Germany, studied finance, international finance, and I went into finance. And that actually road took me far, and in different and funny side streets. And right now, I'm in coaching, career coaching, and freelancing.

Sonnhild: Okay, nice. That's kind of a shift in your career. I'm actually curious, is there, was there an experience that inspired or motivated you to move in the direction of coaching?

Nesli: Yes, thank you for that question. I did finance for around like five, six years. And actually, when things started changing for me, it was right after Corona, and we went through a restructuring, and my job was eliminated. And I had my work visa still, and I was so nervous, and I didn't know what's going to happen. And during that time, I worked with a career coach and went through all different things that I always had in my mind. And the big question came, big topic came. I really wanted to be more with people. I was great at finance, and I loved numbers. It was like a nice game for me, but I missed being more with people and having these one-on-one conversations. And during that time, I was very lucky in my company. There was a new role opening up, something called capabilities, capability building for finance professionals. I was like, that's a great way to shift gears. So, I started where I was. I was working with finance teams where I was already a part of and really enjoyed working with them and their careers, and having those one-on-one times and conversations, and kept growing into that direction.

Sonnhild: Okay, very interesting. That sounds like a good opportunity for you. And I'm curious if you participated then in any further trainings to become a freelance coach?

Nesli: Yes, absolutely. So, my first step was to actually join a training. I joined a coaching training. It was important for me to have a solid training that is also accredited and supervised and really proper training. And to be honest, when I started this training, I still didn't really know what exactly I wanted to do with it. Like I knew I wanted the skill. I knew there are very different options, how you can use this specific skill and

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certification. And I also had options. I was still employed and there were options to really do this internally with the current environment that I was in. I was also considering maybe going into more human resources direction. That is an area where you can use the coaching skills day-to-day, actually. It's a very important skill there. And I was already working with career development and capability building. You can do this in different departments, right? I was doing with finance. I could do that also with other departments, or I could do it more generally as part of the personal and talent development part of the company. Or I could do it as a freelancer, or I could do it in another company. So, there were so many options. But I had this drive to also learn how would it be if I would be a freelancer and self-employed and really just take the world a bit on my own and see where I would go with it. So, I chose that direction and started learning and exploring the self-employment world as well.

Sonnhild: Okay, nice. So, you had different kinds of training, I assume, and could you maybe say a bit more about where you headed and about what it was and also have you thought about being self-employed like before, or did it come also only with this opportunity?

Nesli: I really like that. I think I always at some level really wanted to be self-employed. I had this entrepreneurial drive in me. I needed some time to really arrive into my own professional life and also just starting a career in another country. You also need to go through some of your own hurdles and just first arrive, and there are visa complications as well. So, it's not so simple to jump into this world, but I had already started like doing some things on the side. I had a side business where I was organising events. I am also dancing, so I would go and organise dance events, and yeah, like in different forms and in different countries and cities. So, I was already dipping my toe into this self-employed world, and it was something that I definitely knew I want to explore at some point. And when I started with my coaching training, I was like, okay, this is something actually very interesting, and I would like to bring this further to more people as well. And that direction also took me to something we call group coaching. In the group coaching context, you also bring people together where you enable them also almost coach each other, and it's a very exciting direction as well. My first training was at Solutions Academy. I studied in solutions-focused coaching, which is very practical, very actually almost taking you forward in your goals and towards what really matters to you. It's an amazing tool to uncover what is behind the motivations. Like what is the motivation behind the motivation

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and really staying on course and staying intentional, because I really think one of the things that happen very often as humans we go around about life and we want to innovate and make good things and achieve great things and sometimes we lose that end goal because there are so many other things might be happening that is not always so easy to see. So solution-focused coaching is amazing for that, and I also followed the path of group coaching, where I can bring people together and they can also really practice those coaching competencies, and anyone who studies coaching and gets trained as a coach, I think also gets very excited to, oh, how great the life would be if everyone would get this type of training. So that's something I definitely also feel and in a group coaching context you also get to train some of these competencies and also, I think every day they're getting very very valuable that people can talk to each other in a group and really supporting each other and being together and progressing together and I think that's also something we really really need as well and I'm super excited to be part of such a solution.

