



Informational Interviewing

WHAT IS AN INFORMATIONAL INTERVIEW?

An informational interview provides you the opportunity to speak with someone working in a job, field or industry you are considering for your career. The premise is simple:

If you really want to know what it is like to work in a specific job, field or industry, you should talk to someone actually working in that specific job, field or industry and get a first-hand perspective.

Informational interviews are great ways to get the inside scoop on career paths you are considering, develop your network of professional contacts, and get advice that will help you make better career decisions.

In an informational interview, you are the interviewer; the person with whom you are meeting is the interviewee. As the interviewer, it is your job to drive the conversation.

WHY SHOULD YOU CONDUCT INFORMATIONAL INTERVIEWS?

There are four primary objectives for informational interviews:

1. To gather information about a job or career area you are considering, so that you can make a sound decision as to whether or not you wish to pursue that career path;
2. To seek advice regarding how you can best prepare to enter or advance in this field/profession;
3. To ask for assistance regarding entering or advancing in the field/profession after you have determined that you actually wish to do so; and
4. To request referrals to other people in the field/profession that might be valuable contacts for your career search.

In order to accomplish any of these objectives, you must build credibility with the person you are interviewing. You have to give the person a reason to help you.

There are three primary reasons people will be willing to help you:

1. They believe you deserve their assistance.
2. They genuinely want to see you succeed.
3. They are confident you will not make them look bad if they refer you to a friend or colleague.

There are two primary reasons people will not be willing to help you:

1. They do not know you or know enough about you to care if you succeed.
2. They are afraid you might make them look bad if they refer you and do not want their names or reputations connected to you or your candidacy.

The Bottom Line: People will help you when you have earned their trust and respect – when you have credibility with them – and they believe their assistance will not be wasted. People will not help you if they believe you are unprepared or do not know what you want, or if they believe investing their time and reputation in you (e.g., referring you to friends and colleagues) will come back to haunt them. You have to earn the opportunity to benefit

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from their assistance – it will not be given to you just because you asked.

HOW TO SCHEDULE INFORMATIONAL INTERVIEWS

You should conduct informational interviews with people who can offer you current and relevant advice about career paths or professions you are considering.

Begin by creating a list of the types of jobs and careers you wish to explore.

The only way to learn about specific career paths is to ask specific questions, and the only way to be able to ask specific questions is if you have specific jobs and careers you wish to explore. Make a list!

Once you've identified jobs and careers of interest, reach out to people you already know.

Finding people to interview is not as hard as you might think; call, email or otherwise contact your friends, family members, professors, parents of friends, and others who already know you (people with whom you already have some credibility). They can be great resources if you ask the right questions.

Use social media (like LinkedIn) to identify potential interviewees.

Social media sites can be extremely powerful online professional relationship-building resources. Facebook is great for keeping up socially with friends; LinkedIn is more effective for building professional relationships with current and potential colleagues. Do not treat your professional interactions on LinkedIn like your personal contacts on Facebook. LinkedIn is for professional communication. By the way, if you are not on LinkedIn, you should be!

Once you have a LinkedIn account:

- Complete your profile. Provide a summary of your qualifications, list the internships and jobs you have held, enter information on the degree you are pursuing, get and give recommendations, and join relevant groups. Your LinkedIn profile will serve as your online, digital presence; your online brand. It allows others on LinkedIn to get to know you and what you offer.
- Search LinkedIn groups for potential interviewees, and use LinkedIn to initiate contact and ask for meetings with prospective interviewees.
- Remember - don't depend solely on social media to find potential interviewees. Call, email and otherwise contact those friends, family members, professors, parents of friends, friends of parents, and others who already know you. They are a great place to start.

Ask potential interviewees for specific assistance and referrals:

"I would like to speak with someone working in arts administration. If you know someone working at a local museum, theater or art gallery, would you be willing to refer me to them?"

"I'm trying to learn more about teaching elementary school; do you know any elementary school teachers I might be able to speak with?"

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"I'm really interested in learning more about careers in residential real estate. Do you know any realtors I might be able to visit with? Could I speak with the agent who helped you purchase your home?"

The more specific and direct the question, the better they will be able to determine if they can be of assistance. Remember - some will be able to assist; some will not.

When you are referred to someone, be sure to list the person who referred you in your outreach. For example:

"My advertising professor Gretchen Murphy suggested I contact you. I am in her interactive advertising class this semester and am trying to learn more about search engine marketing and search engine optimization because I hope to work in that field when I graduate. I am going to be in New York March 16-20 during our spring break. Would it be possible for us to meet for coffee while I am in town?"

or

"Mary Spencer suggested I call you. I go to college with her daughter, Sara. I'm interested in learning more about careers in residential real estate, and I know you helped the Spencer family purchase their current home. Would you have time for a brief visit? I'd love to learn what it's like to work in residential real estate."

