

Informational Interviews



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Are you exploring careers and need information on how to reach your goal? Are you aware of professionals who utilize the knowledge and skills that interest you? Would you like to speak with them about their positions? Then consider conducting an informational interview. Below you'll find practical information necessary to complete an effective informational interview.

Seven steps to informational interviewing

1. Identify sources of information

Two ways of identifying sources of information are through personal referrals and direct contacts. Personal referrals are obtained by using your current network of friends, family, neighbors, co-workers, professors, etc., to obtain names of individuals they know who are using the knowledge, skills, interests, and/or talents that you enjoy or are interested in developing. A direct contact is a source you identify by reading newspapers, magazines, professional journals, and websites, or by researching professional associations related to your areas of interest.

HOT TIP: Read trade journals or magazines from your field of interest and contact a professional who was profiled for an informational interview. Mention that you read the article and were interested and impressed. This will flatter the person and will likely increase the professional's willingness to help you.

Each method of identifying sources has benefits. Personal referrals can save you time by eliminating some of the research required for seeking direct contacts. Obtaining a personal referral can increase the chance that your request for information will be warmly received. Direct contacts, however, are likely to have more rapid access to the type of information you are pursuing. Utilizing direct contacts also allows you to practice being assertive. In summary, it may be beneficial to use a combination of personal referrals or direct contacts when personal referrals are not an option.

2. Make an initial contact with your source

Initial contact may be made either by email, phone, or mail. Regardless of how you make contact with your source, be sure to identify who you are, the purpose of your contact, and what type of information you seek. Your source should have a clear understanding that your sole purpose is to gain information of the particular career field that you consider as a possibility for yourself. It is best not to call it an informational interview. Instead, you might want to call it something like "career development research." Interviews, to employers, translate into job search. **Your source should be assured that you simply want information, not a job.** If your source is the result of a personal referral, mention the name of the person who referred you; however, be certain to have that person's permission first. Finally, if you are writing, indicate when you will call your source to arrange for a meeting.

3. Arrange the details of your interview

When speaking with your potential source, ask for 15 to 20 minutes of time to visit and learn more about his or her position and career area. If possible, arrange to meet at the workplace. Otherwise, scheduling a telephone interview may be necessary. If your potential information source is not able to assist you, ask for a referral of someone who might be able to provide the information you seek. Be sure to ask if your source would mind your using his or her name when contacting other contacts.

4. Prepare interview questions

Before your meeting, develop a list of relevant questions to help you obtain the information you desire. When preparing for the interview, thoroughly research the company. Remember that an informational interview is designed to obtain a “real world” perspective and information not readily available from other sources; therefore, ask questions that can't be answered by common reference materials. Questions should be open-ended, not "yes/no" questions, since open-ended questions provoke a more detailed response. A list of potential questions is provided on the next page.

5. Interview your source

On the day of your scheduled interview, respect your source's time by being punctual and staying only as long as you originally specified. Realize that conducting an effective informational interview involves more than simply asking questions. Active listening and observation are keys to gaining useful information that your source has to provide. Allow the interview to progress on a natural course and you will likely obtain more information than you were initially seeking. Pay attention to your source's attitude and feelings about his or her job and organization. Take brief notes throughout the interview in order not to forget valuable information. Some sources may also allow you to tape the conversation, but remember to ask permission in advance. **Remember, at no time during the interview should you ask for a job!** If you're talking about careers, your source will know you want a job and, if appropriate, he or she most likely will mention it without your asking.

6. Ask for additional referrals

As part of the career area you are considering, your source undoubtedly knows other professionals in that same career field. Remember to ask for names of others who would be valuable to you in obtaining information about this career option.

7. Send a thank-you note to your source

You should always follow up your contact promptly with a brief thank-you note. A thank-you note allows you to express your appreciation for the time and useful information provided. In addition, it will leave a favorable impression and may contribute to a good future relationship. An example of a thank-you note is provided on the last page.

Things to remember...

Your primary purpose in conducting an informational interview:

- To gather information to make an informed major or career choice.
- To make valuable contacts in your field of interest for future opportunities.
- To be remembered and referred on later, because 80% of the currently available opportunities are in the “hidden job market.” Remember the saying, “it’s not so much what you know, but who you know.” It’s actually who knows you; the person who knows you will refer you.

Building a network of contacts is the best way to find an internship or a job:

When setting up an informational interview, the first thing to say is that you are **not** looking for an internship or job but are seeking information about the field. This contact may lead to future opportunities, but your first contact is to gather information only.

What should you take from the interview?

After the interview, make a careful record of the results on an Interview Data Sheet. Determine what you have learned and how it might affect your major and career decisions. Be sure to include:

- Names, titles, addresses, and phone numbers
- What you talked about
- Reflect on the interview and write down any hard questions that came up that threw you
- Try to think of things you can change to improve your approach in the future

A sample Interview Data Sheet is provided on the next page.

Examples of questions to ask:

- What type of skills, knowledge, and academic preparation does one need to perform this job?
- How did you get into this line of work?
- What are some specific advantages and disadvantages of this type of work?
- Can you describe a typical workday for me?
- What are the rewards of this type of work?
- What are the frustrations of this type of work?
- How much flexibility do you have regarding dress, hours of work, vacation schedules, or place of residence?
- What types of advancement opportunities are available?
- To what professional organizations do you belong? Should I join now?
- If you were starting out again in this field of work, what might you do differently?
- What is the future outlook for this line of work?
- What areas do you feel promise the most growth?
- What are some typical job titles in this field?
- Who hires individuals to do this type of work?
- How would I best acquire the necessary skills to perform this job?
- Would you recommend graduate or professional school directly after completing undergraduate work, sometime in the future, or not at all?
- What do you think are the most critical factors in hiring someone into this line of work?
- How would you advise me to look for an entry level job in this area?
- What might be the best way to approach prospective employers?
- How did you go about finding this job?
- If you were to leave your current position and line of work, what other kind of work would attract you and why?

Create an Interview Data Sheet for EVERY interview conducted

Name of person interviewed:

Title:

Organization:

Address:

Date of Interview:

1. What part of this person's work particularly interested me?
 2. What skills used by this person do I have?
 3. What skills used by this person could I develop?
 4. How should I prepare myself to enter this field?
 5. What other types of careers are related to this field?
 6. What about this kind of work is attractive to me?
 7. What negative impressions do I have?
 8. Did any other possible interview contacts come up? (list name and contact information)
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Example of a thank-you note following an informational interview

Date ??, 20xx

John Doe
Publisher
Vertiform Digest
Topeka, KS 66621

Dear Mr. Doe:

Thank you for taking time from your busy schedule to answer my questions about a possible career in the publishing profession. You gave me a wealth of information that I would not have been able to learn in a class or find in a textbook.

Based on what I learned from you, I feel that I am definitely on the right course. I certainly appreciate your insight and advice and look forward to meeting with Mr. X and Mr. Y as you suggested. I will keep you informed of my progress as I refine my career search.

Sincerely,

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You only get one chance to make a positive first impression on a potential employer!

Visit Career Services in Morgan 105 or call (785) 670-1450 to make an appointment.
www.washburn.edu/career-services