



# Crossing the Bridge

## — Twice

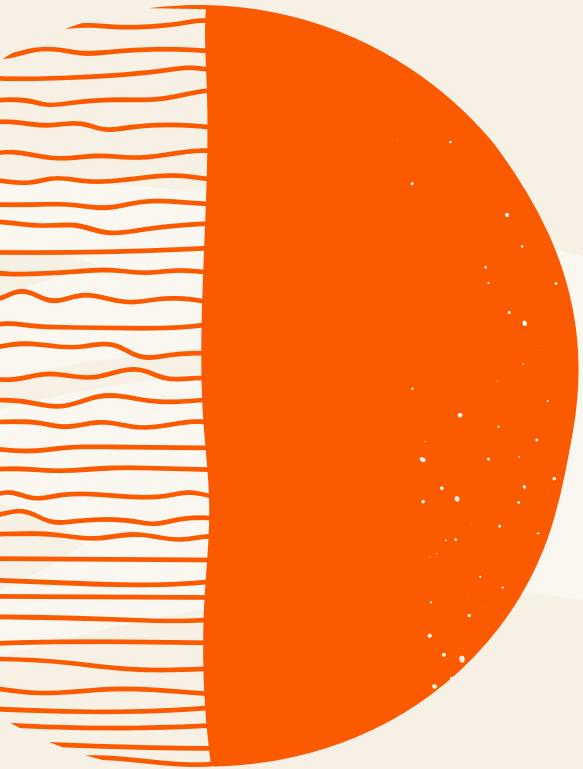
*Practitioner's notes on the route from PhD to COO  
(and back, and back again)*

**Johannes Holvitie • Adj. Prof. • D.Sc. (Tech.)**

COO, Oiva Health Group • University of Turku •

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# Two questions

What were you doing the week you decided to apply for a PhD?

**What will you be doing the week you'll defend it?**

# Johannes Holvitie

- *Current*
- **COO, Oiva Health Group**
- **Docent, University of Turku**
- **Board Member, Property Companies**
  
- *Earlier*
- Director of ICT & Chief Information Officer, Varha
- Program Director & Chief Development Officer, VSSHP & TYKS
- Senior Research, University of Turku
  
- *Education*
- D.Sc. (Tech.) Software Development • M.Sc. (Tech.) Software Engineering
- Adj. Prof. (Docent), Software Production and Business – University of Turku



# The thesis I wrote, and the thesis I learned

## What I thought I was studying:

- a software metric – how to quantify shortcuts.

## Year 3 – a governance problem:

- who decides, who pays, who remembers?

## Year 5 – a psychology problem:

- why smart people make choices that hurt their future selves.

## Next 9 years: same problem, larger stages.

- *the thesis was a rehearsal. I didn't know it.*

*Find the  
problem-shape.*

*You'll see it everywhere  
afterward.*

# The first crossing

- 2017
  - defended DSc. Had “founded” a University of Turku startup “factory”.
- 2019
  - “exited” the factory and jumped to the regional hospital district.
- *Why I left*
  - *academic feedback loops were too slow.*
- *Why I never really left*
  - *industry loops are too fast.*
- ***You will need both – for different things.***

# The public-sector chapter

- **2019–2022, Hospital District of SW Finland (VSSHP & TYKS)**
  - **Enterprise Architect**
  - **Digital Services Director & CDO**
- **2021–2022, Wellbeing County of SW Finland (Varha)**
  - **ICT Director and inaugural CIO**
    - Portfolio: >38M€. Start from 24.12.2021
    - Health, social and emergency services depended on ICT running by 1.1.2023
- **Lesson**
  - Scale doesn't make problems bigger. It makes them different.
  - *You stop being a person who solves problems and become a person who designs how problems will be allowed to occur. Plan for it.*

# The CTO chapter

## What I did (2022–2025)

- CTO for Oiva Health going into a multinational group.
- Product & services development across borders.
- Technology due diligence on acquisition targets.
- Fused acquired technologies with what we had.

## What I learned

- **Every acquisition is two acquisitions.**
- The code, and the people who wrote it.
- The first is hard.
- *The second harder, but it is where value is made – or lost.*

# The COO chapter – "everything but sales"

## **My teams are responsible for**

- Product & Services Development
- Client & Market Deployment
- Support
- Regulatory Compliance
- Project Management Office (PMO)
- Merger & Acquisitions (M&A) operations
- External Funding

## *We do not do*

- *Sales*
- *Marketing*
- *(We help, of course.)*

***The less visible parts of our group  
where longevity of our service  
deliveries rely on***

# Breadth is a craft, not a gift

- I am not an expert in seven departments. Nobody is.
- **I am expert at one thing — knowing which question to ask each department on which week.**
- This is learnable. PhDs are especially well-equipped to learn it.
- *Beginning of your doctorate:*
  - you walked into a literature you didn't know, in a field where everyone had a five-year head start...
- *Continuation of your doctorate:*
  - ... and you learned to ask sharp enough questions that the experts took you seriously.
- *You did that once, on one topic. COO does this seven times, in parallel, every Monday (except this one).*
- **If you can survive a literature review, you can survive month one of quality compliance. The transfer is real.**



# The bridge goes both ways

The choice is not "leave or stay."