In addition to reaching out to people you already know, you should try to contact people doing the jobs you think you want to do. So, where do you find these people? In industry directories, on professional association and other industry-specific websites, at professional association meetings, in trade journals, at conferences, in alumni directories, and on professional and social networking websites. Email, phone or visit in-person – just ask. For example:

"I'm a journalism student at Missouri and I want to work in the magazine industry in layout and design. Could I visit with you briefly to get your advice and perspective on the industry?"

"I'm going to be graduating in May with my degree in biology and want to pursue a career in pharmaceutical sales; could I get your advice and talk about how you got into that business?"

"What advice would you have for a college student who thinks she wants to work in entertainment? I am a Radio-TV-Film major, and I am trying to learn more about what I can be doing while I'm still a student to prepare for a career in film production."

Make sure you are asking for something specific. Do not ask for too much time (ask for no more than 15 to 30 minutes). Do not try to turn an informational interview into a job or internship interview. Remember, you are

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interviewing them; they are not interviewing you.

QUESTIONS TO ASK DURING AN INFORMATIONAL INTERVIEW

Good Starting Questions

You are the interviewer; it is your job to ask the questions. You need to be prepared or you run the risk of wasting your interviewee's time, and if you waste his/her time, forget about getting any referrals from them. Here are some good starting questions to get the ball rolling:

- "Would you tell me how you got into this profession/field?"
- "What do you like most about working in this profession/field?"
- "What do you find most frustrating about working in this profession/field?"
- "What are the most important skills/characteristics one needs to be successful in this profession/field?"
- "What do I need to know that they don't teach in college? Can you describe your career path for me? How typical/unique has your career path been?"
- "What do you advise I do while I am in college to be prepared to enter this field/profession?"
- "What do you wish someone had told you while you were still in college/starting your career?"
- "What are the most typical entry-level jobs in your industry/with your company?"
- "What do you look for in entry-level candidates?"
- "How do you see your profession/field changing in the future?"
- "How will these changes impact job opportunities in this profession/field?"
- "If you had it to do all over again, what might you do differently?"
- "What other professions/fields do you think I should consider in addition to this one?"
- "What are the most common mistakes you see young professionals make early in their careers?"
- "What professional association affiliations do you find most valuable and why?"
- "How have you seen the process of finding a job change over the years?"
- "What advice do you have for someone considering a career in this profession/field?"

Throughout the informational interview you will get to know the interviewee and he/she will get to know you, both by the questions you ask and by the way you answer his/her questions. They may ask for a copy of your resume in order to get to know you and your qualifications better, but don't be concerned if they don't. Simply be prepared to provide a resume if requested. Throughout the interview you will be building credibility and rapport with your interviewee.

Good Finishing Questions

Once you have established rapport and credibility with your interviewee, you will be able to ask for assistance. For example:

- "Thank you for your advice about <subject>. If I would like to learn more about <subject>, whom else

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would you suggest I contact? May I tell them you referred me to them?"

- "Can you tell me a little about how your company uses interns? If I wanted to apply for an internship with your firm, how and when should I apply? To whom should I apply? Would you be willing to introduce me to the person in charge of interns?"
- "I've been reviewing the employment and salary data the College collects. It indicates that entry-level salaries in this field are in the <median salary range> range? How consistent is that entry-level salary range with what you are seeing here in <city>?"
- "What are the near-term job opportunities with your company? How can I best position myself to compete for these opportunities?"

Next Steps Questions

Prior to concluding an informational interview, make sure you discuss and confirm your next steps in staying connected with this person. Here are two good questions to help you define the terms of your professional relationship with this person:

- "I really appreciate the advice you have given me today..."
- "Would it be alright for me to contact you periodically to get your advice on my career?"
- "I would like to stay in touch with you. Would you mind if I connected with you on LinkedIn?"

FOLLOWING UP ON YOUR INFORMATIONAL INTERVIEWS

Upon concluding an informational interview, send your interviewee a thank you note to show your appreciation for the time he/she invested in you. This thank you note will be the first of your follow up communication with this person. It should not be the last! It will be your job to stay in touch and maintain the relationship. Depending upon the individual and your relationship with that individual, you may touch base once a month, every few months, or just once or twice a year. You may be seeking additional advice, sharing an interesting article, referring a friend or colleague, or seeking direct assistance.

Networking/professional relationship building is a two-way street. You have to both give and receive to maintain a relationship, and you have to regularly exchange information to nurture the relationship. Do not just call or email when you need something. Reach out when you have something to offer, as well.