

THE CAREER CENTER INFORMATIONAL INTERVIEWING GUIDE

Background Information:

"Informational interviewing" was invented by Richard Nelson Bolles, author of the best-selling career guide, *What Color Is Your Parachute?* Bolles refers to the process as "trying on jobs to see if they fit you." Informational interviewing is exactly what it sounds like -- interviews designed to gather information, ideally information you'll need to assist or refine your career decision-making.

The best way to learn what you really want in a career is to talk with the people in that career field. Because of the exploratory nature of informational interviews, they are particularly effective for college students, who are just embarking on the career development process.

Informational interviewing is not the same as interviewing for a job by any means, but it is probably the most effective form of networking there is. Networking being the key to any successful job search strategy, you'll want to develop the necessary skills for conducting meaningful informational interviews, and this guide can help you get started.

Why Should I Conduct an Informational Interview?

You may have any number of reasons for wanting to have an extended conversation with a network contact, however, below are some good reasons to take advantage of the invaluable experience of informational interviewing:

- *Explore careers and clarify your career goal* - 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.
- *Expand your professional network* - You can make personal contacts among management-level personnel, who are often influential decision makers when it comes to hiring new employees.
- *Build confidence for your job interviews* - 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 your course work or other outside research. This exposure not only provides personal understanding, but it could also result in your becoming a more impressive job candidate.
- *Access the most up-to-date career information* - Because informational interviewing is comparatively low-stress, you 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 interview; you decide which questions to ask. Later, evaluate the acquired information in relation to your organizational / industry research.
- *Identify your professional strengths and weaknesses* - Informational interviewing provides an opportunity to meet with potential employers before the more stressful (for both parties) job interview.
- *Gain visibility as a potential new hire in your field of interest* - It is an opportunity to learn where you might fit into a particular organization and you gain insight into the hidden job market (employment opportunities that are not advertised). This opportunity will expose you to a variety of jobs and personalities of companies making the search for your "niche" that much easier.

Where to Begin?

Occupational selection is a process that involves assessment of your interests, abilities, values, skills and labor market conditions and trends. If you're uncertain of your current career aspirations, you may do well to begin the Self-Assessment process.

If you already have some idea of the occupation you would like to further investigate, before you arrange an informational interview, you'll want to have spent some time researching it. Read all you can about the nature of the work (duties, tasks, skills, etc.) the work environment, and industry information. To assist you, The Career Center has a variety of online and print resources in the Career Resource Library to help you get started! The Woodruff Library is also a great resource for Emory's students who are looking to do industry and occupational research.

The importance of doing your research in advance of conducting an informational interview is that you will be able to prepare a focused list of questions and have an insight into a particular industry and/or occupation prior to having a conversation about it. The more knowledge you have, the more confident you will feel about your ability to communicate effectively and therefore you will convey your motivation and interest to the employer by acknowledging that the information the interviewee is giving you is important. Be sure to ask only those questions that are appropriate and important to you.

Who Should I Contact?

If networking at its heart is defined as "relationship building" then start with those you already have a relationship with! These can be family, friends, neighbors, classmates, current or former co-workers, etc. This is your "core network" and can be a receptive group of individuals who would be willing to connect you with others in their network.

Alumni are a great resource for Emory's students to connect with to set up informational interviews. The Emory Alumni Association maintains a variety of networks who are interested in giving back to the Emory Community specifically in this way.

Professional Organizations are another method with which you could begin to identify potential candidates for informational interviewing. Professionals usually enjoy helping students out with career related information, especially if they really love what they do!

Informational Interview or Job Search?

Never make the mistake of asking for a job during an informational interview! Informational interviewing is not the same as job seeking. Employers who grant you an informational interview are under the impression that you're on a fact-finding mission. The moment they discover you are using this opportunity for an ulterior motive (i.e., to obtain a position) they will feel betrayed, and you will lose your credibility. However, if during your informational interview you uncover an employment opportunity, wait until the interview has concluded and then while following up (Ideally the following day) you may express your appreciation for their time and insights, confirm your continued interest in the career, and inquire as to the appropriate procedures for formally applying for the opportunity you discovered.

