

RESEARCHING YOUR FUTURE: INFORMATIONAL INTERVIEWS

Definition: The informational interview is a technique for finding out about jobs and making contacts. You can find out a lot by reading, but the best information comes from talking to **people**. How do you talk to people to find out about jobs? The answer is simple: don't ask for a job, ask people about **their** jobs. 'Informational interviewing' is a formalized, structured approach for this process.

Philosophy: Informational interviewing **works** for two important reasons: first, people love to talk about themselves! They don't get to do it very often, especially to a truly interested audience. And second, they generally remember the folks who helped them along the way and are eager to offer the same help to others, now that they have an opportunity to do so. Yes, there will be people who are unable or unwilling to make time to see you. Simply move on, it's not personal.

Objectives: Get real information from real people about real jobs – the things you really need to know to make an informed decision about whether a career, a company, or a job is really what you want. Form a network in an area where you really need one, with people who can help you get the information you need and the work you want.

A Happy Result. Yes, sometimes – often – informational interviewing results in a job! Or the right lead to a job! Every contact counts – you never know where the key contact will come from.

Informational interviewing is one of the most powerful tools in a job search. Many candidates have found that they gained crucial information, polished their interviewing skills, established a network, and made important contacts through these appointments. All it takes is a few telephone calls!

Ten Key Steps in Informational Interviewing

1. **Questions.** Make a list of questions. Be prepared with a clear set of questions for the interview. You will need a 'basic' list of questions that you will adjust and add to for specific conversations. Some sample questions are included in this document.
2. **Network.** Find someone in your area of interest with whom to make a contact. Once the contact is made, be specific about your purpose and intent – that you are looking for information, NOT A JOB.
3. **Appointment.** Make an appointment to talk to this person. Set a specific time and date. Offer to go to the person's office. Do not ask the person to go out of her/his way for you.
4. **Research.** Do some research about the company, department and function the person is associated with, so that you can ask intelligent, informed questions. Your research can be done by reading written material, searching the Internet, and by talking to other people.
5. **Biography.** Be sure you have prepared and practiced your 'one minute story.' Are you ready to answer the 'Tell me about yourself?' question in a very short, coherent and meaningful way, that will highlight the key factors you need him to know and will also lead quickly to the point of your visit? Your interviewee is certain to ask.
6. **Meeting.** Be on time for the appointment. Do not stay longer than the time scheduled unless the interviewee requests it. Present yourself in the meeting in a professional manner, as if you were applying for a job. The contact may be invaluable later, so do not miss the opportunity to make a good impression. Although there are differences of opinion, it is probably best to not bring a resume with you, consistent with the fact that this is not a job interview. You can always send one later.
7. **Referrals.** Close the interview by thanking the person for the time and the valuable information provided. ALWAYS ask for names of one or two other contacts and whether you can use the interviewee's name as the referral source.
8. **Study.** Take good notes. Treat this effort like a research project, with carefully recorded, organized, and filed data. Compare the data from this interview with other data sources. Record similarities and differences.
9. **Thanks.** Send a brief thank you note. It is common courtesy and it helps keep the door open for future contact.
10. **Expand.** Contact the referrals you received in the interview and begin with Step 1.

Calling to Arrange the Informational Interview

When you want to get information about a kind of work, it is very helpful to speak with others who are currently doing that work. Making the call requesting that someone meet with you can feel awkward, and so many job seekers do not take advantage of this excellent tool.

If you have targeted a specific company where you want to work, DO NOT go to that company for your informational interviews. Instead, talk to people in the same industry but who work for different companies. For example, if you would like to work at the Marriott Hotel, hold informational interviews at other hotels. This way, by the time you are ready for a real interview at Marriott, you will have learned about the job titles in the hotel industry, the typical career path, the education needed, typical salaries, and you will be familiar with the buzz words for that business. You will also have become acquainted with several people in the industry . . . you will be forming a network.

Here are some sample 'scripts' that people have used successfully to arrange informational interviews:

TO THE RECEPTIONIST

R: This is [company name] Company, how may I direct your call?

You: I am hoping you can assist me. I am doing some career research and want to talk to a sales representative. Would you direct me to someone who might be able to answer some questions for me?

R: Career research? I can tell you we aren't hiring right now.

You: I am not expecting you to have a job for me. I'm still in the research stage. Is there a sales rep would be able to answer a few questions for me about this kind of sales?

R: Perhaps Joe Smith could answer just a few questions, let me connect you to his office.

You: Thank you very much.