Sonnhild: And do you also apply group coaching in your current coaching, what you do, and could you say more about your coaches, like where do they come from, what kind of background do they have?

Nesli: Yes, I do. Group coaching is something I actually recently started, and I usually work with international students. I've also been trained in English, I can also speak very well German, but I also feel very close to international students, so that's an area I really like to be in, and what I also notice is international students when you also give them the space to be together, it's almost this belonging and support feeling coming together, and I can hear they say things like, oh it's so nice to be with people who are having similar problems, or oh I've never thought we have exact same challenges that we're facing, and that's the beauty of it. When you get together, you can really get these different perspectives on the same struggles we might have and then really be able to go forward there are issues. Like visa insecurities, and insecurities around language, and how you learn, and how much you use, and then how maybe hesitant you feel sometimes. And the whole job search process, that can be so stressful; you feel like the time is ticking, and I need to get to a certain point at this time, and then I need to change all my papers again, and there's a lot of pressure that can be, and sometimes it can also feel quite isolated. And bringing people together and being with other students who are also going through similar things, I think, has been a great bonus on top of everything.

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Sonnhild: So, you've said before that you've always wanted to take this entrepreneurial path. Could you maybe elaborate a bit on like what do you think are kind of key competencies or requirements for working as a freelancer but also freelance coach?

Nesli: Oh yeah. I think I talk about this every day. I think one of the first things that comes to my mind that is the most important is really, I'm not sure if I find the right word, but more or less resilience. This ability to stay with it and really, it doesn't matter what happens, knowing how to recover from it and getting up and continuing. Really, the longer you can stay and the longer... Well, the second one is adapt, really being able to adapt and keep going. The resilience, adaptation, and this ability to continue on the path that you're on, I think, is very important for all sorts of endeavors, actually, because anything that is worthy takes time. Nothing is an overnight success or project. Everything that takes a bit more- you know, anything that's taking you a tiny bit out of your comfort zone- real growth opportunities, really fulfilling and taking you places, and you can add value into other people's lives, that takes time. Yeah, it's never overnight, and during that time, really being able to deal with those self-doubts sometimes, and a lot of rejection, and also sometimes being in a room where it's completely dark and you don't know which direction the door is, and really spending a lot of time touching a lot of walls to see, okay, can this be a handle, can this be a handle, and noticing you're on the wrong wall after all, right? And it's all part of it. I think these are kind of like the competencies and skills to be able to deal with it, but also, I think very important is being able to see that fun in it. I love it. Like, I do get nervous and stressed every now and then, of course, but I just love the feeling of that excitement and finding that door handle in this darkest room ever, and maybe noticing, oh wait a second, this is another door. It's actually, I don't know, another room next to me that is opening completely different ideas and opportunities, and I find it very exciting. And I think maybe this is not a competency but more like a character trait, and also being able to enjoy this and seeing the fun in it and really loving that process.

Sonnhild: Yeah. It sounds like it's also like some kind of creativity that you also need to bring.

Nesli: Yes, exactly, and I think it's also one of the most fulfilling parts. You get to be also creative, yeah.

Sonnhild: Yeah, and also, I can imagine that you will also develop these competencies the further you go.

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Nesli: Yes, exactly, and being able to see that, and that's, I think, also what makes it so fulfilling, because the meaning and fulfillment as humans, we also get from seeing the progress, being able to notice that, oh, I'm developing, I'm growing, I can do now more than I don't know how many times before, and being able to see that, it's also really making it very fulfilling.

Sonnhild: Okay, I have one question which goes back to what you said about your coaching. In which language do you offer coaching?

