**Informational Interviewing**

Adapted from article in: <http://www.quintcareers.com/informational_interviewing.html>

# Introduction

An informational interview should be an integral part of your networking and job-hunting plan. An informational interview involves talking with people who are currently working in the field to gain a better understanding of an occupation or industry -- and to build a network of contacts in that field.

## Potential Results of Informational Interviews

This opportunity will expose you to a variety of jobs and personalities of companies making the search for your "niche" that much easier.

It is an opportunity to learn where you might fit into a particular organization.

## Reasons for Conducting Informational Interviews

Following are some good reasons to conduct informational interviews:

* to explore careers and clarify your career goal
* to expand your professional network
* to build confidence for your job interviews
* to access the most up-to-date career information
* to identify your professional strengths and weaknesses

You gain invaluable interviewing experience and you gain visibility. In short, informational interviewing prepares you for what's in store and allows you the opportunity to network with others in your field of interest.

Talking with family, friends or anyone with whom you feel comfortable should reduce the anxiety you may feel about interviewing.

## Guidelines for Informational Interviews

Following are some guidelines for informational interviews:

### Identify Occupation(s) for Informational Interviews

Identify one or more occupations you would like to investigate. Assess your own interests, abilities, values, and skills, and evaluate labor conditions and trends to identify the best fields to research. Read all you can about the field before the interview. Decide what information you would like to obtain about the occupation/industry.

Prepare a list of questions that you would like to have answered. Find out as much information as you can about each place before setting up an interview.

### Identify People to Interview for Informational Interviews

Start with lists of people you already know: friends, fellow students, present or former co-workers, supervisors, neighbors, etc. Professional organizations, the yellow pages from the phone book, organizational directories, and public speakers are also good resources. You may also call an organization and ask for the name of the person by job title. There's no one in the world who you can't try contacting. You should be prepared. Research the organization, person you'll be speaking with, product produced by the organization, etc. If your contact is an alumnus/alumna, look him/her up in the Alumni Office's biographical material. Try to access periodicals, such as local and large metropolitan newspapers.

The more you know, the better you'll be able to formulate questions pertaining to the organization and job. The more knowledge you have, the more confident you will feel about your ability to communicate effectively. Write to organizations for brochures and pamphlets for additional information. Ask yourself what it is you want to know and then figure out who has an investment in knowing that sort of information. Use the library.

### Never Ask for a Job

Prepare Ahead of Time for your Interview

Ask only those questions that are appropriate and important to you. You will convey your motivation and interest to the employer by acknowledging that the information the interviewee is giving you is important.

A list of suggested questions can be found a little later in this tutorial.

## Do Some Research Before the Interview

For an informational interview to be truly effective, you can’t just go into it blindly.

Thorough company research is an absolute necessity when you go on a regular job interview. Learn about the company: http://www.quintcareers.com/researching\_companies.html andt http://home.sprintmail.com/~debflanagan/.

Other resources include:

* Company Website
* Annual Reports
* Other Company Literature
* Library Reference Material
* University Career Service Office

## Preparing for an Informational Interview

The day before the interview know the location. Plan to arrive 10 minutes early for your interview. Be polite and professional. Refer to your list of prepared questions; stay on track, but allow for spontaneous discussion.

http://www.quintcareers.com/dress\_for\_success.html

## Be Prepared to Take Notes at an Informational Interview

Be enthusiastic and show interest. Employ an informal dialogue during the interview. Be direct and concise with your questions and answers and do not ramble. Have good eye contact and posture. Be positive in your remarks, and reflect a good sense of humor.

## Questions to ask at the Informational Interview

You have arrived and are greeted by the individual at the front desk. When the interviewee comes out to meet you, introduce yourself. Thank your contact for his or her willingness to meet with you, and reemphasize that you are there to learn and gather information about his or her career field. Use an informal dialogue during the interview.

Below are some typical informational interview questions. Remember that you won’t have time to ask anywhere nearly all of these questions, so target the ones you feel will be most useful to you personally. Pick a dozen or so that get at what you most want to know. Braille the questions or key words on note cards for a helpful reference during the interview.

If tape recording the conversation you will want to get permission from your interviewee to tape-record the conversation. It is a reasonable accommodation and most interviewees have no problem when asked.

* 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 fairly 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 or not 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 have on you outside of the ordinary work week? 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 suggest 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 as a result 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 taking a look at my resume?

The whole interview could be spent finding answers to the dozen or so questions you decide to ask. But as you practice and move further toward your target, questions will probably pop into your head spontaneously based on what you need to know.

Pay careful attention to what’s said by the person you interview. Ask questions when something isn’t clear. People are often happy to discuss their positions and willing to provide you with a wealth of information. Try to keep the conversation friendly, brief, and focused on the contact person’s job and career field.

## Sharing Information at the Informational Interview

Share something about yourself, but do not dominate the interview by talking about yourself.

## Be a Good Listener at the Informational Interview

Listening is half of the communication. Besides being able to ask questions and convey a message to employers, you need to develop the skill of really listening to what they tell you. Be receptive and show that the information is important to you. You must listen to it and understand it.

## Build the Network at the Informational Interview

You have spent 20-30 minutes with this person, asking questions, getting advice and sharing a little about yourself. Ask for your contact’s business card and exchange one of your own, if you have one.

## Always Send a Note of Thanks After the Informational Interview

Be sure to send a thank-you card or letter within one to three days after the interview. This communication is an effective way to keep in touch and to be remembered by people. Let them know they were helpful and thank them for the time spent.

As a nice touch, quote something that the resource person said back to them, word for word. Ask the person to keep you in mind if they come across any other information that may be helpful to you in your career research. Include your address and phone number under your signature.

## Record, Analyze, and Evaluate the Informational Interview

For possible future reference, keep a list of all the people you have interviewed or plan to interview. You may even plan to keep a special notebook or cards (Brailled) with interview notes on your questions covered. Include the main things that you gained from each interview. This file will be a rich source of information as you conduct your occupational exploration.

Immediately following the interview, record the information you gathered. 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?

## More Helpful Hints About Informational Interviews

Some final hints about informational interviews:

* 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.