

## Networking in Informational Interviews

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### Introduction

One of the most effective means of acquiring useful information about a career field or an occupation is to speak with those employed in the position. Known as the “information meeting or interview,” this approach provides important information that complements printed resources. It can offer more personalized and individualized experiences and knowledge, more up-to-date information, more specific information related to a local market and can be more reflective of a particular environment. The information obtained from these meetings will further help you decide whether the occupation or field is suitable to your interests, skills and goals. In addition, it will increase your self-assurance, an essential element for the entire career development process.

Professionals in a career field are willing to share their knowledge and experiences with others, particularly college students, recent graduates and alumni. They are flattered that you are interested in their profession and would be pleased to spend time with you and discuss their careers. Unlike an employment interview, you set the agenda for the information meeting. Therefore, your preparation is crucial to the success of the meeting. Being unprepared is a waste of their time and may ruin the chances of others seeking similar information from this professional. It may also tarnish your reputation, so be prepared and dress as if it was an employment interview!

Informational Interviewing is more structured than networking, because it is a *scheduled, one-on-one appointment* with a person in your field of interest who can give you insight into the occupation and industry.

### You can:

- Explore careers, learn what a field is really like, and clarify your career goals
- Find out the skills and training needed and identify your professional strengths and weaknesses
- Expand your professional network and discover employment opportunities that are not advertised

### Steps to Follow to Conduct an Informational Interview

1. **Identify the occupation or industry you wish to learn about.** Assess your interests, abilities, values, and skills to identify the best fields to research.
2. **Prepare for the interview.** As you are the person initiating the meeting, you need to take the initiative and be prepared with questions and background information about the occupation and field. You are seeking the individual’s perspective, observances and experiences. You are seeking confirmation or contradiction of the information you have obtained from other sources. Read all you can about the field prior to the interview. Research the industry and company and decide what you would like to learn. Prepare your resume, business card, and a list of questions to ask.

**Identify people to interview.** Start with who you know. Then reach out to people in professional organizations, social media like LinkedIn, Chambers of Commerce Directory of Members, the yellow pages, and on company directories. Call companies and ask for the name of the person in a specific job title.

**Prepare a target speech.** 30-second commercial. Be brief. Say who you are, what you do, and why you are there.

3. **Arrange the interview.** Contact the person by telephone or by a letter or email followed by a call. Ask for 15-30 minutes of their time. Explain that you are seeking information about a particular occupation or career field, and you have already conducted some research. The reason for the meeting is to obtain a professional's perspective. Be flexible, as you are the one requesting the meeting. Do not expect them to rearrange their schedule to accommodate you. To add to your experience, whenever possible, conduct the meeting at the person's place of work. This will add a dimension to your research as you experience an example of a work setting that is related to the occupation. If not possible, settle for the phone if necessary. Also, provide your telephone number should they need to reschedule. Give yourself sufficient time for this process. It is not unusual or uncommon to have to wait several weeks to obtain an appointment, nor is it unusual for the appointment to be rescheduled. Be gracious about delays and any interruptions that might occur during the actual meeting.

A sample opening presentation follows. Adjust the actual dialogue to fit your circumstances.

"Good morning [name of person]. My name is \_\_\_\_\_. I am a student at Albright College and am considering a career in [name the career field - travel, banking, marketing, etc]. I have read about the field and am interested in speaking with professionals who could provide their personal perspective. I would be interested in any information or advice you could share with me. Could we arrange a brief meeting, at your convenience?"

4. **Don't ask for a job.** Instead, ask for advice. People are much more open and willing to give you time if you tell them you want to ask them a few questions about the industry, the company, or their career.
5. **Confirm your appointment.** Call the day before.
6. **Conduct the interview.** Dress professionally. Be on time, polite and professional. Use your questions. Respect their time. When you arranged the meeting, you asked for only 30 minutes of their time, so be conscious of the clock. However, do not be surprised if the meeting lasts longer. As the 30 minute time approaches, make an appropriate comment about this subject and judge the professional's response to whether or not the meeting is drawing to a close.

**Build rapport.** Show interest and ask questions. It's okay to show some personality, but be professional. People are more likely to refer you if they feel they "know" you. They don't want to put their reputation on the line for a "stranger."