Occasionally during an informational interview, the employer may discover that you're a good match for an opportunity, they very well may make you an offer for an internship or job. Simply by presenting yourself as researching an occupation and asking good questions you've found the good fortune of being in the position to consider an employment offer. If you're truly interested and feel it's the right opportunity, you can pursue it!

Scheduling the Informational Interview

So, you've done your research and have identified someone you think would be a good person to provide you the information you seek. The next step is to arrange a meeting with them. There are a couple of ways to make contact, regardless of which method you choose the key to being effective is to demonstrate appropriate etiquette.

Remember these Professionals are taking time out of their busy work lives by volunteering their time to assist you. Therefore, you should request about 20 –30 minutes of their time to conduct the informational interview. Try to be as flexible as possible in scheduling a time to meet. Also ensure that you provide them information as to the best method and times to reach you. Keep in mind that what works best for you may not always work well for them due to their prior commitments.

By Letter (or email): Here is a sample cover letter requesting an informational interview.

Date

Mr. John Doe, Research Director
XYZ, inc.
123 Any Ave. NW, Suite 200
Any City, ST 012345

Dear Mr. Doe,

As a rising senior at Emory University pursuing a bachelor's degree in Neuroscience and Behavioral Biology, the field of Psychotropic drug interactions on the Human Brain fascinates me. From my research in this area, I have learned that your pharmaceutical company is a leader in developing new drugs in providing schizophrenia patients relief from this debilitating mental illness.

Now I am exploring research career options in this field, primarily with an emphasis in tracking results from clinic trials. I would appreciate the opportunity to meet with you to briefly discuss your role and your area of specialty in the Research & Development division at XYZ, inc.

I will contact your office within the next week to arrange a mutually convenient time for this informational meeting. I maybe reached on my cell phone at 404-727-6211. Thank you for your consideration of my request.

Sincerely,

William Dooley

By Phone: Here are some sample phone scripts.

“Hello, my name is William Dooley and I’m a senior at Emory University. I’m conducting research on careers in your field. I would like to meet and talk with you for about 30 minutes at your convenience to learn more about your field of expertise.”

Remember, if you have to leave a message, be sure to indicate how and when the best ways to reach you are. Also, if someone they know has referred you to them, you should also indicate that as well.

“Hi, my name is William Dooley. Professor Paul Lennard, Director of Emory University’s NBB department suggested I call you. He indicated you would be a good contact person for me to arrange an informational interview with, as I’m interested in a research career in the pharmaceutical industry. Do you have some time we could get together for 20-30 minutes to discuss your role at XYZ, inc.?”

You can develop your own script that makes you feel most comfortable, as long as you come across professionally and emphasize that you’re simply trying to obtain firsthand information, and what ever information they are able to share with you will be appreciated.

Occasionally you’re going to run into a “gate keeper”, these are usually receptionists or other administrative personnel who hold the keys to reaching the person you are attempting to reach. Don’t see these individuals as obstacles, but rather as additional resources you can use to learn more about the organization. It’s important for you to clearly communicate with them so they have a full understanding of what you want. If they don’t have the information, they will more than often be happy to provide you a referral to the correct person who can best assist you.

You may run into someone who is going to prefer to talk with you in the moment over the phone, but your goal is to attempt to arrange a visit to his or her workplace. Face to face informational interviewing provides a great opportunity for you to learn about the work environment and help you to establish a stronger connection with the person you’re interviewing.

Before the Informational Interview:

Do Your Homework

As indicated earlier, doing your research is an absolute necessity to be truly effective in conducting a quality informational interview; you shouldn’t go into it blindly.

