

The Informational Interview



A great tool available to job seekers as they develop a network is the Informational Interview. By definition, this is a meeting between two people: one person who is gathering information about a potential job, company or other opportunity, and one person who is an expert in that specific area. The following article will teach you how to ask for, and conduct effective informational interviews.

Remember, the purpose of the informational interview is to gather information; it is not to ask for a job. But sometimes, these meetings do result in a job offer. That's the icing on the cake!

You accomplish several things when you go out on informational interviews:

- You obtain a great deal of information about a specific 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 how you might fit into that work setting. Thus, you have greater flexibility in planning your options and you have more insights that will help you make critical career decisions.
- You have the opportunity to make personal contacts with career influencers.
- You gain insight into the hidden job market (employment opportunities that are not advertised).
- You become aware of the needs of the employers and the realities of employment. First-hand and current information allows you to learn what happens on the job beyond the understanding provided through outside research. This exposure not only provides personal understanding but it could also result in your becoming a more impressive job candidate.
- Because informational interviewing is comparatively low-stress, you gain confidence in talking with people while learning what you need to know. Informational interviewing provides an opportunity to meet with potential employers before the more stressful job interview.
- Because you are only asking for information, you are in control of the interview; you decide which questions to ask.
- This opportunity will expose you to a variety of jobs and companies, making the search for your "niche" that much easier.
- It is an opportunity to learn where you might fit into a particular organization.

Following are some good reasons to conduct informational interviews:

- to explore careers and clarify your career goal
- to expand your professional network
- to build confidence and develop your interviewing skills
- to access the most up-to-date career information
- to identify your professional strengths and weaknesses

Asking for the informational interview:

Choosing whom to ask makes all the difference. Start by making a list of companies you'd love to work at and of job titles you'd be interested in. While people who fit on either list are good, someone who works for your dream company *and* has your dream role is where you'll get the most bang for your buck.

That said, it's important to consider what the person does at the company and the size of the company—you want to target people who are in an aspirational role, but who aren't so high up that they won't have time to meet with you. You may want to talk to the VP of International Sales of a Fortune 500 company, but if you're at the start of your career, you'll have a better chance getting in touch with a Sales Rep or Sales Manager of a smaller company, and you'll probably learn a lot more. Also, look for people you have some sort of connection with—if someone went to your college or has a shared connection, he or she will be more likely to want to meet with you. Obviously, [LinkedIn](#) is a great place to find these people, and reach out to them. The only limitation to reaching out via LI is that your introductory message to them can only contain 300 characters. For this reason, I recommend sending an email. Often you can find a person's email address under the 'Contact' section of their profile.

Your message to this person needs to do three things: 1) explain who you are, 2) state why you reached out to them in particular, and 3) ask for the informational interview. Here's a good template that you can modify to fit your own style:

Dear Ms. Hoffman,

I found your profile on LI and wanted to reach out to you. I graduated from the University of Illinois four years ago and immediately took a job in marketing. However, I believe I'm better suited towards a more client-focused role, which is why I'm exploring sales, and why I'm contacting you today.

I see that you also graduated from U of I and have developed a very impressive career in sales. Congratulations on your success! I also see that we're both members of a few U of I alumni groups on LinkedIn, and have kept up with the advice you offer there.

I'll be in your area next week. Would it be possible to meet me for a quick coffee wherever it's convenient for you? I would love to ask you a few questions about your sales career. I'm at the information-gathering stage before making this career transition and I believe your expertise could help point me in the right direction. I promise to only take as much time as you can afford to give me.

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If this is something you can do, please let me know a few dates/times that work for you. I'm happy to make my schedule work with yours. Thank you so much for your consideration, and the coffee is my treat!

*Very cordially,
Job Seeker*

Find three or four people that you want to meet. Once you zap out a few emails, you'll see that most people are happy to help. Once your career is underway, I'm sure you'll be happy to help people more junior to you. And most people who offer this type of help report back that they also get a lot out of these conversations. Win-win!

Critical Tips:

Don't mix informational interviewing with job seeking. Employers will grant informational interviews when they firmly trust that you will not hit them up for a job. The minute you begin trying to get a job, the employer will feel misled. If there is a job available and they like you, they'll make you aware of the opportunity. The fact that you are merely obtaining information will help set you apart from the hundreds of others who are walking in asking for jobs and being told no. Approach the employer with the attitude that you are seeking career advice. It is, therefore, usually a good idea to set up an informational interview with a resource person before there is an actual job opening in your area of interest.

For an informational interview to be truly effective, you can't just go into it blindly. Thorough company research is an absolute necessity when you go on a regular job interview. The same goes for an informational interview. This research will greatly enhance the quality of the conversation. If you are informed about the company, you'll be able to ask more intelligent and relevant questions. You'll respond thoughtfully to any questions the interviewee might put to you. You won't ask questions that could easily have been answered by doing your homework.

Research resources include:

- Company Website
- Annual Reports
- Trade publications / press releases
- Google News
- General online search

Be enthusiastic and show interest. Employ a professional yet friendly tone during the interview. Be direct and concise with your questions and answers and do not ramble. Have good eye contact and posture. Be positive in your remarks, and reflect a good sense of humor.

