

INFORMATIONAL INTERVIEWING

This guide was created by Quintessential Careers
(www.quintcareers.com/informational_interviewing.html) and was adapted by the Gwynedd-
Mercy College Career Services.

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.

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Background Information About Informational Interviews

Here's a startling statistic: One out of every 200 resumes (some studies put the number as high as 1,500 resumes) results in a job offer. *One out of every 12 informational interviews, however, results in a job offer.* That's why informational interviewing is the ultimate networking technique, especially considering that the purpose of informational interviewing is not to get job offers. Job offers just happen to be a delightful side benefit to this valuable practice.

Informational interviewing is just what it sounds like -- interviewing designed to produce information. What kind of information? The information you need to choose or refine a career path, learn how to break in and find out if you have what it takes to succeed. Informational interviewing is an expanded form of chatting with your network contacts. It's the process of spending time with one of your network contacts in a highly focused conversation that provides you with key information you need to launch or boost your career.

The term "informational interviewing" was invented by Richard Nelson Bolles, author of the best-selling career guide of all time, *What Color Is Your Parachute?* Bolles refers to the process as "trying on jobs to see if they fit you." He notes that most people screen jobs and companies after they've already taken a job, while informational interviewing gives you the opportunity to conduct the screening process before accepting a position.

An informational interview is not the same as a job interview by any means, but it is probably the most effective form of networking there is.

When you are considering entering or changing to a certain career path, it just makes all kinds of sense to talk to people in that field. Yet most people never do. They trust their professors, textbooks, or romantic notions about professions gleaned from TV or movies. When you really think about it, you miss out on an incredible opportunity if you fail to research your career field by talking to people in it.

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 those, such as college students, who are just embarking on their careers. They are also an excellent tool for career-changers who want to find out what's involved in the career they are considering entering. Even for those who don't wish to change careers but do want to change jobs, informational interviews can be a helpful way of discovering what working for other companies would be like.

Potential Results of Informational Interviews

You accomplish several things when you go out on informational interviews:

- 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 how you might fit into that work setting.
- You have the opportunity to make personal contacts among management-level personnel.
- You gain insight into the hidden job market (employment opportunities that are not advertised).
- 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.
- Because informational interviewing is comparatively low-stress, you gain confidence in talking with people while learning what you need to know. Informational interviewing provides an opportunity to meet with potential employers before the more stressful (for both parties) job interview.
- 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 for personal use.
- 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

- Explore careers and clarify your career goal
- Expand your professional network
- Build confidence for your job interviews
- Access the most up-to-date career information
- 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.

Guidelines for Informational Interviews

The following are some guidelines for informational interviews:

- Identify an Occupation
- Identify People to Interview
- Never Ask for a Job
- Prepare Ahead of Time

Identify an Occupation(s)

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

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. People like to help students out with job information. One student whose dream job was to run a Fortune 500 company called the president of Levi Strauss & Co., asked for an informational interview, and got it.

You should be prepared. Research the organization, person you'll be speaking with, product produced by the organization, etc.

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 university library.

Never Ask for a Job

Don't mix informational interviewing with job seeking. Employers will grant informational interviews when they firmly trust that you will not hit them up for a job. The minute you begin trying to get a job, the employer will feel misled. If you discover a job that you do want to apply for during the interview, wait until the informational interview is over. The next day, call the employer and tell your contact that the informational interview not only confirmed your interest in the field, but also made you aware of a position that you would like to formally apply for.

Sometimes the interviewee may offer you an internship or job. It's happened on numerous occasions. Many people have conducted informational interviews and have done nothing but ask questions and yet have been offered employment. What do you do if they offer you an internship or job? If it sounds good, take it! Suddenly your life changes in an instant!

The typical job searcher is going around asking for a job instead of asking questions to find out more about the job and the employer. A job searcher needs to know the basics about the employer and what the company is about. The fact that you are seeking only information will help set you apart from the hundreds of others who are walking in asking for jobs and being told no. Approach the employer with the attitude that you are seeking career advice. It is, therefore, usually a good idea to set up an informational interview with a resource person before there is an actual job opening in your area of interest. Most managers and supervisors feel uneasy or uncomfortable talking with a potential candidate when the organization is actively recruiting to fill the position. However, you may find it helpful for future reference to find out the name of the manager or the person who does the hiring. (Be sure the information you get is accurate!)

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.

Scheduling the Informational Interview

Contact the resource person preferably by telephone or letter. You can also try to have someone who knows the interviewer make the appointment for you.