Nesli: I do mostly in English. Very rarely, it also happens in German and Turkish. Actually, that is sometimes the funniest for me, because that happens very rarely, but it does happen. That's my native language. I've been trained in English most of my life. I've always studied in English, and a lot of things have worked for me in English, so that's my main kind of language to also deliver, but I do also, every now and then, come across where I need to do it also in German or Turkish.

Sonnhild: Yeah, you just said that you have studied in English, also here in Germany for your master's, and what do you think were your biggest challenges coming to Germany, starting to study, maybe also finding work, like the first job that you have during studying, but also in finishing?

Nesli: I've been so lucky. I've been really lucky, but I did have challenges as well. So, I'm reflecting back; it's been a while. When I think about it, I learned German before I came to Germany. I was in a high school where German was actually the first foreign language, so I did have quite a lot of time learning German. I graduated with a C1 level of German already in high school, so that was not a big problem. And I had some internships before as well, back in Turkey. During my studies here, I was very focused on getting a student job. For me, I've always been very planned and strategized on how to actually go towards a goal. So as soon as I was here, like arrived in my studies, I was looking for a student job, and I think that was one thing that opened a lot of doors for me. The struggle, though, imagine I arrived in Germany four months, and I'm looking for a job in that time. I know nobody, like nobody, nothing. I don't know anything about what people expect from me, specifically when I interview, and my CV, and quite a lot of things I needed to figure out. And there were also, very interestingly, good patterns as well, that when I applied for similar companies

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compared to back in Turkey, I could also see some similarities that I could make use of. That was very beautiful. I think one big struggle I had that I did not know before I came here, I did not have many documents. Like, for me, CV was just CV, and when I moved here, I noticed, oh no, you have to have all these extra certifications and reference letters and so on. So I had to go back to my ex-managers and companies and really ask for, hey, can you give me this document, can you help me do this. So definitely, I think that trace of successes that you need to bring with you to this other country, that's one thing that has been challenging. But I could find a way around it. I still had good connections with the people I worked with; the times were good, so it's not that difficult to reach back to your past connections, so I could bring them all together and then find my way around here.

Sonnhild: It's really nice to hear, and it's really interesting what you said, because that might be something that people might not be expecting when they come to Germany: that these certificates really matter. So yeah, that's a really important point, and it's good that you could get these reference letters from your previous managers. I can also see that establishing a network is also really important in Germany, not only for the career but also personally, to feel that you belong here, maybe. Are these challenges that you addressed now also some challenges that your coaches address in the coaching?

Nesli: Yes, one of the things I think that comes very often is the language. That is usually one of the biggest, or the biggest, topics everyone here and there mentions. And on top of it, there is this not knowing what you don't know and the fear around it. It's like, oh, but you know, what am I supposed to do, what exactly needs to be in my CV, and which order is right, and what topic is right, and what skill is important to put in. And I think it's very often also fear of the unknown, like what do I not know; maybe that might be holding me back. And next to the fear of the unknown, there is also, well, how do I show myself, how do I present myself. There's a bit of the struggle and fear around, oh, how much of myself should I show, how much of my differences do I show. Well, I'm supposed to actually adapt here, right? I don't want to be like the odd one out because I want to be welcomed, I want to be given a room here, a space here at this table too, but if I'm too different, maybe that will be an issue. So, this difficulty in deciding how much of that I want to show, or is it okay to show, that comes quite often too.

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Sonnhild: And do we have any ideas on how to deal with this, and also what you said: the language barrier is also something that we at career service also often encounter, that it's hard to find a job if you, for example, have B1 level German. Do you have any recommendations for international students?

