

# Informational Interviewing

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# The Purpose

Since the career planning process doesn't usually involve a crystal ball, we have to search for a more conventional approach to gathering career information. What better source than professionals working in the career field you're interested in learning more about? Here are some benefits to informational interviewing:

- Informational interviewing can help you uncover "hidden" jobs.
- You'll develop an extensive network of job search contacts.
- Build confidence for job interviews.
- Become a more impressive job candidate after some "professional home work."
- Meet new people.
- Have firsthand current information rather than data from outdated printed material.
- Gain self-knowledge through job exploration.
- Learn what skills you need to develop to compete in the job market.
- See if a job is really a good fit for you before you feel "stuck."



# The Process

As you prepare for internship or job searches, it is critical that you gather information about companies and organizations, salary expectations, job expectations, and career growth. By obtaining as much information as possible about potential opportunities you will be able to make an informed, confident decision about your career path.

One of the most useful resources as you gather information is a current employee in your targeted industry/organization. Most executives started out just like you. Therefore they know what you are going through and want to help you as someone once helped them in their career planning process and subsequent job search. Informational interviews are a great way to obtain advice, information, and contacts. After all, what better way to learn about a profession than to get advice from someone who is already in the position you're striving for? Most executives you contact will be happy to share their experiences with you, give you further contacts, and perhaps even keep you in mind when positions open up at their companies.

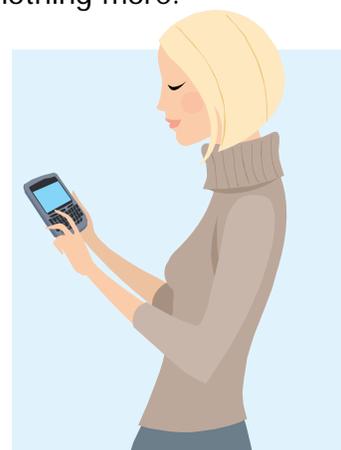
Linda Gonzalez, a career consultant in Berkeley, California, says, "There isn't enough to be said about the value of informational interviewing. Given the fact that most jobs are not advertised, it is an essential career tool and one you should continue to utilize even after you land a job — especially given the current work environment."

## The First Rule of Informational Interviewing

Remember that the purpose of an informational interview is to get information, so NEVER ask for a job. Asking for one will put the employer on the defensive; she will feel like she's been tricked or used. All you can do once you get in the door is impress the employer with your well-researched questions and great personality. You are there to get information, nothing more.

## Requesting an Informational Interview

You may request an informational interview by phone, letter, or email. Typically, if you already know the person with whom you would like to meet, the phone may be the easiest approach. If you are interested in conducting an informational interview with an "unknown" contact, someone you researched and identified online from an alumni directory or other source you may want to write an introductory letter or email, and then follow up with a telephone call to discuss the possibility of an informational interview.



If you decide to write an introductory letter or email, be sure to heed the following tips in your introductory letter:

1. Write that you're looking to get into the field and that you would like to speak with him or her to get information on the industry. Say that you are interested in his or her professional experience and advice.

2. Tell the employer how you got his or her name. If you have something in common with the employer, such as being alumni of the same college or having a mutual acquaintance, let him or her know in the first sentence. "Your letter should give me a reason to want to talk with you," says Peter Boland, president of Boland Healthcare in Berkeley. "If you've done your research on my company or know someone I know, I'll want to help you."
3. Respect the employer's time. Executives are busy, so keep your letter short and to the point. On the same note, stress in your letter that you want to meet for only a short time — a half-hour at the most.
4. Set a date. End by stating when you will call to arrange a brief talk. A tip: never use the word "interview." This sets off alarms in the employer's head and brands you as just another job hunter. A letter asking for an interview is just begging to go to human resources, the final resting place of résumés.

### **Need Someone to Interview?**

A great place to start is by asking people you know (friends, family, faculty, etc.) if they know anyone working in your field of interest. If they do, they may be able to refer you to someone.

If this yields no results either, be sure to use the internet as a resource! Use search engines to identify and target companies and organizations in your field of interest and geographic location then visit each organization's website directly. On the website, identify potential "interviewees" and their address, phone number, and/or email address, as well as the company's core business(es)/services(s), number of employees, parent company, earnings and other relevant information. This knowledge will come in handy if you do get an interview; employers like to see that you've done your homework.



### **The Interview**

Once you have successfully "landed" your informational interview, preparation is the key! Be sure to research the contact's organization/company even if it is someone you know! This research will allow you to develop a list of questions that will impress them and show you have done your "homework."

