

Why conduct informational interviews?

Conducting informational interviews is a great way to learn more about an industry or organization, to make contacts and expand your network, and to practice your interviewing skills. With an informational interview your goal is **not** to ask for a job; rather, you should look to gain information that will help you to become more efficient in your job search and to present yourself as a stronger candidate for the positions for which you apply.

Whom should I interview?

Make a list of job titles and companies/organizations that you're interested in. Then ask everyone – family, friends, professors, co-workers, etc. – if they know of anyone working in those areas. Utilize LinkedIn to find alumni and second degree connections that can assist you. Don't just look for people working in positions that you'd like to have right now; talk to those whose jobs you would like to have 10-20 years from now, too.

How do I set up the interview?

It can be difficult for some people to make contact with someone that they don't know. However, you are asking this person to share his/her expertise, and people generally like to help when they are made to feel important.

If you do not know the contact personally, ask a mutual connection to put you in touch by providing you with contact information.

- If you are provided with an email address, send a brief email introducing yourself, referencing your mutual connection, and indicating an interest in meeting for 15-20 minutes to discuss the person's work in the industry or with the company.
- If your connection copies you on an email sent to the contact on your behalf, you should then send a follow-up email directly to the contact requesting time to meet in person.
- If you are provided with a phone number, place a brief call to introduce yourself and set up a time to meet. If you are not able to reach the contact on your first attempt, call back rather than leave a voice mail. If you're able to speak with a receptionist or assistant, ask him/her when your contact is expected in the office and call back during that time.

If you have neither a personal connection nor a mutual connection, you still can reach out to someone with whom you'd like to speak. Perhaps you share an alma mater; in that case, reference in your inquiry that you are alumni of the same school. Maybe you both belong to the same professional organization; if so, mention that in your introductory note and request. Finally, you may simply come across someone on a company website with whom – after much research – you realize you have no shared connections or affiliations. As long as you can find contact information, you can still request an informational interview. Just be sure to keep your message brief, but specific: explain who you are, what interests you

about that person's job, and then politely and professionally ask for an informational interview. You have nothing to lose by asking.

What if I cannot meet in person?

While it is ideal to meet in person for an informational interview, you also could "meet" over the phone. A phone meeting is a good solution when the person with whom you'd like to speak is located in another part of the country or overseas, or when there may be scheduling issues that make a face-to-face meeting nearly impossible. That said, if you have the opportunity for an in-person meeting, the in-person approach always should be your first choice since you are likely to amass more insight and build greater connection from that type of meeting.

How should I prepare for the interview?

Research, research, research! Read through the company's website, view the contact's LinkedIn profile, and read publications that she/he has written. With that information, compose a list of questions that will allow you to gain in-depth knowledge of the position, industry, or company (see below for examples). Write and practice your 30-second About Me statement and update your resume, just in case.

During the interview

Dress in appropriate business attire, as you would for a job interview. Arrive a few minutes early, and be sure to treat all support staff with courtesy. As the meeting begins, take initiative in leading the interview, but remember that you are there primarily to listen and learn. Ask the insightful questions you've prepared, take notes, and show enthusiasm for what your contact is saying. Keep the interview to the agreed-upon length of time.

Many people wonder if they should bring their resumes to an informational interview. Since it is not a job interview, you should not share your resume unless the person with whom you are speaking asks to see it. However, you may want to bring it along discreetly -- perhaps placing it in a folder, tucked away in a bag -- in case a situation arises where you are asked about it. Sometimes, a contact may provide very useful feedback on a resume since she/he works directly in the field and can speak to what her or his organization looks for on a resume.

After the interview

Follow up with a handwritten or email thank you note within 24 hours. Express appreciation for your contact's time and expertise, and make mention of any specific suggestions or follow-up items that were discussed in the informational interview. You can maintain the new relationship by adding your contact as a connection on LinkedIn, letting him/her know of your job search success, and sharing relevant industry articles or events you come across. Although you don't want to bother your contact with too-frequent communication, you can make contact occasionally as a way to build a professional relationship.

Sample Questions

What is your background? How did you get to where you are now?

What skills and knowledge do you utilize in your job?

What competencies are required for your job? Is there a typical career path that most people follow to become a _____?

How do you spend your time in a typical day or week?

What are the most rewarding aspects of your job? What are the most challenging aspects?

What is a typical salary range for an entry level position in this field? For a senior level position?

How are employees evaluated at this company?

How would you describe the company's culture?

What experience do you recommend I obtain in order to work as a _____?

What do you recommend I emphasize in a job application for a _____ position?

What are the most important factors used to hire someone for a _____ position?

What journals, blogs, or newsletters do you recommend I read to be well-versed in the field? What professional organizations do you recommend I join?

What is the organizational structure of this company?

What are the biggest problems/challenges/opportunities facing this company/industry?

What do you wish you had known when you started out in this field? What, if anything, would you do differently?

Is there anyone else that you recommend I speak with to learn more about _____? *

**This question is very important because it will allow you to build your network. You ideally want to leave your meeting with the names/contact information or 1-2 more individuals to contact. When you contact these new people, you'll be able to reference your original contact and it will be easy! (e.g., "Joe Smith recommended I speak with you.")*