**The choice is which mix, when.**

## Practical advice, part 1

# During the PhD

*Four things to do  
before you  
have to choose.*

- 1. Pick a problem-shape, not a topic.**
  - Topics allow delivery but they expire; shapes don't
- 2. Build one industry relationship per year.**
  - Coffee, not contracts. Most leave with zero — have four.
- 3. Ship something outside academia before you defend.**
  - A workshop talk, an open-source release, a pro-bono job.
- 4. Learn to write for non-specialists.**
  - A one-page memo. The single most leveraged skill in industry.

## Practical advice, part 2

# At the defence

### The day you defend ≠ an ending

- It is the loudest signaling event of your career.
  - Your network is paying attention.
  - Your supervisors will write recommendations.
  - Your peers want to celebrate.
- *Most focus only on a holiday and a hangover.*

### Have a month-one plan written before the defense

- Five emails for week one.
- Three meetings for week two.
- A rehearsed answer to "what's next?"
- **Pre-decide year-one focus:**
  - optionality, depth, or income.
  - *You cannot have all three.*

## Practical advice, part 3

# Choosing the first role

### **Optimize for exposure, not title or salary.**

- Small enough that you see everything. Big enough that everything is real.

### **Counter-intuitive: avoid the role that is exactly your thesis topic.**

- The pitch is irresistible — "we'll pay you to keep doing what you do."
- Don't. Or do, but with a two-year timer. You miss the second learning curve — where the compounding lives.

### **The best first industry role makes you uncomfortable on day one.**

- My 2019 hospital role was that. No clinical training. Never run that scale.
- *I learned more in eight months than in the previous three years combined.*

## Practical advice, part 4

# The boring functions

1. Budget
    - Profit & Loss
    - KPIs
  2. Politics
    - Know the Context
    - Opportunities are Between the Lines
  3. Quality
    - Compliance, Privacy & Security
  4. Support
    - Service Levels
    - Up-Sell
- *Boring to people who haven't run them.*
  - *Essential to every executive who has.*

## The arbitrage

*Brilliant young people avoid these because they sound dull.*

*So the people running them are often promoted past their level – not enough competition.*

## Volunteer for one early.

*Three years in, you are in a room with the CEO that your peer in product engineering will not reach for ten.*

***This is real. This is what I did. It worked.***

# Four mistakes

*I did and I still see*

## Common mistakes I see

### 1. Waiting for permission to talk (to industry).

- There is no permission. Just go.

### 2. Treating the PhD as a contract with the system.

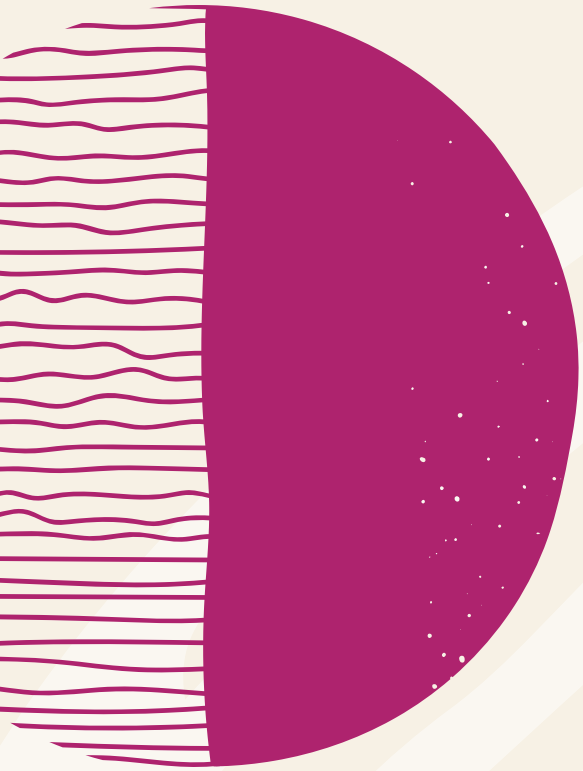
- You supply effort; the system supplies a career?
- No. You supply both.

### 3. Confusing "specialist" with "valuable."

- Specialists are valuable because they translate. Not because they know more.

### 4. Believing the choice is one-way.

- It is never one-way. Cross. Cross back. Cross again.



## What I'd tell my 2017 self

"

*The thesis was a hard part, but you haven't started yet.*

*Take the uncomfortable job and don't apologize for changing your direction.*

*Keep the academic connection always.*

"

# The route, summarized

- **Education – all at one address**

- BSc → MSc → DSc → Adj. Prof. in University of Turku from 2008 → today.
- *Learned to ask questions and construct argumentation*

- **Public sector**

- Hospital District of SW Finland → Wellbeing County of SW Finland.
- *Spent >38M€ of tax payer money to understand projects, delivery and politics*

- **Industry**

- Oiva Health CTO → Oiva Health Group COO.
- *Grasping how sustainable business runs via trust, KPIs and the brutality of economics*

- **Through-line**

- Same problem-shape, progressively larger stages. Same address. Still Turku.

*Don't fall for the LinkedIn version. The planning was retrospective.*

*Disciplined eagerness to first understand and then affect change was the only forward.*



# Thank you. Kiitos.

## Questions?

This week: one coffee with one person in industry. Anyone.  
*Reach out and the first one is on me!*

[linkedin.com/in/holvitie/](https://www.linkedin.com/in/holvitie/)

[johannes@holvitie.fi](mailto:johannes@holvitie.fi)