

Informational Interviewing



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Informational Interviewing

*Informational interviews are an important part of career preparation and a good supplement to your academic knowledge. They are also a great way to **network** with professionals and to explore career opportunities.*

An Informational Interview is simply **talking with professionals who are currently in occupations you are considering in order to gain information and insights about a career, industry or company.** This information can be used in exploring career options, or preparing for a summer internship or professional job search. Be clear with yourself and the person you are interviewing that this is not a job interview and that you will not take more than 20-30 minutes of the person's time.

Why conduct an informational interview?

- To explore careers and clarify your career goal
- To discover employment opportunities which are not advertised
- To expand your professional network – it is usually “who you know” that helps you get a job
- To access the most up-to-date career information
- To identify your professional strengths and weaknesses
- To get valuable information for your job hunting and career planning- it's a good way to "reality check" what you've read, heard and think
- To learn about a particular organization, how you might fit in, and what problems or needs the employer has - knowing these things will help you slant your qualifications towards the needs of the organization
- To gain experience and self-confidence in interviewing with professionals through discussing yourself and your career interests
- To gain insights into what employers look for on resumes or in candidates

Preparation and Procedures

1. Research and identify the organization with whom you wish to interview

Before you request valuable time from a professional in the field, learn as much information about the career or industry as you can. This will allow you to ask more in depth questions and make better use of the time.

If you clearly know which careers you want to explore and why they interest you, explore the websites of organizations of interest before scheduling an informational interview.

Informational Interviews can be conducted with people you already know or with contacts referred to you by--faculty, family, friends, alumni, professional associations, and/or Career Services staff. You may want to check with Alumni Relations about events and other opportunities for networking as well as follow up with the Networking Guide provided through the Career Services Office.

2. Create a letter requesting an appointment and enclose your resume; follow up in person or by phone to arrange an interview appointment.

Letter requests for appointments are most effective if followed up by a telephone inquiry to confirm an appointment time. Schedule a 20-30 minute appointment in person or by phone at their convenience. If the present time is too busy for the person you contact, ask when would be a better time in the future. When scheduling an informational interview, contact individuals at least a week ahead to arrange an appointment. Always clarify your objective - that you are seeking information rather than a job. If going onsite be sure and ask for directions and parking information. If conducting a phone interview, please be sure to have a quiet space and get the correct contact number.

Informational interviews can also be obtained through "cold calls." If you identify an organization you would like to explore, but don't have a contact name, simply ask for the appropriate department or explain your request to the Personnel/Human Resources department, and they may refer you to someone.

3. Prepare for the interview

Prepare the questions that you want to ask ahead of time. Having questions in writing and taking some notes is fine. Preparation, promptness and staying on target are important, since after all, the person you are seeing is doing you a favor. Since you initiated the contact and have some control of how the interview goes, keep your purpose in mind and get your questions answered. You'll find that people love to talk about themselves and their careers and may likely digress.

Read about the career area and organization in which the person you'll be interviewing is engaged and know how your interests, skills, and values relate to that career field.

Remember to bring your resume and/or businesses cards with you, or be prepared to email them a copy of your resume after you have finished your conversation and attach it to a thank you note.

The Interview

The following **questions** should give you some ideas of information to seek. After reviewing written career information you should be able to add more specific questions to the list.

1. How did you choose this profession? This particular job? What steps did you take to get where you are?
2. What is a typical day like on this job? Or, What did you do yesterday?
3. What do you like most about your work? Least?
4. Approximately how many hours do you work per week?
5. Do you find your job satisfying? Why? What positive and/or negative effects does this job have on your family or leisure time?
6. What personal qualities are necessary to succeed at this type of work?
7. What is the most important skill set a person could bring to this job?

8. Do you think the prospects for success for a person entering this field will grow or decline over the next decade?
9. What kind of position could a person with a Masters degree anticipate when entering this field?
10. Are there courses you would advise me to take to help me prepare for this career?
11. What are your career goals for the future?
12. If you could give only one piece of advice to someone seeking a career such as yours, what would it be?
13. What methods do you recommend for conducting a job search in this field?
14. The "ASK". See below.