Bring a copy of your resume along with you. Try to find out about specific characteristics or qualifications that employers seek when hiring. You'll probably need to update your resume to reflect some of the information that your contact gave to you. If you feel comfortable doing so when things are wrapping up, ask your contact to critique your resume.

You have spent 30-45 minutes with this person, asking questions, getting advice and sharing a little about yourself. This person has invested time in you and it's a good bet that they want their investment of time to pay off. Ask if it's alright to stay in touch with them. You do not have to call or write every week. Just keep your interviewee posted on your progress when you have news to share.

Before the end of the meeting, ask your contact to suggest names of others who might be helpful to you and ask permission to use your contact's name when contacting these new contacts. Reach out to them and continue your informational interviews. At the end of the meeting, ask for your contact's business card and exchange one of your own, if you have one.

Be sure to send a thank-you card or letter within one day after the interview. (Handwritten is always better than email!) Sincerely thank them for the time spent. Refer back to something that the person said that was particularly helpful or insightful to you. 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.

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

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

More hints about informational interviews:

- Stick to the time limit. If you're given 30 minutes, wrap it up at 25. (There's a chance they'll extend the time if you're doing a good job.)

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- Take all information given with a grain of salt. Don't settle for just one or two interviews about a given area of work; a broad information base is essential.
- Avoid impressions about an area of work based solely on whether the person interviewed was likeable or the surroundings attractive.
- Let the other person talk freely without interruption. You might acquire unanticipated information that could be particularly useful.
- Note your reactions on an objective level, but don't ignore personal feelings; what you naturally gravitate toward or away from is very important.
- Find out if the interviewee has any insight on the qualifications necessary for a position such as the one you are discussing.

And Finally, Questions to Ask During an Informational Interview:

- What is a typical day like for you? What problems do you deal with and what decisions do you make?
- How did this type of work interest you and how did you get started?
- How did you get your job? What jobs and experiences have led you to your present position?
- What part of this job do you most satisfying? Most challenging? What do you like and not like about working in this industry?
- What jobs did you hold before you entered this occupation? Which were most helpful?
- What are the various jobs in this field or organization?
- Why did you decide to work for this company and what most do you enjoy about it?
- Do you find your job exciting or boring? Why?
- How does your company differ from its competitors?
- Why do customers choose this company?
- Are you optimistic about the company's future and your future with the company?
- What does the company do to contribute to its employees' professional development?
- How does the company make use of technology for internal and external communication? (LinkedIn, company website, blogs, Skype conferencing, mobile apps, etc.)
- What changes are occurring in your occupation?
- 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 advancement opportunities?
 - What are the major qualifications for success in this occupation?
- What were the keys to your career advancement? How did you get where you are and what are your long-range goals?
- What particular skills or talents are most essential to be effective in your job? How did you learn these skills? Did you enter this position through a formal training program? How can I evaluate whether or not I have the necessary skills for a position such as yours?
- How would you describe the working atmosphere and the people with whom you work?
- What is the average length of time for an employee to stay in the job you hold? Are there incentives or disincentives for staying in the same job?
- What are the expected standards relating to dress, work hours, vacation schedule, place of residence, etc.?
- What work-related values are strongest in this type of work (security, high income, variety, independence)?
- If your job progresses as you like, what would be the next step in your career?
- If your work were suddenly eliminated, what other work do you feel prepared to do?
- With the information you have about my education, skills, and experience, what other fields or jobs would you suggest I research further before I make a final decision?
- How is the economy affecting this industry?
- What can you tell me about the employment outlook in your occupational field? How much demand is there for people in this occupation? How rapidly is the field growing? Can you estimate future job openings?
- Are there organizations for this industry that would be helpful to join?
- Are there other activities outside of work hours that are expected of you?
- How has your job affected your lifestyle?
- What are the salary ranges for various levels in this field? Is there a salary ceiling?
- From your perspective, what are the problems you see working in this field?
- What are the major frustrations of this job?

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- What interests you least about the job or creates the most stress?
- If you could do things all over again, would you choose the same path for yourself? Why? What would you change?
- What are the educational, requirements for this job? What other types of credentials or licenses are required? What types of training do companies offer persons entering this field? Is graduate school recommended? An MBA? Does the company encourage and pay for employees to pursue graduate degrees?
- How well did your college experience prepare you for this job?
- What courses have proved to be the most valuable to you in your work? What would you recommend for me?
- If you were entering this career today, would you change your preparation in any way to facilitate entry?
- What abilities or personal qualities do you believe contribute most to success in this field/job?
- What are the typical entry-level job titles and functions? What entry level jobs are best for learning as much as possible?
- Who else do you know who is doing similar kinds of work or uses similar skills? What other kinds of organizations hire people to perform the functions you do here? Do you know of other people whom I might talk to who have similar jobs?
- 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?
- Do you have any special word of warning or encouragement as a result of your experience?
- These are my strongest assets (skills, areas of knowledge, personality traits and values): _____ . Where would they fit in this field? Where would they be helpful in this organization? Where might they fit in other fields? Where might they be helpful in other organizations?
- How would you assess the experience I've had so far in terms of entering this field?
- Would you mind taking a look at my resume?
- Can you recommend others that I should talk to?

End notes:

Obviously you're not going to ask all of these questions, so choose wisely. Take great notes. Don't forget to send a thank-you note. Go forth and conquer!