

Informational Interviews

The Ultimate Networking Tool

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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.

Build Your List

Don't Be Afraid to Ask

Whether you're asking someone you know and trust or emailing a complete stranger, asking someone for an informational meeting can be a little uncomfortable.

But, keep in mind that this is a request most people would feel flattered to accommodate—hey, everyone likes to feel important! So don't look at it as a cold call; rather, picture yourself as a reporter calling an expert to research an article. Send the person a friendly, concise email that gets right to the point. A compliment on her accomplishments (“...given that you've had so many interesting experiences in the marketing field”) doesn't hurt, either.

Begin by reaching into your current contact list (the warm outreach).

Ask yourself these 2 questions:

1. Do I know of anyone at Yale who could answer my career questions and advise me about my current job situation?

List the names of 2 people who could directly answer your career questions and/or advise about your current job situation.

2. Do I know of anyone at Yale who could introduce me to someone who could answer my career questions, even if it was a distant contact?

List the names of 2 people who could introduce you to someone who could answer your career questions.

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.

Exercise:

With a partner, create your own invitation for an informational meeting.

Preparation

Prepare Your Questions

The best interviews, informational or otherwise, are the ones that naturally flow. But truthfully, a natural flow is much more likely to happen if you're prepared, and not grasping for conversation starters.

So, prepare a notebook with two lists of questions—one standard and one more abstract—to bring with you. In the standard category, include basic questions such as, “What does a typical day at work look like?” and “What are the most challenging aspects of your job?” In your abstract category, try less conventional questions like, “What’s your first thought when you get up for work every morning?” or “Who has been most influential in your career?”

You don't need to ask everything on both lists, but having a range of questions will allow you to mix up the conversation based on your interviewee's reactions. For example, if she rolls her eyes at the “typical work day” question, skip ahead to something a bit less traditional and see how she responds.

Once you find the right cadence for the conversation, it will become easier for both of you to volley your questions back and forth more naturally.

Exercise: Choose 5 questions from the list below that you like the most. Try to select one from the standard category and one from the abstract. Be prepared to discuss why you chose them.

Standard Questions

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?
- Are there busy and slow times or is the work activity fairly constant?

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 major qualifications for success in this position?

How did this type of work interest you and how did you get started?

- What jobs and experiences have led you to your present position?

What part of this position do you personally find most satisfying?

- What part of this do you personally find most challenging?

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?

Abstract Questions

What's your first thought when you get up for work every morning?

Why did you decide to work for this department?

- What do you like most about this department?
- Do you find your job exciting or boring? Why?

What were the keys to your career advancement?

- What particular skills or talents are most essential to be effective in your job?
- How did you learn these skills?

Exercise:

Create your own questions based on your current career interests.

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. Don't believe it's possible to do an informational interview in that amount of time? See the Addendum on page 10.
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.

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.

1. 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:

- a) As mentioned, let the person know that you have taken action on his or her suggestions.
- b) 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!").
- c) Be sure to inform this person on your career progression. Everyone wants to feel that they contributed in some way to your success.
- d) 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 interviewee'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?

Sample Thank You Email/Note

After an Informational Interview

Dear Mr. Weston:

I just wanted to take the time to thank you for speaking with me the other day. I am really appreciative of the insight you were able to give me on your work in Cardiology.

I am grateful to you for providing me with the contact information for your colleague at Internal Medicine. I will be contacting him sometime this week about the opening you mentioned. Again, I truly appreciate the time you afforded me. Thank you for being so open.

Sincerely,

Katherine Burdick

Dear Ms. Tuchman,

Thank you so much for meeting with me today. It was wonderful to talk with you and to learn more about your work at the Women's Law Center. I was particularly fascinated to hear about your project addressing the needs of new immigrants from war-torn countries.

I am grateful for the contacts you suggested to me, and will let you know what happens when I follow up with them. I look forward to talking with you again in the future.

Sincerely,

Allison Whitmore

Note that it is also appropriate to send a handwritten thank you note following an informational meeting. Many recipients enjoy the personal touch of such a note. But if your handwriting or time constraints make a handwritten note impractical, a thank you email is an appropriate alternative.

How to Have a Great Informational Interview in 20 minutes

1) Make a Good Impression. Be respectful to support staff, have good eye contact and a firm handshake, and say thank you right away. Highlight common connections and stick to a simple agenda:

2) Tell Your Story (*3 minutes*). Describe who you are and what you've done. Your purpose is not to share your complete resume. Instead, help your listener understand what you do so that they can suggest contacts or remember you when a job opening comes up.

3) Engage Your Listener (*15 minutes*). Never ask for information you can read on a company website or a LinkedIn profile. Doing so says you didn't prepare. Have three questions ready that will give you specific knowledge you want to learn from the person you're meeting. Ask for recommendations of others to contact as well as how you can help the person you're seeing.

4) Wrap it up (*2 minutes*). End the meeting on time by reviewing the actions you each agreed to take. Make a brief, positive goodbye – and above all – express your gratitude.

5) Stay in Touch. Send a thank-you note within 24 hours. Look for ways to remain in contact, such as forwarding relevant articles or links, sharing news about mutual contacts, or letting people know when you've found work.

Tips to Keep in Mind

1. These meetings are not about asking for job leads; the point is to learn something.
2. Think about informational interviews as a way to build a relationship and expand your network, not as a way to get a job.
3. Don't overstay your welcome. It's always better to signal the meeting is ending and let the other person say he or she is open to continuing the discussion.

Informational Interview Tracking Sheet

Name	Dept	Email	Phone	Outreach date	Responded? Y/N	Meeting Date	Notes	Thank You Y/N