Nesli: Yes, I think one thing I always start with is the word community, because there is no network, there is no community existing. I think one main goal really needs to be, as the first step, getting out, meeting people, and there are really different ways to do that. For me, I was very active in the dancing scene. I was dancing already before, and I got into different dancing scenes, and it was very interesting because, of course, it's a way to get to know a lot of people as well, but at the same time, I was still new, and I was still shy around speaking German, and I had limits. Very fast in a conversation, I hit my limits. I wanted to talk to people also in German, and I could, but you know, after a couple of sentences, I would just run out of things I can actually say. But with dancing, it was very easy, because I could have this safe environment where I talk to people, and when I ran out of sentences, basically, then I could move around and go to other people or say, oh, come on, let's dance, and then do something that is also non-verbal. So that's, I think, a big tip, like finding those opportunities where you can meet people, but it's not 100% depending on the verbal communication, because when you're with other people, you're going to speak, and depending on how safe you feel, it might give opportunities to practice more German, but then when you reach your limits, there is something else to do and still different ways to connect with each other. This could be things like dancing, it could be singing, it could be also maybe creative work that you can do with others. I think it's a very, very useful way to deal with that.

Sonnhild: In a more relaxed way, because at work you will be required to understand and also to react.

Nesli: And on top of it, something like I really use a lot, and by now I'm not embarrassed to say, even in those gatherings, I would actually notice the things that I wanted to say but I couldn't say. I would go home, and I would literally write sample sentences. Okay, next time when I want to ask someone to dance, this is how I say it. Oh, next time maybe I want to ask about this, then this is how I say it. Or later on, when I actually got into an office job, I still didn't know so many things. Like, I worked in finance, and I worked a lot with Excel, and I knew it inside out, but I could not talk about it in German for the life of me. I did not

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know anything. I knew German well, but like Excel, I had never talked about it in German. So, I would listen around in the office while people are talking around me to each other, and I would write down the words that I hear repeatedly. I could more or less separate them, but I don't know the definition, the meaning, so I would make a list during the day, and then at the end of the day, I would translate them, and I would see, okay, oh, this is what it means, and then I would try to use those in sentences. It was so funny, but it worked. I learned how to speak about Excel very fast, and I picked up on the office jargon and, you know, the German words in this specific work I do. It came very fast, but obviously also with some effort around it. Okay, how do I make it easy for me, and also how do I focus on the things that are relevant for me at this point, so I can actually make progress. And we talked about that fulfilment, right, when I see my progress, I'm going to be more motivated and more fulfilled to keep going on it.

Sonnhild: Yeah, that sounds really inspiring and like a really good method. Like, I mean, as you said, you already knew German, like you had some German skills before, so you were able to recognise the words maybe easier, but I think it can be, it has a lot of potential, this method, like really to try to stick to it and, you know, be a bit also persistent and not giving up.

Nesli: Not giving up. I love that; that's the secret.

Sonnhild: So maybe coming back to the job market in Germany, would you say it is possible to find qualified jobs in Germany without fluent German skills?

Nesli: It is not impossible, but it comes with challenges, obviously, because if you really think about it, on a human base, right, we don't have to talk about a hypothetical and how it could be or should be, but when you go in an office space where everyone is German-speaking, in German, and communicating in German with each other, and maybe there are also some people who are not as comfortable in English as others, then of course that office can and will prefer German-speaking skills. But of course, this is kind of the lower end of this whole. If it's just conversational and also being able to talk to each other, there are also offices and companies and teams where the working language is German. In that sense, being able to also work and communicate with your colleagues in German about your topic will be very important. But there are

