

Informational Interviewing

Informational interviewing is about gathering first-hand information, advice, and contacts, beyond what you can learn online. It's well worth the time and effort, can be fun, and has several purposes. It puts you in direct contact with people who know your field from the inside. It helps you to "reality test" a company, position, or career to see if it is a match for you. It puts you on site where you can experience the conditions and culture that go with that profession; ask about entry-level positions you may want to pursue. It places you with people who are doing what you want to do long-term, and allows them to connect you with others who may help facilitate your search. And it's a great job search strategy for finding the hidden job market.

GUIDELINES:

Have conversations with friends and people you already know.

Ask for suggestions of people you could contact in a special field. You are in the process of developing a story of who you are and the work you want to do. As you gain experience and confidence, widen your circle of contacts.

Hit the internet and research your field of interest.

Library resources include trade journals, newspaper articles, magazines (look at periodical index for field of interest), career reference books, telephone directories, etc.

Read. Watch. Listen.

Pick up brochures, newsletters, watch bulletin boards and TV. Find a free lecture, talk, or seminar. You will begin to discover many ways to find out about your field of interest.

Design a telephone script for local/phone interviews.

"Hello _____,

My name is _____ and _____ suggested I give you a call. I'm currently exploring the field of _____ as a career choice/finding a position in the field of _____. I'd like to request time to meet with you, to hear more about your experience in _____.

I would appreciate 30 minutes (or an hour—ask for what you need within reason) of your time. Is this something you'd be willing to consider? What date and time will work for you? I'd like to send you my bio and resume. May I have your email? I'd also like to send you some initial questions if that's alright with you (this helps you "set agenda" for the meeting)."

Design the questions you want to ask. (See sample questions.) Think through what you really want to know and formulate your own questions as well. You'll find that people enjoy talking about their work and reflecting on it, especially if you are genuinely interested and curious. Ask if it's alright to take notes.

When you arrive, check with the person at the time of the interview itself to see if, in fact, if they still have the time to see you. Adhere to the time you established unless the person invites you to stay longer.

Always ask for additional people you might contact. Ask if you can use that person's name to introduce yourself in a call. Request a business card.

Express thanks after the interview for time and information shared. Write a note of thanks the following day. Send an email to each person who offers their time. Send handwritten note of thanks to anyone with whom you wish to establish or continue contact.

When an interview goes well, and you feel a good rapport with the person you interviewed, consider requesting a 1-3 day shadowing experience. You're asking the person to allow you to quietly observe her/him in what s/he normally does day to day (if the nature of the work is confidential, this may not be feasible) and briefly ask a few questions before you leave each day. Be sure to send a thank you for a shadow experience too!

CAREER INFORMATION INTERVIEWING: SOME SUGGESTED QUESTIONS

Preparing for the position

- What credentials or degrees are required for entry into this kind of work?
- What types of prior experience is absolutely essential?
- How did you prepare yourself for this work?
- Is an advanced degree, such as an MBA, useful in your company?

Understanding the industry

- What trends affect your company's direction?
- Who are the company's competitors and how are their actions predicted or handled?
- What are the professional organizations in the industry?

Learning about the function

- Describe how you spend your time during a typical work week.
- What skills or talents are most essential for effective job performance in this job?
- What are the most satisfying aspects of your work? What are the most frustrating?
- What are some of the challenges and decisions you face in your position? And what skills are required for handling them?
- If you were to leave this kind of work, what factors would contribute to your decision?

Balancing work/life

- What obligations does your work put upon your personal life?
- What hours do you normally work? Is overtime common and, if so, is it regular, seasonal or sporadic. Is there flexible scheduling?
- How often do people in your line of work change jobs?

Managing your Career

- If things develop as you'd like, what are your career goals?
- How rapidly is your present career field growing?
- How would you describe or estimate future prospects?
- If the work you do was suddenly eliminated, what different types of work do you feel you could do?
- What types of employers hire people with your background; what are some representative job titles?
- What is the salary range for this type of position in this region?

Searching for positions in the field

- How do people find out about available positions? Are they advertised on websites, by word of mouth, by the human resource department?
- If you were to hire someone to work with you today, which of the following factors would be most important in your hiring decision and why: educational credentials; past work experience; specific skills, talents; applicant's knowledge of your organization, your department, your job or other?

Advising professionals new to the field

- How well suited is my background for this type of work?
- Can you suggest other related fields?
- What types of experiences, paid employment or otherwise, would you most strongly recommend?
- If you had it to do over again, what would you do differently to prepare for this occupation?

Formulating your own questions:

- What do you really want to know about in your field, your position?
- Make it into a clear statement.
Example: I want to know what it's like the first year on the job.
- Turn it into a question. Specific questions lead to specific answers. General questions lead to general answers.
Example: Day one, what should I be ready for?
About the work ethic: When do people arrive, leave, and work on weekends? Is there a flow chart of people and positions? Would you be willing to show me one?