**Before leaving.** Ask the person to suggest names of others who might be helpful to you. Ask for their business card. Ask them to look at your resume. Thank them!

7. **Send a Thank You.** Remember, courtesy goes a long way in helping to establish and maintain your reputation. Don't forget to send a letter or email expressing your appreciation for their time and information.
8. **Keep a Networking Log.** More than keeping business cards. Make note of who referred them to you, the date you met, a few key points that were discussed, suggestions they made, names of referrals, the date you sent a thank you note, the date you made follow-up contact.
9. **Maintain your network.** Send a periodic email or phone call every month or two. Keep it brief. Provide an update about your job search or new job. Ask how things are going or ask about a project they mentioned. Don't overdo it. If you are in contact too frequently or your contacts are always lengthy or demanding, they will get sick of you.
10. **Prepare for Your Next Informational Interview.** It is important to meet with several professionals and evaluate the information in a larger context. Any one person's perceptions could be shaped by unusual experiences that are outside the range of typical practices in the profession.

### Informational Interviewing Questions

When the contact comes out to meet you, introduce yourself. Thank your contact for his or her willingness to meet with you, and reemphasize that you are there to learn and gather information about his or her career field.

Below are some typical informational interview questions. Select a dozen or so you feel will be useful to you. You may not ask all of the questions on your list. Sometimes questions will pop into your head spontaneously.

No matter what questions you ask, respect their time by sticking to the allotted time. Keep it conversational and friendly so you don't come off sounding like you're there for a job interview, but also focus on your contact's job and career field

- What is your job like? A typical day? Week? What percentage of your time is spent doing what?
- What are the duties/functions/responsibilities of your job? How much variety is there from day to day?
- How did this type of work interest you and how did you get started?
- How did you get your job? What jobs and experiences have led you to your present position?
- How did you prepare for this work?
- What were the keys to your career advancement?
- Why did you decide to work for this company? What do you like most about this company?
- How does your company differ from its competitors? Why do customers choose this company?
- Does the company encourage and pay for employee graduate degrees? Other professional development?
- Is there a philosophy of the company or organization and, if so, what is it?
- What are the greatest pressures, problems, or frustrations in the work?
- What interests you least about the job or creates the most stress?
- Are there busy and slow times or is the work fairly constant?
- What do you find most satisfying? Most dissatisfying? Most challenging? Is this typical in this field?
- What is a usual work week like? Do you have work obligations or expectations outside of the ordinary work hours?
- What are the typical entry-level job titles and functions? What are some related occupations?
- What sorts of changes are occurring in your occupation? How rapidly is the field growing?
- What are the major qualifications or skills to be successful in this occupation?
- How can I evaluate whether or not I have the necessary skills for a position such as yours?
- How would you describe the working atmosphere and the people with whom you work?
- What can you tell me about the corporate culture?
- What types of training do companies offer persons entering this field? Is graduate school recommended? An MBA?
- What abilities or personal qualities do you believe contribute most to success in this field/job?
- What are the advancement opportunities?
- How does a person progress in your field? What is a typical career path in this field or organization?
- With the information you have about my education, skills, and experience, what other fields or jobs would you suggest I research further before I make a final decision?
- How would you assess the experience I've had so far in terms of entering this field?
- Do you have any advice for someone interested in this field/job? Are there any written materials you suggest I read? Which professional journals and organizations would help me learn more?
- Do you have any special word of warning or encouragement as a result of your experience?
- What are the important "key words" or "buzz words" to include in a resume or cover letter when job hunting in the field?

### **Closing the Interview**

- Did I leave out any important questions that would be helpful in learning about the job or occupation?
- [If you feel comfortable and it seems appropriate:] Would you mind looking at my resume?
- Can you suggest other people with whom I might talk to who have similar jobs?

### **Questions for Students or Career Changers**

- Can you suggest some ways a student could obtain this necessary experience?
- What kinds of courses are most valuable in order to gain skills necessary for success in this occupation?
- What educational program is recommended as preparation?
- What special advice do you have for a student seeking to qualify for this position?
- What experiences, paid or unpaid, would you encourage for someone pursuing a career in this field?
- What courses were the most valuable to you in your work? What would you recommend for me?
- What are the employment prospects in this geographic area? Where are the best employment prospects?