

# **Informational Interviewing**

## **What is an Informational Interview?**

The purpose of an informational interview is to get information about a field of work from someone who has some firsthand knowledge.

Here's how to look at it...You need information. Someone has that information. You can interview anyone as long as that person is knowledgeable about the field in which you are interested. Ask friends, relatives, fellow students, your teachers, and neighbors if they wouldn't mind talking with you about what they do for a living.

**When you are on an informational interview you should not ask for a job.** This is not to say that an informational interview cannot lead to a job. In addition to helping you learn about a particular career, the informational interview is a way to start building a network.

Don't get nervous asking someone for an informational interview. Remember people love to talk about what they do and would like to share this information with you.

## **Steps for an Informational Interview**

### **Step 1: Research**

Gather the names of industry leaders from recent news articles, social networking sites, contacts (friends, family members, colleagues, etc), Internet searches or friendly headhunters. Create a resume, build your presence on LinkedIn, join social networking sites and begin getting names of potential interviewers.

Start with readily accessible contacts such as alumni connections, especially those who have volunteered to help students in conducting a job search (they can be found on LinkedIn and Facebook groups). Then expand your network through personal contacts, social media, and cold calling.

### **Step 2: Make Contact- Via Mail**

Write a short, concise letter to the person you would like to interview, clearly spelling out whom you are and what you want. The letter should tell a bit about yourself, how you have gotten their

name, and the information you are requesting. Ask for about 30 minutes of the interviewee's time and suggest a timeframe or specific times (give a couple of options) to talk. Indicate at the end of the letter that you will contact the person on a certain day, at a certain time.

You can send your letter via regular mail or email. If you contact people by email, you must maintain the same high standards of grammar and punctuation as you would in any business correspondence. Just because the email is more informal does not mean that the message should be as well.

*Remember your initial letter should tell the person:*

- Who you are
- Where you got their name
- What you want (Remember you are gathering information; Do not ask for a job!)
- When you will call
- Thank you

Letters should be personal, reflect your style, and sound natural. All letters should be in standard business format, carefully checked for appearance, spelling, and grammar.

To help you get started, review the sample letters in [Optimal Resume](#) requesting an informational interview.

### **Step 3: Make the Contact- Via Telephone**

If you would like to call without sending a letter, you will be making essentially the same request, but will try to find out:

- If they are free to talk now
- When you could call them again
- When you could meet with them
- Where they would like to meet

You would usually benefit from a meeting at their office where information for additional contacts is readily available.

*(Note that when you call to arrange an informational interview, you need to be prepared to deal with some additional issues like:*

- *The person who answers the phone*
- *The person who screens your contact's calls (could be a secretary or assistant)*
- *Leaving a message*

- *Explaining your request*
- *What to say to someone who is busy or brusque*
- *Your response to being turned down*
- *What to say when someone says they'll see you*

*While you may want to write out your telephone script, remember that this is simply a normal conversation. Always treat the person who answers the phone with respect and care. Be polite, considerate and clear about what you want.)*

When setting up the appointment, bear in mind that you are asking busy people to give up time to talk to you; their convenience, not yours, should be the priority. So, be as flexible as you reasonably can be as to time/date/location of the meeting. Also, be prepared for interruptions and last-minute rescheduling, as managers are often called to manage client emergencies without much notice. Remain calm and pleasant no matter what happens.

Call precisely at the appointed time. You may speak with your contact or his or her assistant. The interviewee may agree to talk right away or you may need to send a couple of emails or make a phone call. Telephone interviews are much easier to schedule than face-to-face meetings in the office. A telephone conversation is quicker, doesn't require getting screened by security, and avoids office gossip about why the boss is conducting an interview.

#### **Step 4: The Interview**

Research the topics of interest and the interviewee's background thoroughly. Find as much information about your targeted industry, discipline, or company as you can. You might identify companies that fit certain criteria or learn as much as possible about a specific company. Check out company websites, news reports, and trade publications. Use the research to prepare for interviews.

If you have done your homework and you can walk into the informational interview confident that you will make a good impression and get the information that will help you make a wise decision. If you are meeting someone in person, don't forget to dress appropriately. Arrive on time, keep the interview to the scheduled length, and remember proper etiquette. If you are having a telephone conversation, make sure you are in a quiet location.

#### **Here is a small sampling of questions you should ask:**

- Describe a typical day at work.

- How many hours do you normally work in a week?
- What do you see as the potential for growth in this field?
- What can I do now to help me find employment in this field?
- What are some of the particular advantages and disadvantages of this kind of practice?
- What do you like about your work?
- Are there things you dislike about your work?
- Is there any sort of path in terms of course selection that is particularly important in your work?
- Are there particular skills or personality traits that you think are needed in your kind of job that might be different from other kinds of positions?
- What would you see as the best way to get the skills and experience to best qualify me for this kind of position?
- What do you suggest as the best way for someone with my experience to approach prospective employers?
- How should someone with my lack of experience approach prospective employers?  
What are other types of jobs in this industry?
- How did you go about finding this job?
- Would you suggest any ways in which I could improve the content or appearance of my resume?
- Do you think there are things on my resume that prospective employers might object to?
- Can you think of anyone else that I should talk to? Would you mind if I used your name when I contact him/her?

Remember you are leading this interview, so you need to keep the conversation going and be ready with the next question. As the interview progresses, you may find that you need to re-focus, if the interviewer does not want to go in the direction in which you would like to go. Also, if this meeting becomes a job interview (meaning the contact person starts asking you if might like to work there), you may have to change and answer more traditional interview questions. So, make sure to bring a copy of your resume, if you didn't send it initially, and practice answering typical job interview questions before the meeting. Don't be afraid to arrange for another interview if necessary to continue with the job interview.

### **Step 5: Thank you**

Please remember to send a thank you note to show your appreciation. The interviewee has taken time out of what is probably a very busy schedule to help you. In this letter it is important to re-state some of the information you received in the interview and how helpful this information will be to your job search. You should refer also to the person who connected you to the interviewee and be sure to include your resume should the interviewee need to contact you in the future.

Please see Thank you letter examples in [Optimal Resume](#).

As a note, it is good practice after your interview to follow-up with the contact person that connected you to the interviewee. This could be in the form of a short letter or a quick email thanking them for helping you in your job search and putting you in touch with the interviewee. Often colleagues will speak to each other after the interview, so it is important and polite to keep your contact person informed.