When you are informed about an organization, you’ll be able to ask more intelligent and relevant questions. You can also demonstrate your thoughtfulness and preparedness should the interviewee have questions for you. Like a job interview, interviewing is a two-way street. You’ll have an agenda of what you want to learn, and the interviewee may also have their own agenda, like perhaps sizing you up for a position in their organization. Because you will have already done your basic research, you won’t ask questions that could have easily been answered by doing your homework.

Resources you may consider using to conduct your research prior to the interview include: Organization’s web site, Annual Reports, Company Literature or Library Reference Material. If you’re experiencing difficulty in identifying these or other resources to use, come talk with a career counselor or work with one of the librarians in Woodruff.

Call to Confirm

Appropriate etiquette dictates that you should call and confirm your appointment with your contact person the day before your scheduled informational interview. If you have any questions regarding the location of their office, parking, etc. this is the time to ask. When you leave for the interview, ensure that you have left ample travel time to arrive at least 10 minutes early.

Upon your arrival be polite and professional to everyone you may encounter. It's also a good idea to carry a notebook, pen (or pencil) and have your prepared list of questions. This will assist you in documenting relevant information as well as keeping you on track as to what information you're seeking. Staying on track is important to you, but it's o.k. to allow for spontaneous discussion to occur.

Dress Appropriately

You can never make a second first impression, so make your first one count. Dress professionally as if you were going for a regular job interview. Your appearance speaks volumes about you as an individual (and perhaps as a future employee?). You will want to leave a positive impression and be memorable for all the right reasons.

Be Prepared to Take Notes

In valuing the interviewee's time be direct and concise with your questions and answers. There will be times when you will want to take notes on important information you'll want to remember (Names, Phone #'s, etc.), but you're not going to need to write everything down. Ensure that you maintain good eye contact, show interest and are both positive and enthusiastic while engaged in dialogue during the interview.

Bring Your Resume

In fact, bring several copies with you. This will enable you to provide your contact more detailed information of your background. It's quite possible they may ask for a copy to share with other colleagues or contacts that can further facilitate your career exploration. You may also ask the interviewee to critique the document for you toward the conclusion of the interview.

During the Interview:

Once you have arrived introduce yourself to your interviewee and thank them for their willingness to meet with you. You may also choose to reemphasize that you are there to learn and gather information about their career field.

Your homework on the career field or the employer will have given you some good ideas of questions that you'd like to ask. Keep in mind that your time is limited, so you'll want to prioritize your questions. Choose open-ended questions that will encourage dialog, as simple "yes" and "no" (i.e., closed questions) will not yield much information.

Below is a sample list of questions you may find useful to begin with, however depending upon what you are attempting to learn you may come up with others on your own. Although you will have a prioritized list of questions, you'll want answers to, you may have spontaneous or clarifying questions pop into your stream of conscious, ask those if they are relevant to keeping the conversation focused on the person's job, career field, industry, or employer.

Questions to Ask

- 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?
 - How does the time use vary? Are there busy and slow times or is the work activity constant?

- 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?
- Can you suggest some ways a student could obtain this necessary experience?
- What are the most important personal satisfactions and dissatisfactions connected with your occupation? What part of this job do you personally find most satisfying? Most challenging? What do you like and not like about working in this industry?
- What things did you do before you entered this occupation?
 - Which have been most helpful?
 - What other jobs can you get with the same background?

- What are the various jobs in this field or organization?
- Why did you decide to work for this company?
- What do you like most about this company?
- 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 communication and outside marketing? (Use of e-mail, Internet, intranets, World Wide Web page, video conferencing, etc.)
- What sorts of 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 are the skills that are most important for a position in this field?
- 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 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?
- Is there a basic philosophy of the company or organization and, if so, what is it? (Is it a people, service, or product-oriented business?)
- What can you tell me about the corporate culture?
- 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?

- Is there flexibility related 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 kinds of 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?
- What obligations does your employer place on you outside of the ordinary workweek? What social obligations go along with a job in your occupation?

- Are there organizations you are expected to join?
- Are there other things you are expected to do outside work hours?

