

Informational Interviewing

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Skillfully used, informational interviewing is one of the most valuable of all sources of occupational information. While it may cover some of the same ground as printed material, it presents opportunities for an intimate and flexible inspection of the job field unmatched by written sources. The informational interview communicates the firsthand experiences and impressions of someone close to the occupation, and is directed by your questions.

An informational interview is less stressful for both you and the employer than a typical job interview. You are the one in control. Questions can be asked that may not be strategic during a first interview (i.e., questions regarding salary, benefits, vacation). You can discuss what is done on a day-to-day basis and relate it to your own interests and feelings. Beyond the advantages of gaining valuable career information, the informational interview provides the opportunity to build self-confidence and to improve your ability to handle a job interview.

You should regard each interview as a business appointment and conduct yourself in a professional manner. If you have made clear, in advance, the explicit purpose of your interview you will, in all probability, find your contact an interested and helpful person. Remember the appointment time and appear promptly for your interview. You should neither be too casually dressed nor overdressed. Regular business attire is appropriate. Be sure you know the name of the person you are to see, the correct pronunciation of his/her name, and the title of his/her position.

Because so much ground may be covered in the informational interview, individuals sometimes take notes during the meeting. A limited amount of note-taking is justified provided that your contact is agreeable and that you do not permit this activity to interrupt communication between the two of you. Sketch out a brief outline of the topics covered and the information gained as soon as possible after the interview. This will require only a few minutes, and will insure that you remember the important points discussed. Later, working from your outline, you can construct a more detailed report of the interview.

Write a thank you note to the people you have interviewed. Report back to them if you have followed up on any suggestions. By building strong rapport with career contacts you enhance the likelihood that they will offer assistance with your job search when you are ready for that phase of your career planning process.

Informational Interviewing Game Plan:

During the course of a given day, you have many opportunities to learn from people about their careers or jobs. You will find most people more than willing to talk about the subject at hand-themselves. The process of talking to people who have jobs that interest you is called informational interviewing. The following guidelines will help you with an informational interview.

➤ **Know What You Want to Accomplish**

The primary objectives of informational interviewing are to:

- Investigate a specific career field.
- Assist in narrowing options.
- Obtain advice on where you might fit in.
- Learn the jargon and important issues in the field.
- Broaden your network of contacts for future reference.
- Create a strategy for entering your field of interest.

➤ **Conducting the Informational Interview**

Before the interview:

- Learn as much as you can about the organization.
- Write down the questions that you wish to ask.
- If possible, learn something about the person with whom you will be interviewing.
- Dress professionally.
- Bring copies of your resume. (Distribute only upon request.)
- Arrive 10-15 minutes before your appointment.

During the interview:

- Restate your purpose and why you are talking with this particular person.
- Be prepared to initiate the conversation, since you are the interviewer.
- Adhere to the original time request of 20-30 minutes.
- Ask for referrals to other appropriate individuals in the field or in related organizations.
- Keep in mind that this is an information-gathering and advice-seeking interview, not an employment interview.
- Let the individual you are interviewing bring up the discussion of specific job vacancies.

After the interview:

- Send a thank-you note and keep the individual you have interviewed posted on your progress.
- Keep the door open for future contacts with this person.
- Evaluate your style of interviewing. What could you have done better? Use what you have learned when you conduct your next interview.
- Evaluate the information you received. How does it relate to your plans?

➤ **What to Ask**

Make a list of questions you would like answered about a career field or organization. Your questions will yield the most information if you use open-ended questions to engage your contact in conversation. Listed below are sample questions to help you prepare for your interview.

Questions About the Career Field:

- Types of positions most often found in the career field.
- General skills needed to perform responsibilities (e.g., organizing, supervising, writing).
- Specific skills needed to do the job (e.g., academic, experiential).
- Recommendations for training or education required to perform this kind of work.
- Negative aspects of field, for example, "What would you change if you could?" or "If you had it to do over again, how would you have done it differently?"
- Typical entry-level position in the field.

- The outlook for entry-level professionals.
- Alternative methods to gain entrance to the field (e.g., part-time, mid-career change, volunteer work or other kinds of training).
- The future of this field in terms of new and expanding opportunities.
- Other information that may be helpful (e.g., critique of resume, job-seeking tactics, names of other professionals in the field).

Questions About the Organization:

- Short- and long-term goals of the organization such as growth, new products or services, and expansion of facilities.
- Philosophy of the organization and types of training programs available.
- Descriptions of the various positions they have held between entry-level and present job.
- Description of the individual's present job (as defined in the job description as well as what is done beyond the job description).
- Description of typical career path from entry-level to top management.

Summary:

Informational interviewing is an effective tool in your approach to career planning. It can be one of your most valued strategies in gathering information and establishing contacts as you begin or continue to build plans for the future. Like all other components of career planning, informational interviewing requires planning and focus on your part. Make the interview a benefit for you and your career.