

Informational Interviews

What is an informational interview?

An informational interview is one of the few interviews in which you are in control of the questions asked. It is a chance to learn more about a specific career without making a long-term commitment of your time or money. You can find out about the responsibilities, rewards, and problem areas inherent in a specific career by asking questions of people already established in that field.

When you begin your program of information interviewing, keep in mind that:

1. You are not asking for a job. You are simply asking for information and advice, so you are not putting this person on the spot.
2. You have the right, and a responsibility to yourself, to seek advice and information from those who can best help you.
3. Because you are interviewing them, you are in charge -- they can relax.

Why are informational interviews necessary?

Informational interviews provide valuable information to help you decide if a particular career is right for you, and if it is, how you can prepare yourself to work in that field. If you've already made a tentative career choice, informational interviews can help you to learn how to get a job in your chosen field and provide valuable insight on obtaining success.

Be sure of your motives before you decide to arrange informational interviews. Scheduling an interview for information when you really want a job interview can ruin your chances with the employer. In addition, it could make a valuable contact person hesitant to grant future requests for informational interviews.

How to conduct an informational interview

First:

You'll need to identify people who can be helpful to you -- those who are active and knowledgeable in the career field you're researching. And it's simple to do that. Just ask. Ask all the people you know if they are acquainted with anyone in your field of interest who might be willing to talk to you. Then ask if you can use their name as a reference when you contact that person.

Next:

1. PREPARE. Inform yourself about the field, the organizations, and the person you will be interviewing. Written and taped materials in libraries and reference rooms can help you.
2. PREPARE a list of the questions you want to ask, including some that you know will be interesting to answer.
3. PRACTICE by interviewing people for information whenever you get a chance (formally or informally). It's fun. You'll find that people really like to talk about themselves and their work.
4. EXPRESS interest; listen attentively; show enthusiasm and appreciation. Be aware of your non-verbal cues.

Getting started - "The Phone Call"

The format below is suggested for setting up appointments with the people you would like to interview. Arrange a personal interview if possible. If that isn't convenient, you can do informational interviews by telephone.

Hello (the other person's name). My name is (your full name). (the person who referred you) suggested that I call you because of your expertise (knowledge, background, experience) in the field of (occupation, trade, industry, profession, company) for information or advice about careers in your field.

[If calling without a reference, state how you heard about this individual, i.e., "I read about your work in" "I heard you speak at" "I know of your reputation through"]

I am interested in this field (as a possible career direction -- or whatever your reasons are). I've read and discussed it with others, and I need to know more. I would like very much to meet with you, at your convenience, for no more than 20-30 minutes, to ask you some questions. Could we arrange a time?

Remember ...

1. Organize your thoughts before calling and speak clearly.
2. Avoid annoying distractions, i.e., gum chewing, calling from pay phones, background noise from radio, TV or conversations.
3. Be friendly, sincere, courteous, and polite. Practice until you're sure your voice reflects confidence and the impression you make is professional.

Preparing for the interview -questions to ask

Prepare questions in advance. The sample questions below are offered to get you started, but you should design your questions around your personal situation and goals for the interview. Your interview will be more effective if you ask your own questions.

The informational interview is a conversation; you will not want to read a list of questions as you would from a script, but without planning on your part, the interview may lose focus and fail to provide what you need.

Also remember to be on time, dress professionally, and relax. Remember, you're in control of this interview.

Starting Out

1. How would you advise someone to start building a career in your field? Where would you start? What steps should they take? What experience will be expected? How can I get that experience? In what companies, departments, positions? What positions lead to dead ends?
2. Did you participate in a formal training program? Where?
3. What education or training is most valued? What is necessary educational background for this field? What courses are particularly valuable? What areas of knowledge are most important for advancement in the field? What degrees? Certification? What educational institutions would you suggest?
4. How did you get your start? What were some of the most important factors contributing to your success? If you were starting out again, would you do anything differently?

The Job

1. What is a typical work week like for you? What do you actually do?
2. What are some of the rewards of your occupation? Your field? What do you like most about your work?
3. What are some of the difficulties, frustrations, most frequently recurring problems?
4. How flexible can you be in this field/position? Can you work at varied hours? Can you arrange your own hours? What latitude do you have to plan your own time?
5. What are your major responsibilities in this job? What part do you play in deciding priorities?