- How has your job affected your lifestyle?
- What are the salary ranges for various levels in this field? Is there a salary ceiling?
- What are the major rewards aside from extrinsic rewards such as money, fringe benefits, travel, etc.?
- From your perspective, what are the problems you see working in this field?
- What are the major frustrations of this job?
- 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?
- Does your work relate to any experiences or studies you had in college?
- 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?
- How important are grades/GPA for obtaining a job in this field?
- How do you think my university's reputation is viewed when it comes to hiring?
- How do you think graduation from a private (or public) university is viewed when it comes to hiring?
- How did you prepare for this work? 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 is the department head or supervisor for this job? Where do you and your supervisor fit into the organizational structure?
- 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?
- What kinds of experience, paid or unpaid, would you encourage for anybody pursuing a career in this field?
- What special advice do you have for a student seeking to qualify for this position?

- Do you have any special word of warning or encouragement because 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?
- [If you feel comfortable and it seems appropriate:] Would you mind looking at my resume?

Sharing

Informational interviewing is like a balancing act, you're there to gather information to assist you in your career development, but you don't want the experience to become an interrogation of your interviewee. During your conversation, you'll have moments to share things from your research and background, which you can just do if you don't find yourself dominating the conversation by talking about yourself, or what you know. Remember you're there to learn!

Listening

If sharing is one side of the conversation, then listening is the other half. Being a good listener is a valued skill and one in which you will need to develop to really "hear" what's being said. You must listen to the information to fully understand it. Be receptive and show that the information that is being provided is important to you.

Relationship Building

At the conclusion of your interview ask the interviewee for their business card, after all you've just spent close to half an hour getting to know them, asking for their advice, and sharing a bit about yourself. You'll want to maintain this relationship and nurture it by staying in contact with them. Keeping them updated with progress on your research and career development is customary and central to building your contact network. Generally, people who are willing to invest their time in you will have an interest in what your future holds, and it makes them feel good to know they had a small part in your overall development. Other advantages of maintaining a professional networking relationship with those you have had informational interviews with is for generation of referrals to other networking contacts, employment leads, and for future consideration as a mentor.

Referrals

Professionals usually know others in their field or industry. One of the final questions you should ask is, "Whom else would you recommend that I speak with?" When asking for these referrals, be sure to gain permission to use the interviewee name when contacting these new leads. This is the art of successful networking!

After the Interview:

Reflect on What You Have Learned

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 what I learned fit with my own interests, abilities, goals, values, etc.?
- What do I still need to know?
- What plan of action can I make?

Maintaining a record of all the individuals you have interviewed and the main things you learned from the experiences is an effective way to organize, evaluate and analyze your occupational exploration. This process can enhance your ability to identify your dream job(s), assist in facilitating your job search, and build your network of contacts.

Follow Up

Within 24 to 48 hours after the conclusion of the informational interview, professional etiquette is to send a thank you letter or note. This little gesture will go a long way to maintain a positive networking relationship. Demonstrate to your new network contact that you genuinely appreciated their time and that they were helpful in assisting you.

If you can, provide them something specific which made a difference for you. Ask the person to keep you in mind should they come across anything that may help further your career journey. Be sure to include your address and a phone number under your signature.

The thank you note can be either a formal letter or a handwritten note, depending upon your comfort level. Whichever you choose to be sure that it's sincere, legible and on appropriate stationery or resume quality paper. Emailing is acceptable, but doesn't reflect that same level of appreciation, as does a handwritten note or typed letter.

Some Final Tips

- If you ask for 20-30 minutes of a person's time, stick to the limit.
- 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.
- When in an interview, ask what you want to know but really let the person talk because you might discover and acquire information about unanticipated areas of employment.
- 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.
- Talking with people doesn't have to be a formal process or one you practice only when job hunting. Chat with people casually -- on a plane or bus, while waiting in lines, at social gatherings, etc. Since most people enjoy talking about their work, curiosity can open many doors.