

Informational Interviewing

How to Prepare

Make a list of at least 10 questions you want answered that are important to you. You want to ask thoughtful open-ended questions about the person's career, company, job, future, etc. This is their chance to give you good advice.

Typical questions you might want to ask:

- Tell me about your typical work day. Number of hours, amount of work you take home, etc
- What problems/issues do you solve for the company?
- How are you evaluated?
- What training opportunities are there?
- How do you advance if you want to?
- If you were me entering the field, what advice do you have?
- Who does and does not succeed in this kind of job?
- If you could do it all over again, what would you do differently?
- What do you like most about the job?
- What do you like least about the job? Is there anything that drives you crazy?
- What are the most important skills needed in this job/industry?
- What is the percentage of required people interaction (committees, phone calls, emails, etc.) vs. working alone?
- What are the trends emerging in this field?
- What does the future hold in this career area?
- How does the economy affect this career?
- What is the best way to get a job in the field or your company?
- Where can I live, how much travel is required, relocation policy?
- Do you know what the salary range might be at entry-level or the next level? (however, NEVER ask the person what salary THEY are making)
- As a new employee, what would I do to earn the Employee of the Year award?
- Who else do you know that I might talk to further?

The last question is very important. The person you just talked to has several additional contacts. Get those contact names and phone/email addresses. Then let the new contact know that you were referred by the mutual contact. Something like this:

“Dear Ms. Smith, Jim Cone suggested that I talk to you. I’m a student at UTSA and thinking about a career in _____ (fill in the blank). Jim said that you have expertise in this area and might be willing to give me some advice about my own future career. Would it be possible to schedule a convenient meeting time for you (phone or in-person...in-person is always best) so that I can ask you some questions about your own career?”



One word about contacts: There are hot, warm, and cold contacts. Hot contacts are ones you know directly as an associate, friend, colleague, family member, etc. Warm contacts are people that are referred to you by hot contacts, or people you meet once at events, classes, etc. Cold contacts are secondary referrals or names you get from lists, web sites, etc. Obviously, the warmer the contact the more luck you will have working with them. Start with your hot contacts first and then work your way to colder contacts. It will be more successful.



The Actual Informational Interview

This is just a conversation between two people. It's sort of like talking to a faculty member during office hours. Introduce yourself and thank them for spending some time with you. Tell them how you became interested in the career area – maybe it's a story about an inspiring faculty member you had, or a project you worked on, or a hobby you have. It's often good to spend a couple minutes engaged in informal conversation. Then tell them you wrote down a few questions you want to ask them. Then ask your questions.

Watch your time. If they agreed to 30 minutes, then try to stay only 30 minutes. You can tell them when the 30 minutes are up. They might say it's OK to talk a little longer, but be sensitive to their time. At the end, ask them for their business card, and give them your card. You do have a business card, don't you? If not, you can make some using a Word document and print them at an office supply store, or order some at Vistaprint.com.

Location

It's always best to visit with your contact in person, preferably at the location in which they work, that way you can get a feel for the environment. Face-to-face encounters build trust and the interviewee is much more willing to help you out with the next phase of your process. Phone interviews are OK, but not as good as physically visiting your contact. Obviously, if the contact is far away, phone interviews are the only option. Email is not a good way to do an informational interview. It takes too much time, puts a burden on your contact, and is impersonal. At least make a phone call for an informational interview.



How to Dress

If you are meeting someone in person, dress business casual or better (slacks, dress shoes, long-sleeve button shirt/blouse – and remember to iron your clothes – we recommend polyester-cotton blends, wrinkle free, which you will need to have sooner or later for actual job interviews anyway). If you are visiting their workplace, bring a blazer or jacket with you – you can wear it or drape it over your arm if the place is informal. It shows respect, they take you more seriously, and you won't embarrass them by walking around their job site in flip flops and a Hawaiian shirt. Bring a comb in your pocket and stop in the restroom to look yourself over before the session.

Follow Up

After you leave or hang up, jot notes down immediately. What did you learn? What else do you need to know? What impressions did you have? What do you think about your career direction now?



Then, send them a Thank-You card. This is very important! You should send an immediate email, but a card is the right thing to do, and you must follow up right away. It is rude not to. Your thank you reminds them of the nice conversation and they will feel good to know they contributed to your career decision.

Now you are ready for another informational interview.

One Last Word

Informational Interviews are for information only – not to get a job. People are glad to give you career advice. But *if you are really looking for a job*, tell them so up front. It's OK to tell them you got their name as a referral, or from the Alumni Association, etc., and are interested in a job or internship. Ask them if they would be willing to give you advice about applying to their company, or forward your resume to others who they might know. That works fine. Just don't tell them you only want advice, then half-way through the conversation you tell them you really want a job. It will make you seem dishonest.



Informational interviews are for collecting information, advice and career direction only. You may want to re-connect some weeks later with the person you talked to during an informational interview and explain you are now hoping to get experience and do they have any recommendations about job search. But you do that after several weeks, not right away. Keep the two types of connections separate (informational interviews vs. help with your job search).

Good Luck

Informational interviews are quite enjoyable. You learn a lot, the other person has a chance to be helpful, and it is motivating to hear other's stories about their career successes and challenges.