

INFORMATION INTERVIEWING

"Here is a startling statistic: One out of every 200 resumes results in a job offer. However, one out of every 12 informational interviews results in a job offer"

- Katherine Hansen (Author of "A foot in the door: Networking your way into the hidden job market")

What is Information Interviewing?

An information interview is just what it sounds like – an interview designed to gather information. It is an opportunity to “test” a career by going to talk to a person who is actually doing the work you would like to do. The purpose is to gain current “insider” information on various aspects of working in the field including typical entry level positions, educational background required, keys to success, typical career paths, work environments, etc. All students and alumni, regardless of the stage of their career development, can benefit from this career-search tool.

What are the benefits to conducting Information Interviews?

- Explore: Learn the realities of working in a particular field and/or for a particular organization
- Tap into the hidden job market: Gain “insider” information on the hiring practices for a particular organization, learn how to break into and succeed in your chosen industry, and discover the names of other organizations who may be hiring
- Practice that can be applied to job/internship interviews: Talk with professionals one-on-one – learn the language of the industry
- Build your network: Get connected to other professionals – start building relationships

Who to contact?

- Begin by identifying the organizations and people that work in a setting you like, work in career areas that interest you, and/or work in specific jobs in specific organizations of interest. Consider the following resources when trying to identify contacts:
- Your Networks: You may already know someone who can answer your questions. Consider family, friends, neighbors, former employers/supervisors, teachers, relatives, etc. Connect with anyone you or your family knows who may be a good source for an information interview or a resource for a referral.
- Trade & Professional Associations: Research associations relevant to your field of interest (e.g., Public Relations Society of America). Get involved in a local chapter – this is a great way to connect with professionals in the field.
- People in the News: Look for people whose interests are similar to yours. Read relevant magazines and newspapers. Take notes as you watch television and listen to the radio. These are contact names of people who are doing what you want to do – go talk to them.
- Speakers on Campus: Interesting people -- experts in their field – occasionally come to campus to deliver lectures and present programs. Do not be afraid to approach these people after their talk to introduce yourself and ask for their business card.

How to arrange an interview?

- Use phone, email or a formal letter to introduce yourself to the contact and to explain your request.
- Introduce yourself and tell the person how you got their name. If possible, use a mutual acquaintance or the Career & Professional Development office as a bridge for your contact. (e.g., I am Lisa Smith, a junior at Ursinus College. I was given your name by...)
- Explain your request to schedule a meeting to gather information about their career. If questioned, indicate clearly that you are not seeking a job from them but merely conducting career research which will help you make better decisions. Schedule a 20-30 minute appointment in person (optimal) or by phone at their convenience. If the present time is too busy for the person you contact, ask when would be a better time in the future.
- Be careful to not let your phone call to schedule the appointment turn into the actual interview. Be sure and ask for directions and parking information.
- Letter and email requests for appointments are most effective if followed up by a telephone inquiry to confirm an appointment time.

Preparing for the Information Interview

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! Know your interests, skills, values and how they relate to the career field represented by the persons you're interviewing. Research the interviewee's career area and organization. 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. Check the Career & Professional Development office for print materials. The Internet can provide resources on the organization (e.g., the organization's homepage) and on career fields (e.g., www.wetfeet.com).

Possible Questions – What do you say?

The following are some topics areas and sample questions to consider incorporating into your interview. You will need to adapt them to fit your career field, needs, interests, and what you already know about the person and his/her field.

1. Career field/Industry

Examples: What are the various types of jobs available? What types of training do companies offer those entering this field? How is the economy affecting this industry? What entry-level jobs offer the best opportunities for learning? What is the typical entry-level salary in this field? What trends do you see for this industry in the next 3-5 years? What is the most important thing that someone planning to enter this career should know?

2. Interviewee's background and job

Examples: How did you get started in the field? What was your educational background? What is a typical day for you? A typical week? To what extent is the job what you expected? How much flexibility do you have in determining how you do your job? Do you find your job exciting or boring? Why? What is most rewarding about the job?

3. Problems/Challenges on the Job

Examples: What are the toughest problems you deal with? What problems as a whole does the organization have? What constraints such as time and funding make your job more difficult? What do you do if you cannot solve a problem on your own?

4. Career Path

Examples: What jobs and experiences have led you to your present position? What were the keys to your career advancement? Where do you see yourself in 5 years? If your work were suddenly eliminated, what kinds of work do you feel prepared to do?

5. The Organization

Examples: Why did you decide to work for this organization? What do you like most about this organization? Is turnover high? Do they promote from within? What does the organization do to contribute to its employees' professional development? What are your co-workers like? How would you describe the morale of people who work here? What is the best thing about this place?

6. Referral Questions

Based on our conversation today, what other types of people do you believe I should talk to? Can you name a few of these people? May I have your permission to use your name when I contact them?

After the Information Interview

- Always send a thank-you letter to the person you interviewed. Sum up the significant things you learned, and let them know that their help was appreciated. People appreciate and remember courtesy.
- Record the information that you obtained: names, comments, and new referrals for future reference.
- Evaluate your experience. How did you manage in scheduling and conducting the information interview? How sufficiently did you prepare? Did you get the information you sought? What information do you still lack? Do you need to interview more people in order to get more than one biased viewpoint or additional information? What do you need to do next?
- Make appointments to interview the referrals obtained during the interview.

Tips for handling the interview

- Do not exceed your requested time, but be prepared to stay longer in case the contact indicates a willingness to talk longer.
- Dress as if it were an actual job interview. First impressions are always important.
- Get to your appointment a few minutes early and BE COURTEOUS to everyone that you meet - secretary, receptionist, etc.
- Take the initiative in conducting the interview. The interview is in your ball park. You ask the questions, you interview the person. Ask open-ended questions which promote a discussion and cannot be answered with one word responses.
- Remember that you are seeking information, not a job.
- Once inside the organization, look around. What kind of working environment is there-dress style, communication patterns, sense of humor, etc? Is this a place you would want to work?