Guidelines for contacting the resource person by:

- Letter
- Phone or in Person

Scheduling by Letter

An introductory letter, written much like a cover letter without the job pitch, is a great way to get your name out there. Although an introductory letter should be typed, neat printing is acceptable. Your letter should include:

- A brief introduction about yourself;

- Why you are writing to this individual;
- A brief statement of your interests or experiences in the person's field, organization or location;
- Why you would like to converse. Be straightforward; tell him/her you are asking for information and advice.
- The last paragraph of the letter should always include a sentence about how and when you will contact this person again.

Make sure to follow up the letter as you said! Usually this follow-up involves a phone call to set up a phone appointment or an informational interview. Never expect the person to phone you. If you have difficulties contacting the person, ask the receptionist for a convenient time to phone again.

Finally, **proofread all correspondence and save copies!**

Letter Requesting an Informational Interview

Here's a sample cover letter requesting an informational interview.

May 15, 2008

Mark Steppe, Esq.
VAVILOV, WEBB, WALSH & RIVER
1313 Avenue of the Harbors
Suite 4444
Gwynedd Valley, PA 19437

Dear Mr. Steppe:

I am student at Gwynedd-Mercy College, beginning my third semester. Human resources has been of interest to me since I took a class in that subject as an undergraduate. Your firm has an outstanding reputation in that field of practice.

I would appreciate the opportunity to meet with you briefly and discuss the practice of your specialty. I am especially interested in your views regarding public vs. private employment experience. Any further insights you have would be greatly appreciated.

I will contact your office the week of October 2 to set up a mutually convenient time for this informational meeting.

Sincerely,

Jeremy D. Muller

If someone has referred you to another person for an informational interview, consider a letter, such as this sample referral letter.

Referral Letter Requesting an Informational Interview

Here's a sample referral cover letter requesting an informational interview. Additional samples appear on pages 96-97 of *Dynamic Cover Letters for New Graduates*:

March 27, 2007

Mr. C. Benjamin Stevenson
Curriculum Design Department
InstructoSource
555 Fifth Avenue
Kansas City, MO 64100

Dear Mr. Stevenson:

Barry Bartam, whom I met at a recent meeting of the Association of Instructional Designers, suggested that I contact you about my interest in entering the instructional design field.

I'm currently a systems analyst, but I did some instructional design as the result of teaching a class at Gwynedd-Mercy College. I am extremely intrigued by the field, especially the possibilities of Web-based instruction presents.

I would be very grateful for any suggestions you might have.

I'd like to contact you in the near future to "pick your brain." I won't take much of your time and will greatly appreciate any advice you can offer.

Sincerely,

John H. Randall

Requesting an Informational Interview in Person or by Phone

People who grant informational interviews are generally willing to share 20-30 minutes of their time to explain their expertise in their field. Please remember to be flexible in your scheduling, as these volunteer interviewees may have prior commitments. If your prospective interviewee seems too busy to talk to you, ask a convenient time when you could call back to discuss scheduling an appointment. Although there are many techniques to requesting the informational interview, the following are good approaches:

1. "Hello, my name is _____. I'm conducting career research in your field. I would like to meet and talk with you for about 30 minutes so that I can find out more about your field of expertise."
2. "Hi, my name is _____ and I'm a student at _____ University. I got your name from _____. You're in a line of work that I'm interested in, and I was hoping that you could help me gain insights into the profession. I'm sure that my questions could be answered in a 20-30-minute informational interview."
3. If you prefer to arrange an appointment in person and cannot get past the front desk, treat receptionists as resources. They hold the key to getting inside the unit or section of that organization if you do not already have an inside contact or referral. Ask them some of your questions. You will usually get good information. Receptionists and other support staff know much more about their company than we often realize. They know how it works, the names of key people, job requirements, etc. It is important that they understand what you want. If you ask them something that they feel could be more fully answered by someone else, they will usually give you a referral.
4. You can use your own creativity, but the most important thing is to emphasize that you are simply trying to get first-hand information, and whatever they share with you will be appreciated.

Most of the time, your prospective interviewee will be more than willing to take 20-30 minutes to answer your questions. Sometimes the person will want to talk over the phone, but often he or she will invite you to his or her workplace. When you can, choose that the interview be at their workplace because you'll learn more and make a stronger connection with the person.

You may want to schedule some of your interviews with managers and supervisors who have the authority to hire. Identify yourself and explain that you are researching careers in the contact's field, and that you obtained the person's name from _____(if you were referred).

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. You don't have to do quite as much research for an informational interview, but some degree of research will greatly enhance the quality of informational interviews. If you are informed about the company, you'll be able to ask more intelligent and relevant questions. You'll respond thoughtfully to information and any questions the interviewee might put to you. You won't ask questions that could easily have been answered by doing your homework.

