

Interviewing for Information & Networking

Informational Interviewing is the process of gathering career information from people who are already working in target occupations, organizations, or geographic locations. Both the *content* of the information and the *process* of gathering it will help you to refine your goals and possibly discover some new ones.

WHY DO INFORMATIONAL INTERVIEWING

To Gain Information

The main goal of Informational Interviewing is to obtain information and advice on career fields or job search strategies through one-to-one, comfortable conversations with persons already working in a particular career. Informational Interviews are initiated and controlled by the interviewer (in this case, you).

More specific purposes and benefits of Informational Interviewing include:

- to validate the choice of career by investigating the day-to-day experiences of someone working in the field;
- to determine whether the career, industry or company matches your skills, interests and expectations;
- to narrow the list of potential employers developed from reviewing background literature to those who form the most likely market for your qualifications;
- to make contacts and obtain current information and to get additional leads to jobs and/or Informational Interviews;
- to develop a knowledge of the vocabulary of the field;
- to gather information that will make a positive impression on employers in a cover letter or a job interview; and
- to build confidence in your ability to discuss your career interests and goals.

To Develop Networks

One important benefit of Informational Interviewing is to establish a career network. Networking is the process of discovering and utilizing connections between people. Genuine networks stem from friendships or business relationships. Everyone knows other people, and thus has a network. But "networking" implies movement beyond one's immediate network and involves tapping into other people's networks, perhaps far removed from one's own. Networks prove very helpful for both exploring career fields and actually finding jobs.

FINDING PEOPLE TO TALK TO

It is not easy for some people to start Informational Interviewing. There are two types of approaches which are used, and you may wish to start with the low risk, indirect approach until you gain confidence.

The Indirect Approach

Think about everyone in your circle (family, friends, neighbors, classmates, present and former co-workers, mentors, supervisors, faculty members, members of the club[s] to which you belong, etc.). There is probably at least one person in your circle who has information about the career you are considering. Ask everyone on your list to suggest the names of people who are employed in companies or fields you are investigating and ask for permission to use their name in contacting these people.

For example, Bob, who is interested in starting out as a personnel assistant, found that the father of one of his friends was in charge of personnel for a major local consulting firm, and he was able to arrange for an interview. From this first interview, he obtained the names of other personnel managers in the area who might supply him with career information.

Alice started by interviewing one of her marketing instructors, who referred her to computer marketing representatives in the companies she had researched.

The Direct Approach

The most direct way of finding people who can furnish useful information in Informational Interviews is to approach companies and organizations, identify potential interviewees, and ask directly for an interview. To do this you must get the names of persons who are in charge of the departments which interest you. If the names are not mentioned in the company's literature, they are usually obtainable from the organization's website or through LinkedIn. LinkedIn is a popular platform to reach out directly to recruiters, hiring managers and alumni to obtain more information. You can also call an organization and ask for the name of the person who is in charge of a particular department (e.g., the personnel or marketing department manager). Requests for this information are frequently made in the normal course of business.

PREPARING FOR THE INFORMATIONAL INTERVIEW

This is a critical step! Too many students often set up interviews, then "drop in" for their appointments without doing any homework. Employers or alumni are often frustrated when they talk with a student who knows *nothing* about their field.

Prepare for Informational Interviews well in advance. You must begin with a self-assessment. The better you know yourself, the more likely you will pursue a career that is both enjoyable and rewarding. Next, conduct a thorough search for information about the careers that interest you and on any organization you intend to contact. There are several sources that could provide the names and addresses of people with whom you might set up an Informational Interview. Begin by checking the following resources in Career Services:

- Alumni Directory
 - Employer Directories
 - Professional Associations and Journals
 - Internet (Handshake, LinkedIn, etc)
- Add to your list, other people that you know:

- Professors
- Family, Friends
- Career Services Office

Also, the more you know about an area or an organization, the more intelligent and productive your questions can be -- plus your interviewees will be impressed by this knowledge and preparation on your part.

Before your Informational Interview, plan open-ended questions that will stimulate discussion and enable both of you to learn about each other. See the list of sample questions on the following pages.

Plan ahead what you want to communicate about yourself: skills, traits, goals. Think about ways to get these attributes across by means of the questions you ask and the way in which you conduct the interview.

Focus on the interviewee's views, opinions, thoughts, and feelings rather than cold facts. Your interviewee will enjoy the interview more and will feel more positive about you as a result.

I have reviewed my notes on my Self-Assessment	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No, not yet
Type of Job or Occupation I would like to check out:	
Summary of Research (on company/alum/recruiter) [via website, LinkedIn, press..]	

SETTING UP THE INFORMATIONAL INTERVIEW

Having done your research on organizations and having identified the people with whom you wish to speak, you are now ready to arrange your Informational Interviews. Contact each person to ask for a time when you can meet to discuss their organization and, in particular, what this person does on the job. Be sure to make it clear that you are interested in gathering information and advice--*not a job*. Be prepared to explain the kind of information you want.

