

Informational Interviews

An informational interview is an opportunity to start a conversation with someone who works at a department that you're interested in, or someone on your desired career path. I like to call it relationship building because this implies making authentic connections with people who could become friends, mentors, or maybe future colleagues. And real conversations are where the magic is.

Benefits of Informational Interviews

You accomplish several things when you conduct an informational interview.

- 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 also 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 department and the realities of employment. First-hand and current information allows you to learn what happens on the job beyond the understanding provided through research. This exposure not only provides personal understanding but it could also result in your becoming a more impressive job candidate in the future.
- Informational meetings are comparatively low-stress because you are the interviewer. This is a great opportunity for you to gain confidence in talking with people while learning what you need to know.
- Because you are only asking for information, you are in control of the meeting; you decide which questions to ask. Later, evaluate the acquired information for personal use.
- It is an opportunity to learn where you might fit into a particular organization.

Secrets to Success

1. **Confirm.** At least 24 hours in advance of your scheduled phone call or meeting, confirm with your interviewee. This shows that you respect the person's time and that you are taking this opportunity seriously.
2. **Be on time.** This is just as important for a phone call as it is for an in-person meeting. If you have agreed to 2pm, call at 2:00pm on the nose. Again, it's a matter of respecting the other person's time.
3. **Do your research.** It's really irritating when someone asks to speak with me and then his or her first question is, "Can you tell me about what you do?" A simple Google search will lead you to my (or anyone's) LinkedIn profile, Twitter feed, website and all of the articles and blog posts I've written. This opening question isn't a smart use of the time you have to gain valuable career advice.
4. **Clearly and concisely explain your situation.** In most cases, the person you are interviewing won't know much about you. So it's a great idea to start the call with a brief (one-to two-minute) introduction to who you are and what you're looking for.

If you're not totally sure what you want to do, it's fine to say that you're not sure yet, but do give the person some indication of the fields you're interested in. For example, "I'm currently looking at positions in public relations and marketing and would be open to other opportunities as well."

5. **Prepare questions in advance.** I recently spoke to a staff member who had prepared about 5 questions to ask me in a 30-minute phone call, which struck me as the perfect number. She clearly had specific issues she wanted to discuss and I really respected the fact that she had prepared so thoroughly.
6. **Show that you're listening.** Remember that you are the interviewer in this situation, so it's important to be a great listener. You want your interviewee to do most of the talking so you can gain as much wisdom as possible. This means repeating back some of the highlights of your interviewee's advice and jotting down some action steps that you can share with the interviewee at the end of your call. For instance, perhaps the interviewee recommended a book to read or a particular department to research.
7. **Set (and Respect) Time Limits.** Limit your appointment to 20 minutes. The person you meet will be impressed by your focus and meeting management skills.
8. **Ask How You Can Help Them.** People I meet in informational interviews who ask what they can do for me always stand out. Don't forget you have much to offer to others no matter what stage of career you are in.
9. **Buy Coffee.** No one expects to be rewarded for giving an informational interview. But if you planned to buy coffee anyway, why not include a local gift card for a cup of coffee in your thank-you note. You will create terrific good will.

Sending Invitations

After including a brief introduction of who you are and where you work, below are some sample phrases to use in your invitation when requesting an informational meeting. Keep in mind that this should be a brief email invitation, no more than 1-2 paragraphs.

1. I have three specific questions on XYZ that I would appreciate getting some insight on over a cup of coffee. May I ask for 20 minutes of your time?
2. I'm new to this field, and have great respect for the work you have done, particularly in [something] and [something else]. I...
3. I would like to hear your career story and ask a few questions about your career path.
4. I would really value your input and professional advice.
5. I would really love the chance to talk to someone who can offer personal insight on [this position, this department]. Would it be possible for me to sit down with you to ask why you went in this direction with your career and what steps you took to reach this level of success? As a [something you have in common], I'd really value your advice.

