

## **Informational Interviews**

An informational interview involves talking with people currently in the field to better understand an occupation or industry -- and to build a network of contacts in that field.

Informational interviewing is designed to produce information that you need to choose or refine a career path, learn how to break in and find out if you have what it takes to succeed. Informational interviewing is the process of spending time with network contacts in a focused, but friendly, conversation that provides you with key information; it's "trying on jobs to see if they fit you."

When you are considering entering a certain career path, it just makes sense to talk to people in that field -- yet most people never do. They trust their professors, textbooks, or romantic notions about professions gleaned from TV or movies. When you really think about it, you miss out on an incredible opportunity if you fail to research your career field before jumping into it.

### **Potential Results of Informational Interviews**

You accomplish several things during informational interviews:

- You obtain a great deal of information about your career field and the skills needed to do that job effectively. You gain a perspective of work that goes beyond the limitations of job titles, allowing you to see not only what skills are required for the job but how you might fit into that work setting. Thus, you have greater flexibility in planning options.
- You have the opportunity to make personal contacts among management-level personnel.
- You gain insight into the hidden job market (employment opportunities that are not advertised).
- You become aware of the needs of the employers and the realities of employment. First-hand and current information allows you to learn what happens on the job beyond the understanding provided through your course work or other outside research. This exposure could also result in your becoming a more impressive job candidate.
- Because informational interviewing is comparatively low-stress, you gain confidence in talking with people while learning what you need to know. Informational interviewing provides an opportunity to meet with potential employers before the more stressful (for both parties) job interview.
- Because you are only asking for information, you are in control of the interview; you decide which questions to ask. Later, evaluate the acquired information for personal use.
- This opportunity will expose you to a variety of jobs and personalities of companies making the search for your "niche" that much easier.
- It is an opportunity to learn where you might fit into a particular organization.

### **Identify People to Interview for Informational Interviews**

Ask yourself what it is you want to know and then figure out who has an investment in knowing that sort of information. Start with lists of people you are familiar with: friends, fellow students, present or former co-workers, supervisors, neighbors, etc. Professional organizations, the Yellow Pages, organizational directories, and public speakers are also good resources. Locate alumni, people you've read about, or people your parents know. You may also call an organization and ask for the name of the person by job title. There's no one in the world who you can't try contacting. People like to help students out with job information. One student whose dream job was to run a Fortune 500 company called the president of Levi Strauss & Co., asked for an informational interview, and got it.

You should be prepared. Research the organization, person you'll be speaking with, product produced by the organization, etc. The more you know, the better you'll be able to formulate questions pertaining to the organization and job, and also the more confident you will feel about your ability to communicate effectively. Write to organizations for brochures and pamphlets for additional information.

Resources include:

- Company Website
- Annual Reports
- Other Company Literature
- Library Reference Material
- University Career Service Office

### **Scheduling the Informational Interview by Letter or Phone**

An introductory letter, written much like a cover letter without the job pitch, is a great way to get your name out there. An introductory letter should be typed. Your letter should include:

- A brief introduction about yourself;
- Why you are writing to this individual;
- A brief statement of your interests or experiences in the person's field, organization or location;
- Why you would like to talk with the individual. Be straightforward; tell him/her you are asking for information and advice.
- The last paragraph of the letter should always include a sentence about how and when you will contact this person again.

Proofread all correspondence and save copies.

Make sure to follow up the letter as you said! Usually this follow-up involves a phone call to set up a phone appointment or an informational interview. Never expect the person to phone you. If you have difficulties contacting the person, ask the receptionist for a convenient time to phone again.

You might also be successful making a direct call. People who grant informational interviews are generally willing to share 20-30 minutes of their time to explain their field. Do remember to be flexible, as the professional may have prior commitments. Ask if s/he is available to talk, and ready to schedule a convenient time when you could call back. Sometimes the person will talk over the phone, but often s/he will invite you to his or her workplace. Face to face interviewing is best when possible because you'll learn more, gain confidence and make a stronger connection with the person.

### **Preparing for an Informational Interview**

The day before the interview, call to confirm your appointment with the contact person. If you have questions regarding the location of the contact's office, this is the time to ask. Plan to arrive 10 minutes early for your interview. Carry a small notebook and pen. Be polite and professional. Refer to your list of prepared questions; stay on track, but allow for spontaneous discussion.

### **Dressing Appropriately for an Informational Interview**

Because 90 percent of all jobs are never advertised, you will uncover job openings that never make it to the newspaper or employment office. Thus, be prepared to make a good impression and to be remembered by the employer.

Dress as you would for a regular job interview.

### **Be Prepared to Take Notes at an Informational Interview**

You don't need to write down everything, but there may be names, phone numbers or other information that you may want to remember.