Advancement

1. What are some typical mistakes or errors which prevent a person from advancing in this field? From succeeding in this kind of work?
2. Is there personal advice you would give a person wanting to advance in your field? Wanting to build a career?
3. What is the range of income possible for persons in this field? What is the salary structure? What is the starting salary range? The range at different levels of advancement? What benefits accrue to these positions?
4. What is developing in this field? Company? Industry? Where do you see the greatest needs? What are the most important areas in this field? The key problems, the major problems?
5. What are your projections for the future in this industry? What areas do you feel promise the most opportunity? The most growth? Where is expansion taking place? In what markets? With what products?
6. Is there a deficit of qualified personnel in any part of this field? Where is the best place to look for jobs?
7. Is most of the hiring here done on an external or internal basis?

Special Interests

1. Are there many women/minorities in this field?
2. How effective are affirmative action programs in this field? Have you seen the proportions of women/minority managers change over the past few years?
3. Is there any particular advice you would give to a woman/minority job candidate in this field?

Follow-up - After the Informational Interview

Having completed the informational interview, be sure to ask for the names of other individuals who might give you different perspectives. Also, few people in this world take the time to say thank you anymore. Don't be one of them. Say it at the end of your interview and write a thank you note when you return home -- next day at the latest.

Keep records of your discussion, including names, phone numbers, and addresses. You never know ... you may wish to talk with them again in the near future.

After each meeting, take a few moments to jot down some notes about your conversation, especially the key points. Write a short thank-you note and include a brief synopsis of these key points. Make sure the note goes in the mail within 24 hours of the meeting. The next time you talk to that person, refer to your notes to refresh your memory. As you talk to more and more people, your meeting notes will serve as a source of ideas and additional questions. It won't be long before you are feeling comfortable and competent. Too bad you can't network for a living!

When is networking appropriate?

Fledgling networkers often wonder when are the best times to meet people. The simplest answer is whenever they are available. If you're still employed, your best times will be breakfast, lunch after work, or on weekends. With personal friends and relatives, evening and weekends are probably most convenient. With business associates, you'll be better off at normal breaks in the workday.

If you are not working, then any time of the day is convenient for you! You just have to set up a time when your contact is available. Many people with office jobs, especially at management levels, can find time during the workday to talk. This is a terrific advantage for you because it allows you to meet them at their place of business, which has several good points in its favor.

Where should networking take place?

Whenever possible meet your contact at his/her place of business. There are three main reasons for this. First, when they are on their own "turf" they are likely to feel more relaxed. They think better, and come up with better ideas. Their familiar surroundings provide them with cues that help them remember key points that will be useful for you.

Another good reason, and a very pragmatic one, is that they don't have to travel anywhere to meet you, you are likely to get more of their time. Finally, and perhaps the most important of all, when they are in their own office, they have their business resources available immediately. The Rolodex or the business card file may be full of information just waiting to jump into your lap. The closer you are to those resources the better.

Maybe you think that since they are doing you favor, you ought to at least take them to lunch. Nice gesture, but it could get expensive! If they invite you to lunch, chances are they'll pick up the tab, but even then you should make it clear that you'd just as soon have a chance to see their office (plant), and you'd be glad to take a raincheck for lunch. Once you are employed, you can cheerfully buy lunch!

Summary

Networking is very useful way of keeping key people aware of your availability and of keeping yourself up to date on industry trends and employment opportunities. You can learn through networking what you'll rarely see in the newspapers. The important thing to remember in this regard is to tell everyone you meet that you are looking for a job, but ask no one directly for a job. This is hard to do, and for many people goes against their instincts, but it's a necessary skill to be learned.

Given the opportunity, most people would be pleased to help you, but you can't put them on the spot, or they'll run away fast. Your attitude is important in how you approach people. If you think that networking is simply a way to use people to help you get what you want, you'll never be able to hide that, and sooner or later people will begin resenting and avoiding you. On the other hand, if you approach networking as a way of building and maintaining relationships for their own sake, people will feel good about you and be eager to assist you in any way they can.

Your networking begins with the people you already know, and grows by means of introductions to others. Even after you are back at work, you should keep up the practice of meeting people. You never know when you may want to call them for assistance. Of course, you must remember that you will be called upon from time to time to assist others.

Networking is not just idle chit-chat. When you arrange a meeting, it's your responsibility to have an agenda of comments and questions. You have to help the other person to help you. It's ineffective and unfair to expect them to do all the work.

Meet people at their own workplace at times mutually convenient. That way you have quick access to information and resources you may need. It also gives them a chance to show off a little, and you have the chance to be introduced directly to others you may want to talk to later on.

<http://www.olin.wustl.edu/wcrc/students/networking.htm>