

INFORMATIONAL INTERVIEWING

What is an Informational Interview?

An Informational Interview is an interview with an individual involved in the work you're exploring. You initiate the meeting for the purpose of obtaining the information you need to make a career or job decision, or to obtain specialized data about a job, a firm, or an industry before you are a job applicant. It's a short (20-30 minute) meeting, scheduled at your initiative, to ask for information. Since you are initiating the action for the interview, you are in control of how it goes; it is not a job interview.

Purpose:

- To find out more about the work that interests you.
- To learn up-to-date information about a field of interest.
- To find out more about the organizations in your field of interest.
- To build up a network of useful contacts that can help you locate and get the job you want.
- To develop your skill and confidence in interviews.

How To Conduct an Informational Interview:

1. *Locating People.* The first step in setting up an informational interview is to locate people who are doing the work you are interested in exploring. The following list gives you ideas of sources of people to contact:
 - Alumni (your academic dept., the career center, or the alumni relations dept. should have databases, files, or directories of alumni willing to do informational interviews)
 - Children's friends' parents
 - Classmates
 - Colleagues
 - College professors
 - Career counselors (at colleges, community centers, and private practice)
 - Electronic bulletin boards or "chat" areas
 - Family and their friends
 - Friends and their friends
 - Human resource and employee relations manager
 - Job Fair company representatives
 - Neighbors
 - People mentioned in newspapers, magazines, directories of employers and career resource books
 - Previous employers and supervisors
 - Professional association members
 - Professional contacts and their colleagues (i.e. your accountant, doctor)
 - Sport teammates
 - Volunteering - organizations that you've volunteered at
- II. *Initial Contact.* In your initial contact with the person you are hoping to interview, introduce yourself and mention the name of the person (if any) who referred you. Explain that you are exploring options for the next step in your career. You're talking to knowledgeable people to learn more about this kind of work and the organizations that do it. Be clear that you are only asking for information, not a job.

State that you would like to set up a time to talk with them (preferably in person) for 20 to 30 minutes at their convenience. You can initially contact someone by telephone, in writing, or email.

III. *The Interview.* Prepare a list of questions that you would like to ask prior to the interview.

Questions usually focus on the job function, the organization, or the field. Some general questions are:

- What is involved in a typical day on your job?
- How did you get into this position/field/job?
- What do you like best/least about your work?
- What important developments/trends are occurring in this field?
- What advice would you give to someone who wants to do this kind of work?
- What are the key skills and competencies required to do this kind of work?
- What are job titles for entry-level positions? Salary ranges?
- Is there a career path for people in this field?
- What is the overall philosophy of management in this organization?
- What associations do people in this field usually belong to?
- Could you refer me to someone else in the field whose job is slightly different?

At the beginning of the meeting introduce yourself and give a brief overview of your background (education, experience, skills) and why you are in the career exploration process. Express that you will keep the interview brief (and be sure to respect the time limits of the interview). Start by asking some of your initial questions and allow the person to share their expertise with you. You will need to balance guiding the interview to receive answers to your questions with allowing the interview to flow freely into topics that may be of interest to you that you weren't aware of. But it's your interview so structure the time to work for you.

At the end of the interview, ask if they could suggest other people for you to talk with for more information. This starts the process of you building a network of contacts. You can also ask if they would like a copy of your resume so that further contact can be made with you if appropriate but don't thrust your resume on this person at the last minute in a way that implies that you are, in reality, asking for a job.

IV. *Follow Up*

Immediately after an interview, debrief yourself by taking notes on the interview. What positive and negative information did I learn? How does what I learn fit my skills, values, and interest? What else do I need to know? Who else do I need to talk with? Next steps? Be sure to record the name, organization, title, phone number, address, and date of the interview on your notes.

- 1) Send a personal thank you note within 48 hours expressing your appreciation for their time.
- 2) Keep your network of contacts informed as you go along. Write briefly to tell them that you've contacted the people they recommended, that you have learned something new, that you have changed your direction or job target, taken a job in the field, etc.

Do's and Don'ts of Informational Interviewing

- Do respect your interviewee by sticking to your time limit.
- Do interview more than one or two people about the same issue/job
- Do be objective but pay attention to your personal feelings.
- Do realize that the information provided is one person's opinion and experience.

- Do prepare a brief summary of your background.
- Do stress that you are seeking information, not a job.
- Do ask for the names of other people to contact.
- Do prepare a list of questions to ask before the interview.
- Do keep the focus of the interview on the interviewee.
- Don't keep your interviewee waiting.
- Don't ask for a job.
- Don't send your resume beforehand.
- Don't forget to send a thank-you note.