A number of great resources are available for company research, many of them right at your fingertips on the Internet. Two excellent resources that walk you through the whole process of company research are the [Quintessential Careers Guide to Researching Companies](http://www.quintcareers.com/researching_companies.html) site (www.quintcareers.com/researching_companies.html) and our [Step-by-Step Guide to Researching Companies](http://www.quintcareers.com/researching_companies_guide.html) (www.quintcareers.com/researching_companies_guide.html).

Other resources include:

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

Prepare

The day before the interview, call to confirm your appointment with the contact person. If you have questions regarding the location of the contact's office, this is the time to ask. Plan to arrive 10 minutes early for your interview.

Carry a small notebook and pen. Be polite and professional. Refer to your list of prepared questions; stay on track, but allow for spontaneous discussion.

Dressing Appropriately

Because 90 percent of all jobs are never advertised, you will uncover job openings that never make it to the newspaper or employment office. Thus, be prepared to make a good impression and to be remembered by the employer. Dress as you would for a regular job interview.

Take Notes

Pretend you are a reporter. You don't need to write down everything, but there may be names, phone numbers or other information that you may want to remember.

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.

Bring Your Resume

Bring a copy of your resume along with you. Try to find out about specific characteristics or qualifications that employers seek when hiring. If you feel comfortable doing so, you may ask the person you are interviewing to critique your resume.

Questions to Ask

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.

Feel free to skip some -- even most -- of these questions or to substitute questions of your own -- as long as you don't come off sounding like you're there for a job interview.

You may want to get permission from your interviewees to tape-record the conversations, but be aware that transcribing taped conversations can be very time-consuming.

- 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 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 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.

For even more questions you could ask in an informational interview, go to [200 Informational Interview Questions](http://www.quintcareers.com/informational_interview_questions.html) (www.quintcareers.com/informational_interview_questions.html).

Share Something About Yourself

Share something about yourself, but do not dominate the interview by talking about yourself. You are there to get the information that will help you learn the most about the occupational field so that you can be prepared to compete for a job. Be aware, however, that many informational interviews have turned into actual employment interviews. Don't count on it, but it does sometimes happen.

If it seems that you are being interviewed for a specific job, clarify with the employer so you can make sure you emphasize your functional/ transferable skills and why you feel they relate to this job.

Be a Good Listener

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

You have spent 20-30 minutes with this person, asking questions, getting advice and sharing a little about yourself. Thus begins your contact network. The person has taken time to share with you; in other words, he or she has invested time in you. Most people like their investments to pay off. Most people will feel good about your staying in contact with them. You do not have to call or write every week. Just keep your interviewee posted on your research.

The interviewee may not have a job for you but may know of other employers or people to which you may be referred. If possible, keep these people informed about your progress. If you have done your job well, they will be interested in your final choices. Ask for your contact's business card and exchange one of your own, if you have one.

Ask for Referrals

People who are in the same kind of business usually know their competition. Before leaving, ask your contact to suggest names of others who might be helpful to you and ask permission to use your contact's name when contacting these new contacts.

Thank You Note

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 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. Now you know how to get the inside scoop on your dream job.

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?

Another Use for Informational Interviews

Phillip Levine of "Ask The Expert" suggests that people who have been out looking for jobs and have become so fearful of getting a "no" that they actually become paralyzed can benefit from informational interviewing.

Informational interviews enable job-seekers to get in front of employers and regain self-confidence as well. Levine notes that with informational interviewing you can't be rejected but you can learn a great deal.

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.

Links About Informational Interviewing

There are a couple of places on the Web where job-seekers can participate or read previous informational interviews:

- Informational Interviewing: A concise look at the steps in the informational interviewing process. Offers 20 sample questions to ask at the interview. From the Wisconsin Job Service and Job Center. <http://danenet.wicrip.org/jets/jet-9407-p.html>
- How to Explore Careers Through Informational Interviewing: A general overview of the informational interviewing process, from JobTrak. www2.jobtrak.com/help_manuals/jobmanual/inform.html
- Information Interviews Guide: A concise review of informational interviewing from Florida State University's Career Center. www.career.fsu.edu/experience/information-interviews-guide.html.
- Informational Interviewing: Get the Inside Scoop on Careers: A PDF of a 2002 article from the U.S. Department of Labor's *Occupational Outlook Quarterly* that provides a nice overview of informational interviewing. www.bls.gov/opub/ooq/2002/summer/art03.pdf

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