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Guide to Informational Interviewing

Whether you are starting your career or contemplating a change, informational interviews are a great way to learn relevant and authentic information about a specific job or career field. Simply put, an **informational interview is an informal conversation you can have with someone working in an area of interest to you.** The objective isn't to find job openings in the moment, but rather the interview serves as a learning opportunity and a chance to network. In fact, informational interviews are somewhat of a hidden gem among job seekers and professionals alike, because there are so many benefits to doing them and they are a low-risk commitment – meaning that it's just a conversation among two people.

Benefits of informational interviewing

- Get firsthand, relevant information about the realities of working within a particular field, industry or position. This kind of information is not always available online.
- Find out about career paths you did not know existed.
- Learn whether a specific job is for you – or if it isn't! It's always helps to know what you *don't* want to do.
- Learn what experience and skills are necessary to land a particular job.
- Learn what it's like to work at a specific organization.
- Initiate a professional relationship and expand your network of contacts in a specific career field; meet people who may forward job leads to you in the future.
- Get more comfortable with professional interviews – it will help when a formal job interview comes around.

Who should you interview?

Typically, the person who is seeking information is responsible for setting up the interview. They will initiate contact, request 30-60 minutes of the interviewee's time, and then determine the time and place for the meeting. Therefore, some groundwork must be done first before you can access the insider knowledge gained from an informational interview.

When you are considering who would be best for an informational interview, it's crucial to **have an idea of the kind of information you're looking for.** Is there a particular job or company you are interested in learning more about? Is there a broad career field, like sales, marketing, or HR that you want to explore? Or rather, is there an industry, like construction, tech, or hospitality, in which you are curious about? Consider individuals who have experience in something you have an interest in or want to learn more about. That way, you can ensure the conversation is worthwhile for both parties involved.

It also helps to **find individuals you have a connection with**. Although it's not necessary, asking a mutual friend or acquaintance will increase the chances that they will agree to meet with you – and it's easier to contact them. Consider asking your friends, family, former colleagues, or other people you know whether they have any contacts in the specific job, company, or industry you're interested in. Another way to set up an informational interview is to track down **fellow alumni from your alma mater**. You can find alumni by either doing a search on LinkedIn or by going through the alumni association of your college.

Making the ask

Once you've found someone you'd like to meet with, it's time to ask them whether they're willing to have an informational interview with you. Usually, the easiest way to reach out is by contacting them by phone or email. Here are some tips for making the ask:

- Keep your introduction short and if you don't know the individual personally, establish any connection you have to them. Who gave you their contact information? Did you attend the same university or work at the same company? Did you meet briefly at a past event?
- Be clear about what you're looking for. Ask for something very specific, and make it as easy as possible for the person to say yes.
- Be considerate of their time and find a way to meet that is convenient for them.
- Make it clear that you want to talk to *them* for a specific reason, not because you're looking for a job (even if you are).
- Follow up and be politely persistent. If you haven't heard back in a week, reply to your first email and respectfully ask if your contact has had a chance to read your previous email. Also, use this opportunity to reiterate how much it would mean to you to have 30 minutes to learn from them.

Interview Preparation

Since you're the one asking the individual for an interview, it's courteous to be prepared by doing some research beforehand and coming with a list of questions you'd like to ask. Take some time to research both the interviewee and the company they work for. Obtaining some background knowledge on what they do will also help you create some questions about what you want to learn more about. Here are some examples:

- What are your main responsibilities as a...?
- What is a typical day (or week) like for you?
- What do you like most about your work? What do you like least?
- How did you begin your career?
- How do most people get into this field? What are common entry-level jobs?
- What skills, abilities, and personal attributes are essential to success in your job/this field?
- Can you suggest anyone else I could contact for additional information?

Tips for the meeting

Although it's not a formal job interview, it's still important to treat an informational interview with professionalism. Dress appropriately, arrive on time, and come prepared with list of questions and topics you want to cover. Express your gratitude early on and thank them for taking the time to meet with you.

After you have introduced yourselves again and settled in, focus your early questions on the interviewer. Start by asking about their experience in the field, how they got started, what other careers they considered, etc. You should also be prepared to chat about yourself, your past experiences, and your career goals. Remember, this meeting isn't just a time to ask for advice and learn from your contact's experiences—it's also a chance to make an impression.

Don't be afraid to take notes during the meeting, especially if the interviewee refers you to other people to get in touch with. Alternatively, toward the end of the meeting, it is appropriate to ask if the interviewee knows anyone else who could offer you more advice on any of the topics that came up during your conversation.

Finally, always follow up with a thank you note or email, regardless of how helpful the informational interview was. Make sure they know how much you appreciated them giving you their time. If you go on multiple informational interviews, it can help to keep a log of who you met with, their contact information, a summary of what you learned from them, and whether you followed up with a thank you note.