Be enthusiastic and show interest. Employ an informal dialogue during the interview. Be direct and concise with your questions and answers and do not ramble. Have good eye contact and posture. Be positive in your remarks, and reflect a good sense of humor.

### **Bring Your Resume to an Informational Interview**

Bring a copy of your resume along with you. Try to find out about specific characteristics or qualifications that employers seek when hiring. If you feel comfortable doing so, you may ask the person you are interviewing to critique your resume.

### **Questions to ask at the Informational Interview**

You have arrived and are greeted by the individual at the front desk. When the interviewee comes out to meet you, introduce yourself. Thank your contact for his or her willingness to meet with you, and reemphasize that you are there to learn and gather information about his or her career field. Use an informal dialogue during the interview.

Below are some typical informational interview questions. Remember that you won't have time to ask anywhere nearly all of these questions, so target the ones you feel will be most useful to you personally. Pick a dozen or so that get at what you most want to know. Ask only those questions that are appropriate and important to you. You will convey your motivation and interest to the employer by acknowledging that the information the interviewee is giving you is important.

Feel free to skip some -- even most -- of these questions or to substitute questions of your own -- as long as you don't come off sounding like you're there for a job interview.

- What is your job like?
  - A typical day?
  - What do you do? What are the duties/functions/responsibilities of your job?
  - What kinds of problems do you deal with?
  - What kinds of decisions do you make?
  - What percentage of your time is spent doing what?
  - How does the time use vary? Are there busy and slow times or is the work activity fairly constant?
  
- How did this type of work interest you and how did you get started?
- How did you get your job? What jobs and experiences have led you to your present position?
- Can you suggest some ways a student could obtain this necessary experience?
- What are the most important personal satisfactions and dissatisfactions connected with your occupation? What part of this job do you personally find most satisfying? Most challenging? What do you like and not like about working in this industry?
- What things did you do before you entered this occupation?
  - Which have been most helpful?
  - What other jobs can you get with the same background?
  
- What are the various jobs in this field or organization?
- Why did you decide to work for this company?
- What do you like most about this company?
- Do you find your job exciting or boring? Why?
- How does your company differ from its competitors?
- Why do customers choose this company?
- Are you optimistic about the company's future and your future with the company?
- What does the company do to contribute to its employees' professional development?
- How does the company make use of technology for internal communication and outside marketing? (Use of e-mail, Internet, intranets, World Wide Web page, video conferencing, etc.)
- What sorts of changes are occurring in your occupation?

- How does a person progress in your field? What is a typical career path in this field or organization?
  - What is the best way to enter this occupation?
  - What are the advancement opportunities?
  - What are the major qualifications for success in this occupation?
- What were the keys to your career advancement? How did you get where you are and what are your long-range goals?
- What are the skills that are most important for a position in this field?
- What particular skills or talents are most essential to be effective in your job? How did you learn these skills? Did you enter this position through a formal training program? How can I evaluate whether or not I have the necessary skills for a position such as yours?
- How would you describe the working atmosphere and the people with whom you work?
- Is there a basic philosophy of the company or organization and, if so, what is it? (Is it a people, service or product oriented business?)
- What can you tell me about the corporate culture?
- What is the average length of time for an employee to stay in the job you hold? Are there incentives or disincentives for staying in the same job?
- Is there flexibility related to dress, work hours, vacation schedule, place of residence, etc.?
- What work-related values are strongest in this type of work (security, high income, variety, independence)?
- If your job progresses as you like, what would be the next step in your career?
- If your work were suddenly eliminated, what kinds of work do you feel prepared to do?
- With the information you have about my education, skills, and experience, what other fields or jobs would you suggest I research further before I make a final decision?
- How is the economy affecting this industry?
- What can you tell me about the employment outlook in your occupational field? How much demand is there for people in this occupation? How rapidly is the field growing? Can you estimate future job openings?
- What obligations does your employer place have on you outside of the ordinary work week? What social obligations go along with a job in your occupation?
  - Are there organizations you are expected to join?
  - Are there other things you are expected to do outside work hours?
- How has your job affected your lifestyle?
- What are the salary ranges for various levels in this field? Is there a salary ceiling?
- What are the major rewards aside from extrinsic rewards such as money, fringe benefits, travel, etc.?
- From your perspective, what are the problems you see working in this field?
- What are the major frustrations of this job?
- What interests you least about the job or creates the most stress?
- If you could do things all over again, would you choose the same path for yourself? Why? What would you change?
- What are the educational requirements for this job? What other types of credentials or licenses are required? What types of training do companies offer persons entering this field? Is graduate school recommended? An MBA? Does the company encourage and pay for employees to pursue graduate degrees?
- Does your work relate to any experiences or studies you had in college?
- How well did your college experience prepare you for this job?
- What courses have proved to be the most valuable to you in your work? What would you recommend for me?
- How important are grades/GPA for obtaining a job in this field?
- How do you think my university's reputation is viewed when it comes to hiring?
- How do you think graduation from a private (or public) university is viewed when it comes to hiring?
- How did you prepare for this work? If you were entering this career today, would you change your preparation in any way to facilitate entry?
- What abilities or personal qualities do you believe contribute most to success in this field/job?
- What are the typical entry-level job titles and functions? What entry level jobs are best for learning as much as possible?

