

# The Informational Interview

The Informational Interview is one of the many job search strategies you can utilize to identify potential careers and career opportunities. It is one of the best methods for obtaining the career information needed to conduct an effective and successful job search.

An informational interview is a conversation with an expert or person knowledgeable in a career field in which you want to learn more about. Different from a job interview, this interview puts you in charge. You take initiative to contact the prospective employers and you ask the questions. This is an especially useful tool if you are not very familiar with a particular field of work and want to learn more.

It is very important, however, before targeting someone for an interview to identify your career interests and to have an idea of what you want to do for work. Once you have identified your career-related skills and developed your interests, you need to become more familiar with the available jobs that closely match your abilities. Here is when the informational interview comes in handy.

The following are just a few of the benefits that an information-gathering interview can provide to you:

- A realistic view of the career field.
- Professional contacts and increased confidence in interacting with professionals/employers.
- Advice on coursework that may be helpful for entry into a particular field.
- Suggestions for part-time and summer jobs that develop useful skills and experience.
- Tips on what to emphasize on a resume and during a job interview.

To the person granting the interview:

- Gives them an opportunity to reflect on their work life.
- Share insights.
- Have another person value and respect their expert perspective and experience.

## *Preparing for the Interview Process*

As mentioned above, the first order of business is to have a solid working knowledge of your values, skills and interests. Secondly, you need to do preliminary research about careers, so that your limited time in an interview can be put to good use. Read publications found in the Career Resource are of the Office of Career Services. Locate all the available written information and become aware of the tasks that people perform at their jobs. Think in terms of your abilities and interests and prepare questions that will help you determine if a job is a good match with who you are. Read everything you can that might provide background for your questions: for example company literature, periodicals (especially trade publications and professional journals) and current books. If you have trouble finding information, ask a reference librarian.

## *How to Obtain Informational Interviews*

Once you have identified your career fields of interest, you need to obtain names of specific individuals, in those fields to be interviewed. These names can be obtained through:

- Career Counselors, professors, friends, classmates and relatives who may be able to recommend professionals in a variety of fields. For referral to alumni in your field of interest, be sure to check with the Career Services Office.

- Resource directories and/or the Yellow Pages, may be used to pinpoint organizations of interest. Contact persons within these organizations can be professionals presently employed in your career field of interest, or managers of departments in which you are interested in working. Avoid Personnel Offices, since you are seeking information, not a job at this time. You may need to contact the main switchboard of an organization to secure the names of appropriate individuals.

### ***Determining Your Purpose***

You should not begin calling prospects or interviewing until you have a clear purpose, and can articulate it to anyone. To learn everything you can about financial analysis is unfocused and too broad a subject. Many individuals spend years learning all they can about a subject. Try to narrow down your subject to a more specific one, and focus on a certain aspect, for example, financial analysis, at XYZ Corporation, and how it compares to other investment firms. You may also be interested in an expert's view of emerging trends in that field, or maybe a picture of a particular organization's culture? Would you like an objective evaluation of your credentials for a specific type of position? Are you interested in learning about the "hot" geographic areas of new markets in your field? You should be able to state your purpose in one or two concise sentences. When you are clear and can articulate your intention, you will be surprised at how many people will be willing to meet with you.

These are additional questions you should consider and be able to answer before contacting prospects particularly if the informational interview becomes a job interview:

- Who you are – a very brief pitch, includes – school, major and a statement on your experiences.
- What you want – your career objectives.
- Why you can do the work – concise and specific statements of you related skills and experience.
- Why you want his type of work – statements about what motivates you to pursue this work.

### ***Scheduling Appointments***

When calling to schedule an appointment, you should cover three areas briefly:

- Self – introduction.
- Purpose for seeking an appointment.
- Arranging a mutually convenient meeting time.

You might want to write an outline or script of what you plan to say on the phone. This will decrease your anxiety and ensure that you obtain the necessary information. Emphasize that you are not inquiring about a job vacancy; you are only seeking information. Indicate that you need only 20 to 30 minutes of the person's time. If you are calling as a result of a referral, state your contact person's name early on in the conversation. Express the need for a personal meeting versus a phone conversation. However, do not decline if the person is unable to meet in person, a phone conversation will do.

