
Career & Employment Center

Informational Interviewing

Spending time with one of your network contacts in a focused conversation designed to provide you with key information to launch or boost your career.

Informational interviewing is designed to produce information you need to choose or refine a career path, or to learn how to break in and find out if you have what it takes to succeed. According to Richard Bolles, author of “What Color is Your Parachute”, it is a way to “try on jobs to see if they fit you.” It is not the same as a job interview, but it is a very effective means of networking, and one that could lead to a job offer. However, it should *never* be used for the purpose of obtaining employment.

Why Conduct Informational Interviews?

Choosing a career is an important decision. The choice you make will affect your income potential and job satisfaction. It makes sense, therefore, to talk to people in the field you are considering to get a realistic view of what you can expect. Informational interviewing gives you a perspective of work that goes beyond the limitations of job titles, allowing you to see what skills are required and how you might fit into that work setting. Thus, you have greater flexibility in planning for the future.

Side Benefits

Informational interviewing is comparatively low-stress compared to job interviews, so you gain confidence in talking with people while learning what you need to know. Because you are only asking for information, not a job, you are in control of the interview. You have the opportunity to make personal contacts among management-level personnel and possibly gain insight into job opportunities before they are advertised. Expanding your network of professional contacts now will also be of great benefit to you later. Remember, it is who you know (or get to know) that gets you a job. It’s never too early to establish contacts.

Steps to Successful Informational Interviewing

1. Identify the Occupation or Industry You Wish to Learn About

Assess your own interests, ability, values and skills and evaluate labor conditions and trends to identify the best fields to research.

2. Prepare for the Interview

Read all you can about the field. Decide what you would like to learn about the occupation/industry. Prepare questions.

3. Identify People to Interview

Start with a list of people you already know – friends, relatives, fellow students, present or former co-workers, supervisors, neighbors, etc. Professional and business organizations, the Yellow Pages, organizational directories, and public speakers are also good resources. You may also call an organization and ask for the name of the person by job title or department.

4. Arrange the Interview

Contact the person to set up an interview by telephone, or a letter followed up with a phone call. It is also possible to have someone who knows the person make the appointment for you. If the appointment was scheduled weeks in advance, you may wish to confirm the interview times, dates and locations on the day before the scheduled interview. Leave your phone number so your interview subjects can reach you if rescheduling becomes necessary.

5. Conduct the Interview

Dress appropriately, arrive on time, be polite and professional. Remember, people are generally interested in talking about what they do and how they do it. But don't waste their time or your time. Be prepared! Read about the career area and organization of the person you'll be interviewing. Know exactly what kinds of information you want by having a list of questions in mind. Generally, don't ask something routine that is readily available elsewhere.

6. Remember

Should you bring a list of questions with you, be familiar enough with the questions you want to ask so you will not continually need to refer to it during the interview. This will help you achieve a more natural, relaxed and spontaneous conversation with your interview subjects which is likely to elicit more honest, candid and complete information than a straight questions-and-answer interview format.

What Questions Should You Ask During the Interview?

1. (Background) Tell me how you got started in this field. What was your education?
2. (Work environment) What are the daily duties? Working conditions?
3. (Problems) What are the toughest problems you deal with?
4. (Life style) What obligation does your work put on you outside the work week?
5. (Rewards) What do you find most rewarding about this work, besides the money?
6. (Salary) What salary level would a new person start with? Fringe benefits? Other forms of compensation?
7. (Potential) Is there a career ladder or opportunity for advancement? How does it work?
8. (The industry) What trends do you see for this industry in the next 3 to 5 years?
9. (Advice) How well-suited is my background for this field? When the time comes, how would I go about finding a job in this field? What experience, paid or volunteer, would you recommend?
10. (Demand) What types of employers hire people in this line of work? How do people find out about these jobs?
11. (Hiring decision) What are the most important factors used to hire people in this field? (Education, past experience, personality, special skills)
12. (Other sources of information) Can you name a trade journal or professional organization that might have information about this career area?
13. (Referral) Can you recommend other people I should talk to? May I have permission to use your name when I contact them?
14. Do you have any other advice for me?

After the Interview

Immediately following the interview, record the information gathered. Be sure to send a thank-you note to your contact within a few days of the interview.

Always analyze the information you've gathered. Adjust your job search, resume and career objective, if necessary.

Sample Phone Script to Request an Informational Interview

Hello. My name is John Smith. I'm exploring the field of _____ as a possible career. I understand that your firm is involved in this, and I would like to talk to you or another member of your staff/firm about the field. Do you have a time that this would be possible? The interview would take about 20 minutes.

The person may be reluctant or say, "We have no openings at this time." If so, explain that you are not looking for a job. Stress that you are in the process of career exploration and want to research this particular field by saying:

I'm investigating various career areas so that I can get a realistic view of the local job market or career potential in this field.

If an appointment is set, thank them and re-establish the date and time of your meeting:

Thank you, Mr. Smith. I look forward to seeing you Friday at 2 o'clock. May I have directions to your office?