- Who is the department head or supervisor for this job? Where do you and your supervisor fit into the organizational structure?
- Who else do you know who is doing similar kinds of work or uses similar skills? What other kinds of organizations hire people to perform the functions you do here? Do you know of other people whom I might talk to who have similar jobs?
- Do you have any advice for someone interested in this field/job? Are there any written materials you suggest I read? Which professional journals and organizations would help me learn more about this field?
- What kinds of experience, paid or unpaid, would you encourage for anybody pursuing a career in this field?
- What special advice do you have for a student seeking to qualify for this position?
- Do you have any special word of warning or encouragement as a result of your experience?
- These are my strongest assets (skills, areas of knowledge, personality traits and values):\_\_\_\_\_. Where would they fit in this field? Where would they be helpful in this organization? Where might they fit in other fields? Where might they be helpful in other organizations?
- How would you assess the experience I've had so far in terms of entering this field?
- [If you feel comfortable and it seems appropriate:] Would you mind taking a look at my resume?

The whole interview could be spent finding answers to the dozen or so questions you decide to ask. But as you practice and move further toward your target, questions will probably pop into your head spontaneously based on what you need to know.

Pay careful attention to what's said by the person you interview. Ask questions when something isn't clear. People are often happy to discuss their positions and willing to provide you with a wealth of information.

Try to keep the conversation friendly, brief, and focused on the contact person's job and career field.

### **Build the Network at the Informational Interview**

Most people like their investments to pay off. Most people will feel good about your staying in contact with them. You do not have to call or write every week. Keep these people informed about your progress. If you have done your job well, they will be interested in your final choices. Ask for your contact's business card and exchange one of your own.

### **Ask for Referrals at the Informational Interview**

Before leaving, ask your contact to suggest names of others who might be helpful to you and ask permission to use your contact's name when contacting these new contacts.

### **Always Send a Note of Thanks After the Informational Interview**

Be sure to send a thank-you card or letter within one to three days after the interview. This communication is an effective way to keep in touch and to be remembered by people. Let them know they were helpful and thank them for the time spent.

As a nice touch, quote something that the resource person said back to them, word for word. Ask the person to keep you in mind if they come across any other information that may be helpful to you in your career research. Include your address and phone number under your signature.

### **Record, Analyze, and Evaluate the Informational Interview**

For possible future reference, keep a list of all the people you have interviewed or plan to interview. You may even plan to keep a special notebook or cards with interview notes on your questions covered. Include the main things that you gained from each interview. This file will be a rich source of information as you conduct your occupational exploration.

Immediately following the interview, record the information you gathered. Now you know how to get the inside scoop on your dream job. This activity alone can lead to your dream job or connect you to a mentor, because employers are very impressed by students who have the savvy to analyze the experience.

In evaluating the interview and making the best use of the acquired information, ask yourself the following questions:

- What did I learn from this interview (both positive and negative impressions)?
- How does what I learned fit with my own interests, abilities, goals, values, etc.?
- What do I still need to know?
- What plan of action can I make?

### **More Helpful Hints about Informational Interviews**

Some final hints about informational interviews:

- Be yourself.
- If you ask for 20-30 minutes of a person's time, stick to the limit.
- Take all information given with a grain of salt. Don't settle for just one interview about a given area of work; a broad information base is essential.
- Avoid impressions about an area of work based solely on whether the person interviewed was likeable or the surroundings attractive.
- When in an interview, ask what you want to know but really let the person talk because you might discover and acquire information about unanticipated areas of employment.
- Don't ignore personal feelings; what you naturally gravitate toward or away from is very important.
- Find out if the interviewee has any insight on the qualifications necessary for a position such as the one you are discussing.
- Talking with people doesn't have to be a formal process or one you practice only when job hunting. Chat with people casually -- on a plane or bus, while waiting in lines, at social gatherings, etc. Since most people enjoy talking about their work, curiosity can open many doors.

Source: [http://www.quintcareers.com/informational\\_interviewing.html](http://www.quintcareers.com/informational_interviewing.html)