"If an interviewer asks the right questions, I'll spend as much time with them as they need," says Boland. "But most interviewers aren't focused enough and they ask the wrong questions. Questions that show they don't know anything about my company or the industry. Why should I spend my time coaching people who won't even take the time to learn the basics of the industry?"

David Marcus, former editor of The Salem, (Massachusetts) Evening News, gives this tip for getting the most out of an informational interview: "Get the other person talking. Ask him how he got started, or about his job. Then just listen."

## Other Considerations

While research and question preparation are keys to success, you must also consider what to wear and what to bring to your interview.

Here are a few tips to get started:

- Dress like you work there. Do a little sleuthing to find out how people in your chosen profession dress, and dress in the same style. You can even go by the office beforehand to check out what the employees are wearing. In any case, it's always better to be safe than sorry, so when in doubt opt for a more conservative style.
- Bring a notebook, pen, a list of questions, and the information you've already gathered on the organization.
- Exude confidence. Walk tall, smile, speak slowly, and confidently. Greet the employer with a firm handshake.



During your conversation or in your letter/email, you indicated that you wanted only a few minutes of the employer's time. But, Gonzalez says, "It's rare that the employer will only give you a half-hour once you are in her office. But you should acknowledge the time and get her agreement to continue."

## Generating New Contacts

This is the part where you get the contact to work for you. At the end of the interview, ask if he/she can suggest anyone else for you to contact. This is called networking. At the end of every interview you should have a few more individuals to target. When you send them your introductory letter, be sure to tell new contacts who recommend them. If you do this with every person you talk to, you should soon have an extensive network of industry contacts.

Employers can also suggest professional associations and industry journals you may not have heard of through your research. Ask and you shall receive.

## Keep on Interviewing

Even after you land a job it is important to continue to conduct informational interviews. By doing so, you will remain "in practice," expand your contact network, and take good precautions in today's unsteady job market.

# Sample Questions

1. I'm very much interested in the field of computer programming and would like to know how most people get into the field.
2. How did you become interested in winery ownership?
3. What do you think is the best educational preparation for a career in marketing management?
4. Which part of the job is most challenging for you?
5. Is there enough growth in the computer resale business that you would advise someone like me to get into it?
6. The banking industry has been going through dramatic changes in the last five years. What have you seen from inside the industry?
7. Of all the individuals you have met in police work, what personal attributes do you think are essential to success?
8. Where would I write to get up-to-date materials on CPAs working in Big Four firms?
9. Which professional journals and organizations should I know about in this industry?
10. What are the qualifications you look for in a junior manager?
11. What skills are required of a Chief Executive Officer on a day-to-day basis?
12. What do you think of the skills I have so far in terms of getting into public relations?
13. What experiences have you had that you think have been invaluable to your learning the business?
14. When would my earning potential begin to improve if I chose a career as a life insurance agent?
15. What would you say are the life-style considerations for outside sales?
16. Do you have any suggestions for my résumé?
17. Have you noticed whether it is necessary to change companies to advance?
18. Are there any industry trends that I should be aware of that may affect employment opportunities?
19. If you could do it all over again, would you choose the same path for yourself? Why? What would you change?
20. Can you suggest anyone else whom it would be helpful to talk to? May I use your name in contacting him or her?

# Thank-You Letters and Follow-up

After making valuable contacts through an informational interview, you'll want to stay in touch and keep these individuals as part of your network. First and foremost, take the time to send a thank-you letter to these people. This correspondence can make a lasting impression and set the tone for any future interaction. Below is a sample thank-you letter:



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July 1, 2009 *(Enter 2 times)*

Mr. John Glenn  
NASA Space Aviation Center  
1 Space Center Drive  
Cocoa Beach, FL 00000 *(Enter 2 times)*

Dear Mr. Glenn: *(Enter 2 times)*

Thank you for taking the time to meet with me on Thursday to discuss career opportunities in the field of Space Aviation. I was impressed by your knowledge of current technological advances in this field and appreciated having a tour of the space flight preparation facilities. *(Enter 2 times)*

Your referral to Sally Ride was very useful. I have arranged to meet with her next month when she returns from a business trip. *(Enter 2 times)*

I will be in touch from time to time to keep you informed of my career developments and progress and will forward you a copy of my résumé as soon as it is complete. Thank you again for your help and valuable insight. *(Enter 2 times)*

Sincerely, *(Enter 4 times)*

*Buzz Lightyear* *(Leave this area blank for your actual signature)*

Buzz Lightyear