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also companies where the work language is mainly English. That was my job. I worked at Coca-Cola, where the official work language was English, so we mainly also worked internationally with other countries and teams from all over the world. However, in the office, we still spoke German, and with my colleagues in the office, I would still send emails in German. But also in the office, we also had quite a lot of international people, because Coca-Cola, for example, and I think quite a few of these international companies, they do also move their talent around the world, so I would also see people from all over the country hopping around from one office to the other, and there is quite a lot of that dynamic and communicating in different languages, and mainly in English because the company's working language is in English. Possible. There are also quite a lot of startups in big cities, very often that do use English, only English as their working language, and there are quite a few people also around Germany working with very little German skills. So, it's not impossible; it's just less opportunities, right? And I think beyond that, "Oh, am I going to be able to get a job?", German skills has so much more to offer actually. It is also sometimes that little coffee chat or that little joke that is happening between two people in the office, or even when you need to get your admin and paperwork done or just find your way around in the city. So there's more benefit to German skills than that, but obviously also being able to say and also feel, "Oh, I can also communicate in German and talk to my colleagues when I see their German, is maybe worse than—sorry, their English is maybe worse than my German, so I can actually jump in and then support them," because sometimes it's really the other way around that we do feel that insecurity, "Oh my god, my German is not so good and how am I going to, you know, say this and I have to speak in German." But then the other person actually has the same struggle, and we, going through that experience, can bring that empathy and having German skills will support that as well.

Sonnhild: Yeah, really nice. Because at the end, as you said, maybe for the Germans it could be English or it could be another language that we struggle with, so no one is actually alone with this problem. Just for an understanding of your job: was German a requirement to get the job, do you remember, or was it like a plus?

Nesli: I think it was more like in the middle, like recommended, because I remember I did apply with a C1 language certificate because I had it already. But I think I also remember my interview was in English and in German; I think we switched. And my work at the end was also in the office with the local team: I spoke in

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German and communicated in German. Like I did my work in German, while with my international colleagues I worked in English. So, from day one, I actually started with both languages. And yes, in the office we also sometimes had things in English because we had internationals there as well. But from day one, both languages were part of it. But I can say, for example, Coca-Cola, and pretty sure most of these international companies, depending on the team size and the mix, see, there's no general fitting rule for this. It really depends on who is there, who's working there. In the Coca-Cola office, we did have internationals because they also, as I said, it's not just internationals who studied here in Germany; they also move their own talent around the world. And mostly the senior leaders, they have four- or five year assignments in different countries, and then they move to another country, and really that already creates, right? —if you have this meeting with the senior leader who's around for four years to lead the team but then moves to another country, that already gives that dynamic, English speaking teams and vibes.

Sonnhild: Okay, so thank you for your interesting insights. Now I want just to go back to our metaphor from the beginning. If career was an amusement park visit, what should students bring with them to the trip?

Nesli: Oh, definitely some snacks. Some snacks and drinks, because it's a long journey. Career is not the decision that you're going to make to get your first job. It's not the first step, it's not the CV, it's the whole journey. It's the whole life, if you think about it, like the professional life. I think with the snacks and with the drinks and, if it's cold, something cozy, you know, really making yourself comfortable in that process, not to run from one thing to the other, to just make the best of it and right now, know it's going to take time. You don't see all the fun parts of the entertainment park the moment you go in. It's bright, it's maybe loud, maybe crowded. You see there's so much that is asking for your attention. It's exciting, you really want to go through and do it all, but you can only do it one thing at a time, right? You cannot be... maybe some parts of it have big lines that you need to wait in, and it's going to get a bit boring during waiting time, but it is the reality of it, and it will be worth it if you really want to be there. If not, you might regret it and you're like, "Ah, okay, I learned. Let me get off this and then go to the next one," and just really having that understanding of: this is a journey, it's not for the goal, it's not for the endpoint, it's for the fun of going from one thing to the other and exploring and really collecting these experiences and having fun with it.

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Sonnhild: Thank you, that's a really nice ending sentence. And yeah, thank you so much for being with us today, Nesli.

Nesli: Thank you!

Sonnhild: And sharing also your personal experiences. And have a good weekend.

Outro: "Wege in den Beruf – Path to a Career" is a podcast produced by the Career Service at the University of Potsdam. If you have any questions or would like personal advice on application documents or topics related to the transition from university to work, please visit uni-potsdam.de/careerservice. You can find all the info you need in the show notes.

