Informational Interviewing

What it is... Informational interviewing is an often overlooked, but excellent research and networking tool to help you gain insight into your future. By setting up a meeting with a professional, you can learn more about the field you are interested in, or in a company you might want to work for. Specifically, this informal discussion can help you:

- Provide focus to, or redirect you in the development of a career path
- Begin to establish, or help you expand your network of professional contacts
- Learn more about strengths and inherent drawbacks of a position or an industry of interest – from a current and local perspective
- Gain knowledge of industry jargon and insight into a company, organization, or institution
- Strengthen your poise and communication skills
- Identify next best steps regarding job-search strategy and get advice and information regarding hiring trends
- Improve your job search strategy… resume writing, cover letters, strategy development all become easier when you know more and have a clear goal in mind

What it is not... Informational interviews are not Job Interviews. Most people like helping others break into the field and enjoy talking about their job or industry, but part of why people agree to grant informational interviews is that there is no expectation that a job request will result.

How do I Set up an Informational Interview?

Before you begin, set up clear objectives. After assessing your skills, interests, values, and personality, you will be able to narrow your focus. It's time to learn more about a position and the corresponding industries. Identify the specifics of what are you hoping to accomplish.

Identify who might be a good candidate. List people you know and the types of connections they may have. Even if they are not in a field of interest, they may know someone who is. Campus resources can be very helpful…Faculty, Coaches, Staff, The Career Services Office, and the Alumni Relations Office are excellent starting points. Contact employers and trade or professional groups directly – news articles, magazines, TV interviews, or company websites may provide names of potential interviewees.

Do your homework. Once you've identified who you will be talking to, take time to research the type of job the person is doing, and learn as much as you can about the industry and company in which the person works. Doing your homework will help you gain a background understanding and will help you when you have to make your initial contact and when you choose interview questions that will highlight you as an intelligent and professional individual.

Make Contact. Depending on how you access names, it may be worthwhile to write a letter of introduction (or email) detailing your request and when you will follow up by phone. Make sure in your phone conversation that you identify:

- Who you are and why your calling
- How you got his or her name
- Clearly state that you are looking for information, not a job
- Ask for 20-30 minutes of their time – at a time and place that is convenient for them

Develop a list of questions. Based on all you have learned, develop a list of 15 to 20 questions. Focus on open-ended questions that allow the interviewee to provide you with expanded insight vs. questions that will get a yes or no response. Realize that you will not get through all of your questions in 20-30 minutes, so choose well and adapt as you go.

Do a mock interview. For most people, this is not a natural activity. It may be worthwhile to practice your contact approach and the actual interview ahead of time. Choose someone who will be able to give you good feedback and strategy options. This is a great time to visit or contact your Career Services Office.

Dress professionally. Remember that people like working with people who appear to be like them… dress similar to the way a person working in the office would dress if they were hosting a group of peers.

Bring copies of your resume (Distribute only if asked!) Remember, this is not a job interview.

Arrive 5-10 minutes early.

Conducting the Interview

- Reintroduce yourself, your goal for this meeting, and how you chose this person
- Be ready to initiate… you are the interviewer
- Be conscious of time – even if it's going well, respect the 20-30 minutes you requested
- Get names of other professionals who the interviewee thinks may be willing and able to share insights
- Show interest… be positive…smile…affirm!

Potential Questions

Role Oriented Questions

- How did you get interested in this field?
- How did you get this job?
- Describe a typical day/week.
- What do you spend most of your time doing?
- What do you enjoy most about what you do?
- What is your least favorite part of this job?
- What training or experiences do you think have helped you most?
- Is there any training or experience that you wish you had had prior to beginning in this job?
- Where do you see yourself going from here?
- How does this job impact your lifestyle?
- What does a typical entry-level person do?
- What entry-level job would provide me with the best preparation?
- What advice would you give to someone trying to break into this field?
- What are the benefits and drawbacks of this type of job?

Industry Oriented Questions

- What role do you play in the industry as a whole?
- What challenges are ahead for this industry?
- What does the future look like for this industry?
- What salary could I expect to earn as an entry-level worker?
- What majors are most often recruited?
- What professional organizations are worthwhile to explore?
- What is the best way to learn about job openings?
- What advice would you give me to help me break into this industry?

Organization Oriented Questions

- What are the strengths of this organization?
- What are common frustrations of employees here?
- How is management working to address those frustrations?
- How much autonomy and flexibility do employees here have?
- What challenges is this organization expecting in the next year? five years? 10 years?
- Describe your ideal entry-level candidate.
- How does the organization support its employees' professional development?

General Questions

- Would you mind if I contacted you in the future for advice?
- If not, what is the best way for me to reach you?
- Do you know of anyone else who might be willing to talk with me?
- Is there anything that I didn't ask you about that it would be worthwhile to understand?
- Would you be willing to look at my resume and provide me with feedback on it?

Appropriate Follow-up

- Make notes about what you talked about and what you learned
- Get a thank-you note out within 24 hours of your meeting – if handwriting is an issue, a typed letter will work well too
- Utilize your notes to add strength and detail to your correspondence and let them know that you will provide them with updates – this allows you to keep the door open
- Assess the experience… what did you do well and how could you have strengthened your efforts
- Contact the referrals you received…this is a way to reinforce the relationship you initiated with your original contact

Some Things to Remember

- For many, this process is not "natural" but if you avoid the experience because it is uncomfortable, you are missing out on a great experience
- People like to help others, and like to talk about their work. Most people will be happy to talk with you, but busy schedules sometimes make it hard to accommodate a request for an informational interview. Don't be discouraged if someone says no… Move on.
- Not every interview will provide you with profound insight, but it will help you begin to make connections and strengthen your professional poise and presentation skills
- Avoid scheduling an interview when you know there is a current job opening… this can create an awkward situation for the person you will be meeting with

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