One of your primary goals for the interview should be to walk away with additional contacts. At the conclusion of your meeting ask for two or three other names of people to contact for informational interviews so you can begin building your "network." Confirm permission to use the individual's name when contacting the referrals. Point #14 is essential to this meeting.

What NOT TO DO in an Informational Interview

- **Ask for a job.**
- **Ask about open positions within the company.**
- **Be unprepared. Not have any questions for them.**
- **Dress inappropriately. Interview attire is expected.**
- **Ask them to be a reference for you. It's too early in the process.**

These meetings must be treated as seriously as an actual interview. Being too casual and not being prepared can hurt your chances of ever being hired by the organization. If meeting with Carnegie Mellon alumni, please remember to treat them with the same kind of respect. Treat the alum like you would anyone other informational interviewee.

After The Interview

Evaluate your experience. Immediately following the meeting find a quiet space and jot down the highlights of your meeting. Think about the information that you obtained and evaluate it objectively. Ask yourself the following:

- Did I get answers to questions I needed to have clarified?
- What did I leave out? What new questions do I have?
- Do I feel caught up in the enthusiasm of this professional?
- Do I need to see more people to obtain a more objective opinion?
- What characteristics did this person have that I need to or want to develop?
- What ideas for future career advancement strategies did I obtain?
- Did I receive additional networking contacts and when should I re-connect with this person at a later date?

Record names, comments, and referrals for future reference and keep a file of all of your contacts – you never know when these contacts will come in handy once you are on the job.

Send a **thank you letter within 24 hours of the conversation**. When you're eventually hired, send a letter to all with whom you met notifying them of your success, thanking them for guiding you along the way.

Key Elements to Remember

- You are seeking advice, not a job
- This is a low-key, non-threatening process
- People love talking about themselves and being asked for advice
- Not everyone will play along and not everyone will yield contacts
- Keep reviewing and fine-tuning your definition of desired positions

What to do if the informational interview turns into a job interview

This may occur if the interviewer likes you and feels you would be an asset to his/her organization. How do you handle that kind of possibility? You have several alternatives:

1. **If you are comfortable and prepared**, you can accept the job interview on the spot and play it by ear.
2. **If you feel unprepared**, honestly state that the purpose of the meeting is to gain information, thank them for the opportunity, and reschedule a job interview for a later date.
3. **You can thank the person**, and state that you will contact them at a later date, since you are considering other job opportunities or offers.

Whatever you choose to do, be definite in your answer, and follow through with what you tell them.

Sample Email Request Letter for an Information Interview

Subject: Meeting Requested

Dear Mr./Ms. Contact Name:

My professor, (professor's name), at Carnegie Mellon's Heinz College, suggested I contact you about my interest in the field of economic and urban development. He felt you could be particularly helpful since you have had extensive experience in this area.

I would appreciate hearing about your typical workday – your likes and dislikes. I would also find it valuable to learn about typical kinds of summer jobs and/or internships that you know of that would help a graduate student gain experience and exposure.

I'll be in town March 23 – 27 over spring break and would appreciate the opportunity to meet briefly with you then. Please email me with a time that is most convenient for you. If you would like to speak with me before then, please don't hesitate to call me at 412-123-4567. I look forward to the possibility of our meeting, and thank you for considering hosting this informational interview.

Thank you,

Your name typed

Sample Email Thank You after your Information Interview

Subject: Thank You

Dear Mr./Ms. Contact Name:

Thank you very much for taking time out of your busy schedule to meet with me Thursday to discuss professional possibilities in the field of economic development. I was impressed by your knowledge of today's economic development trends and appreciated your insight regarding the ways I can apply some of my coursework and project management experience to contribute to economic development issues.

As you suggested, I contacted Eddie Urbanite at the mayor's office, and we have an appointment in two weeks. I sincerely appreciate your willingness to share this contact information with me. I will let you know how the meeting went and will keep you up-to-date on my job search efforts.

I especially found it helpful to learn about the various job responsibilities you have had and appreciated your sharing your background experiences from starting out to your current position as Executive Director. I would not have thought of municipal management as a field of interest for myself, but after our discussion, I must admit I want to investigate further.

Again, thank you,

Your name typed and signed