Build your confidence requesting and conducting informational meetings with people who have the advice, information, and referrals you need.

Questions to Ask

Sample Informational Interview Questions

Remember, the average informational interview lasts for 20 to 30 minutes. Select the questions that will provide answers most important to you.

Questions – Changing Careers

- Currently, my career is (fill in your career). How easy or difficult do you think it will be to make a transition to your career/industry?
- My current career utilizes the following skills most (list skills): Do you feel that any of those skills would be transferrable to your field?
- What would be most helpful in making the transition to your career field?
- What are my biggest obstacles to transition to your career field?
- Is there any additional training I would need to transition to your field?
- What is the best way for me to gain experience in your field, without taking major steps backward from the level I've achieved in my current career?
- What skills do you think I'm lacking and need to develop to transition to your career?
- How would hiring managers in your career view someone in my current field?
- What are the greatest challenges in your career?
- Do you feel the transition from my current career to your career field is realistic? If not, why?

Questions – Career Field: Preparation

- Does your work relate to any experiences or courses you took in college?
- How well did college prepare you for your career?
- What classes proved to be the most valuable to your career?
- If you were a college student again, how would you prepare better?
- How important was your GPA in obtaining a job in this field?

Questions – Your Contact's Job

- Is there something you wish you'd known or a skill you wish you'd had starting out in [fill in the industry]? Or, is there something you wish you had done differently starting out?
- What are the major components of your job?
- What part of this job do you find the most satisfying?
- What's your biggest challenge in this role?
- How do you see your job changing in the next 10 years?
- If you could go back and do anything different in your career, what would it be?
- What are some of the toughest situations you've faced in your job?
- I noticed that you've worked at [company A] and [company B]. How did your career path take you to your current job?
- How many hours do you work? Are you able to balance your work and family life?
- What have you done that sets you apart from others in your career?

Questions – Seeking Advice and Referrals

- What is the best way to obtain a position in this career field?
- What do you wish you'd known before you entered this field?
- How can I assess if I have the skills needed for a position like yours?
- Do you have any words of encouragement or warning as a result of your personal experiences?
- What should I do to prepare myself for trends and changes in this field?
- Do you have any advice or words of warning, as a result of your experience?
- Who else would you recommend that I speak with about this career?
- What advice can you give me to escalate my job search?
- Would you be willing to answer more questions by phone in the future?
- How would you react if you received a résumé like mine for a position in your career field?

Follow up and Analysis

Send a "Thank You" Note

Be sure to send a thank-you card or email within one to two days after your meeting. The sooner you send one, the better to stay on that person's radar screen and show that you appreciated his or her time. Let them know they were helpful and thank them for the time spent. A handwritten note is a nice gesture, too, but given the speed of the world today, I generally prefer an email thank you note following an informational interview.

As a nice touch, quote something that they said in the meeting 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.

Keep in touch

If someone has agreed to an informational meeting, that person now has an investment in your success and wants to hear how you're doing as your job search continues. Sharing action steps is also a fantastic way to set up the expectation of a follow-up conversation. Tell the interviewee that you will be in touch as you accomplish the tasks he or she has suggested. While you don't want to overdo it, it's absolutely appropriate to follow up with this person in a few ways:

- As mentioned, let the person know that you have taken action on his or her suggestions.
- Connect on LinkedIn with a personalized connection request that can serve as another thank you note (for example, "Thank you again for taking the time to speak with me last week. I look forward to keeping you posted on my job search!").
- Be sure to inform this person on your career progression. Everyone wants to feel that they contributed in some way to your success.
- Often times many people forget the basics (like being on time). I advise people that being 15 minutes early is truly being "on time" as it gives them a moment to collect their thoughts and also demonstrates their respect for the interviewer's time.

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 notes on the questions you covered. Include the main things that you gained from each meeting. This file will be a rich source of information as you conduct your career exploration. Immediately following the interview, record the information you gathered.

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

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