OR

You: Hello, my name is _____ . I wonder if you would help me. I am learning about sales careers – I'm not looking for a job - and I would like to talk to someone in your sales department who would be kind enough to let me talk to him for a few minutes on what his job is like. Who do you suggest I talk to?

R: Maybe Mr. Smith could answer your questions, let me connect you to his office.

IF CONNECTED TO A 'REAL' PERSON

You: Hello, my name is _____ . I am doing some research into [industry] sales and I'm calling to see if we can arrange a time when I could come in and talk with you about your career in the industry. I can assure you that I am not trying to get a job with your company, just learn about sales in the industry. I would appreciate hearing about your career and getting your advice. What I am suggesting would take only 20 minutes or less of your time. Is there a time in the next two weeks that we could meet?

Sometimes, the person will respond that he does not have the time for a meeting, but will spend a few minutes right then on the telephone. So, be sure to have your questions ready when you make the calls.

If an appointment can be made, follow up with a note to confirm the date and time, and include a telephone number where you can be reached in case of a schedule change.

TO VOICEMAIL

The chances are good that you will be connected to a voicemail system. This can be helpful because you can write out a script ahead of time, and leave a **clear, brief** message.

You: This is [name]. I am researching sales in [name] industry as a possible career choice and I am calling to set up a brief meeting with you to get information and advice from your perspective. I can assure you that I am not looking for a position with your company at this time, only general information. If it would be possible to meet with me for about 20 minutes, please contact me at [telephone number]. Repeat your name and telephone number. Thank you very much.

OR

You: Hello, this is [your name]. I wonder if you would be kind enough to let me drop by and interview you for about 20 minutes about the kind of work you do. I would be asking you questions like, "What is your typical day like?" Would you be able to see me for a few minutes this week or next week? If you would be kind enough to do this, please leave me a message at [telephone number] and tell me what is a good time to reach you by phone so we can set a date. Again, my name and number are _____. Thank you very much.

In each case, if you have been referred to the party, mention the referring person's name.

Often, people are dealing with very tight work schedules and may not return your call. Call again! You might catch him at his desk, or, you might need to leave another message. Mention that you know the value of his time and will be very careful not to abuse it.

Someone may offer to meet you outside of business hours. It is acceptable to meet in a restaurant or coffee house, but do not accept an invitation to anyone's home.

When you have your interview, be sure to be on time, dress in business clothing, and have several questions prepared ahead of time. It is suggested that you do not offer your resume. It may be requested, and you can always send it later.

When 20 minutes have passed, mention that your time is up and begin to leave. Sometimes, the person will so enjoy talking to you that he will give you more time, and that is fine, but be sure to offer to finish in the allotted 20 minutes.

Before you leave, be sure to ask for referrals. A simple question like, "Is there anyone else that it might be beneficial for me to talk with?" can result in some good leads for additional contacts.

Send a letter of thanks as soon as possible. Email is acceptable.

INFORMATIONAL INTERVIEWING – SAMPLE QUESTIONS	
Your issue	A sample question to ask
Background	How did you get into your current position?
	Would you make the same career choice again? Why? Why not?
	What type of training have you had, if any?
	What has been your career path? What other fields have you worked in over the years? If you have changed, what led to the change?
	What other experience or training have you had that were helpful to you?
Personal Satisfaction	What other occupations did you consider before deciding on this one?
	What is a typical day like for you?
Company, industry, management 'culture'	What do you find satisfying in your job? What are some of the frustrations?
	What is your company/department like? How many people? Functions? Challenges?
Career development	What further training would add to my qualifications for this type of position?
	What training or credential is valued in this industry?
Barriers	What do you see as the career path for you in the future?
Trends	What, if any, are the barriers to entering this field today?
Networking	What is happening in the industry that you anticipate could impact the work that you do? [perhaps suggest one based on research]
Flexibility/autonomy	Are there professional journals in this field I might be reading?
Interaction	How much flexibility do you have in defining your job and in scheduling and pacing your work?
Success	Would you say you deal primarily with people, things, ideas, or data?
Money	What skills and key characteristics do you need to be successful in this job?
Related Fields	If I considered a career in this field, what kind of total compensation range could I expect?
Advice	Are there related fields I should explore?
Personal satisfaction, things to consider as you study the career	What advice would you have for someone considering your field or similar position?
Referrals	Ask yourself about the tone, mood, and feeling of the organization you are visiting. Can you identify with and support their philosophy, product, and service?
Follow up	Are there other people that you think it would be beneficial for me to talk to? May I use your name as the referral source?
	If I have more questions, would you mind if I call you?