These are a few major strategies in contacting the individual with whom you want to meet:

- 1) Find the person on LinkedIn and send a connection request. Introduce yourself and explain who you are (e.g., a student, a person thinking of changing jobs). Perhaps, mention how you found the person's name.
- 2) Send an e-mail (remember to proofread all your correspondence so that it is error-free) and follow it up with a phone call. Introduce yourself, explain your interest in the individual's organization and job, and propose a meeting. State the reason why you are reaching out (to learn more information), and the amount of time it would take to conduct the interview (usually 20 - 30 minutes). You can also mention that you will call to confirm a date; then follow up with a phone call promptly. You will be hard to ignore!
- 3) Call the person directly. The response will be quicker, whether yes or no. If no, express your regret and ask who *would* be the appropriate person for you to contact. State your appreciation for any referral names given to you. You should then begin the process again with that person.
- 4) Have one of your contacts (e.g., parent, friend, professor) arrange an appointment for you. Use whatever approach feels most comfortable and appropriate for you.
- 5) Drop in on the person in hopes of meeting right away without an appointment. This approach is riskier, yet the spontaneity may be impressive and generate a favorable response.

The person I would like to speak to about their job is
Name:
Title:
Organization:
Address:
Phone Number:

I have confirmed the arrangements for my Informational Interview as follows
Date and Time of Interview:
Address where Interview will take place:
Parking Arrangements:
Other Information:

CONDUCTING THE INFORMATIONAL INTERVIEW

Remember that your purpose is to *gather information* from someone who is working in a career area of interest to you. **YOU ARE NOT ASKING FOR A JOB!** You are seeking information to help you understand the realities of working in a specific career field. *You* will be doing the interviewing. Be prepared to take lots of notes!

In preparing for your interview, it is important to recognize that all Informational Interviews are not alike -- your goals for such interviews will change along a continuum like this:

General Career Research ----- Specific Job Research Advice

General Career Research Interviews

Your goal is to acquire basic information about work responsibilities, lifestyles, working conditions, educational background and experience requirements, while accumulating acquaintances in a field or in a particular kind of work environment or organization of interest to you. This type of interview will dominate your early career planning activities. You are seeking *information*.

Specific Job Search Advice Interviews

After you know what you want to do, but are unsure of how to achieve it, your goal is to acquire advice on how to break into the field or organization of your choice. In these interviews you will want to be particularly sure to communicate clear ways that you can contribute, while at the same time seeking information and ideas. Though job leads can come from such interviews, it is vital that you *not* go into such an interview seeking a job. You are seeking *advice*.

After clarifying *your* objectives for the Informational Interview and doing the necessary background research, you are now ready to conduct the interview. Remember, this should be a low-stress, enjoyable *conversation*, not an anxiety-provoking interview.

Stages of the Informational Interview

Begin by setting the stage. Give your introduction and remember that **you are in charge of the progress of the interview**. It is normal to spend a few moments in establishing a climate of relaxation through chit-chat about mutual contacts, the office environment, or weather. More than a few moments of this will make a contact think you are wasting their time. Restate your time goal at the beginning of the interview and do not exceed it without negotiating an extension.

Developing Rapport: One way of developing rapport is by asking people to talk about their jobs, their personal career development, and their likes and dislikes about the field. (See list of questions in the next section.)

Getting Referrals: Once you are nearing the conclusion of an Informational Interview, you should always ask, "Can you think of any other individuals who can provide me additional information about _____ occupational field/employers? May I say that you suggested

that I call?" In almost all cases, your contact will be able to refer you to others and will be pleased to do so.

Ending the Interview: It is a thoughtful gesture to thank the contact at the end of the interview and to send a thank you note/email to them after the meeting. It will create a favorable impression and smooth the way for another contact in the future.

Stay in Touch: Ask if it would be all right to inquire about new developments and leads in the future. Extensive networks of satisfying personal and professional relationships have been built through Informational Interviewing.

The completion of successful Informational Interviews gives you solid data on where jobs are and what employers expect. It can help you decide which employers you wish to approach and may help unearth new job leads. This is a good time to refine a résumé because you have a more precise concept of the skills, knowledge, and experience an employer will be looking for in a job candidate.

Note: *What If You're Offered a Job?* Sometimes a job hunter who is doing an Informational Interview is offered a job or a job interview during the course of the Informational Interview. Use your own judgment regarding the offer of a job interview but remember that you had asked only for information. One strategy is to say you will think it over and call them back.

Questions to Ask in the Informational Interview

Again, *you* are conducting the interview. Often you will find, however, that one or two prepared questions on your part will naturally lead to a free-flowing conversation in which you will learn a great deal.

But, remember also that it is easy to let the conversation get off the track, and then you leave without gaining the information you wanted. Listed below are sample questions. You are encouraged to think of others that meet your needs more specifically. The questions are divided into two categories:

- 1) ***Occupational Field:*** Questions to generate more in-depth information on a particular field and on closely related fields.
- 2) ***Employer:*** Questions on the work setting and hiring procedures. Notice that most of the questions begin with who, what, when, where, why and how. Beginning with these key words can help you develop good, open-ended questions for your interview.