You may want to contact individuals by letter. Include the same information as in a phone request. Type all letters in a business style format and double-check for errors. Always indicate that you will be calling his/her office on a specific date (usually one week after you mail the letter) to arrange for a convenient appointment time. Makes sure that you adhere to this timetable! It's also a good idea to keep copies of all letters.

## ***The Actual Interview***

Be sure to dress appropriately and arrive on time or a little early. You should initiate the conversation since you are the interviewer. Make sure you adhere to your original time request, unless it is obvious that the person is willing to spend more time with you. Always ask for referrals to other appropriate individuals in the field or related organizations. Remember this is an information-gathering and advice seeking interview; you should not ask about job vacancies during the interview. However, you can ask if the person is aware of anyone that might be able to talk with you.

As you begin interviewing, you can build your information base and improve your technique. Schedule interviews so that those that count most are later on in your process. You will be better informed and will have the chance to refine your questions. By practicing with a friend first you can get a feel for how to direct conversation and listen more effectively.

## ***Informational Interview Do's and Don'ts***

### *Do*

*Be on time*

*Ask for referrals*

*Prepare for the interview*

*Be professional, respectful, flexible*

*Send a thank you letter*

*Ask intelligent questions*

*Share your purpose up front*

*Practice interviewing with friends before you begin with your contacts*

*Ask open-ended questions*

*Take notes, discreetly*

***LISTEN***

### *Don't*

*Be late*

*Ask for a job*

*Grill your interviewee*

*Overstay your welcome*

*Overstep boundaries*

*Ask yes/no questions*

*Ask trick questions*

*Read facts from printed material during interview*

*Monopolize the conversation*

## ***Basic Information Interview Questions***

Prepare a list of questions to ask. Some suggested questions are listed below. Please *revise* and *modify* these questions to meet your own needs for information

1. How did you get into this field, position or job? (What is your education, background, training?)
2. What do you like best about it? (What are your greatest rewards?)
3. What skills do you find most helpful in this job?
4. What training do you wish you had not missed before starting? (And what training did you have?)
5. What personal qualities should someone have to be successful in this field?
6. What satisfaction do you find in this job? What really excites you in this career?
7. What are some of the frustrations you face in this position? (What are the major problems you face?)
8. What is a typical workday like for you?
9. What would you do if you were in my position, and was looking to get into this field (position, job)?
10. What should I know about future trends in this field?
11. What problems/issues are common to this job/field?
12. What is the biggest challenge you encounter here?
13. What sort of challenges, needs or issues are you aware/facing in this field, in general, and in this company, in particular?
14. What are the latest developments in this field?
15. What, if anything, is expected of an employee, not specifically listed on the job description?
16. What impresses you about this organization?
17. Are there any books or articles you might recommend?
18. If you were hiring for positions in this field, what background, qualities, skills would you seek in an applicant?
19. Do you have any suggestions as to how I could better prepare myself for a job in this field (practical experiences, further coursework, etc.)?
20. What are your career goals? What other types of employment opportunities do you see this job preparing you for?
21. What is the employment outlook for people trying to enter this field in the future?
22. How does your job affect your leisure time? (How do you resolve those conflicts?)
23. Is there anyone else you can refer me to for more information, and would you mind if I used your name?
24. Is there any other advice you might be able to give me as I pursue this area of interest?
25. As you look at my resume, is there any area that you feel I need to strengthen? How might I go about doing that?

## ***Follow-Up***

Follow-up is as important in informational interviewing as it is for a job interview. Remember, this person took time from their busy schedule to talk to you. The courteous and professional thing to do would be to follow up with a thank you letter. In the letter you can elaborate on things you learned from your conversation and let them know you will be following up on any leads they may have given you. Be brief and to the point. Keep it to no more than three or four paragraphs at most. Make sure you do whatever you state you'll do (i.e. "I will contact Mr. Jones at ABC Company, as we discussed."). This shows you're responsible, proactive and professional.