QUESTIONS REGARDING THE OCCUPATIONAL FIELD

Preparation:

- What credentials or degrees are required for entry into this kind of work?
- What types of prior experience are essential?
- How did you prepare yourself for this work?

Present Job:

- Describe how you occupy your time during a typical work week.
- What skills or talents are most essential for effective job performance in his job?
- What is your level of freedom to solve problems and take action on the job?
- What are the toughest problems you must deal with? Apart from external motivators such as salary or fringe benefits, what do you find most rewarding about your job?
- Has the work changed recently due to technology, marketplace, competition, etc.?
- What do you like least/most about your job?
- How does your work contribute to the organization's overall goals or mission?
- How did you find this opportunity?

Lifestyle:

- How much flexibility do you have in terms of dress, hours of work, vacation schedule, place of residence?
- How often do people in your line of work change jobs?
- What obligations does your company place upon your personal time?

Career Future/Alternatives:

- What type of career paths do people pursue in your field?
- If things develop as you'd like, what sort of career goals do you see for yourself?
- How rapidly is your present career field growing?
- If you were to leave this kind of work, what factors would contribute to your decision?
- If the work you do was suddenly eliminated, what different types of work do you feel that you could do?
- What types of employers hire people with your background; what are some representative job titles?
- Which related fields are you exploring?

Job Hunting:

- How do people find out about these jobs? Are they advertised on websites, by word-of-mouth (who spreads the word?), by the personnel department?
- How does one move from position to position? Do people normally move to another agency (company, division), or do they move up in the agency (company, division)?
- If you were to hire someone to work with you today, which of the following factors would be most important in your hiring decision and why?
 - a. Educational credentials
 - b. Past work experience
 - c. Personality, personal attributes
 - d. Specific skills, talents
 - e. Applicant's knowledge of your organization, your department, your job

Advice to Me:

- How well suited is my background for this type of work?
- Can you suggest other related fields?
- What educational preparation do you feel would be best?
- What types of experiences, paid employment or otherwise, would you most strongly recommend?
- If you were a college student and had it to do over again, what would you do differently to prepare for this occupation?

Referral to Others:

- Based on our conversation today, can you suggest other people who may be able to provide additional information?
- Would you suggest a few of these people who might be willing to meet with me?
- May I have permission to use your name when I contact them?

QUESTIONS REGARDING THE EMPLOYER

- What is the size of the organization/geographic locations?
- What is the organizational structure?
- Can you explain to me what the organization does? (Do your own research first)
- What is the average length of time employees stay with the organization?
- How much freedom is given to new people in exploring departments?
- What types of formal or on-the-job training does the organization provide?
- How often are performance reviews given?
- What are the arrangements for transferring from one division to another?
- How much decision-making authority is given after one year?
- What new product lines are being developed?
- Where is the organization expanding? How does it compare with its competitors?

Questions I would like to ask:

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AFTER THE INFORMATIONAL INTERVIEW

Evaluation

As an important final step, you need to evaluate the information that you have gathered. Answering the following questions should help you in this evaluation.

- 1) What positive impressions do you now have about this area of work? (Think in terms of yourself: interests, skills, values, goals).
- 2) What negative impressions do you have?
- 3) How does this interview help you to clarify your own career or job objective? If it was not helpful in this respect, why not?
- 4) What are your "next steps"? With whom else do you plan to talk? (Beware of relying too heavily on the views and advice of only one or two people). What other steps do you plan to take based upon the advice of your interviewee?

Keep a record of your interviews for your own information. Names, titles, addresses, dates, and major points of discussion will enable you to remember who told you what, and how to get back in touch with your contacts.

Follow Up

Remember to send thank-you notes! (within 1-2 days after the interview). A few lines thanking them for their time and help will indicate your appreciation and will keep you in their memory.

CONCLUSION

The benefits of interviewing for information can be substantial. These conversations enable you to gain information and insight into career fields of interest. Your knowledge will be increasingly impressive as you continue to "interview" key people in a field. You may wish to supplement your knowledge by reading professional or trade literature as well.

Your new knowledge will help you to develop confidence and to make potentially valuable contacts for the future, contacts you can easily re-establish at a later date. You are getting inside the communication network of people with the best information about employment possibilities.

Additional Resources

- Read Chapter Six of *What Color Is Your Parachute* by R. N. Bolles.
- *The Complete Job-Search Handbook*, Howard Figler; Chapter 9 provides good information on how to do an Informational Interview.
- *Information Interviewing*, Martha Stoodley.
- *Networking: How to Enrich Your Life and Get Things Done*, Donald R. Woods and Shirley D. Ormerod.
- *Job Search Networking*, Richard Beatty.
- *The New Network Your Way to Job and Career Success*, Ronald L. Krannich and Caryl Rae Krannich.

*Some sections of this publication were excerpted from *The Job Hunter's Guide*, a document of the Career Service Office of George Mason University.