



INFORMATIONAL INTERVIEWING

Informational interviewing is a conversation with someone knowledgeable in a specific career field or industry for the purpose of career exploration and network building. These conversations provide an opportunity to gather career-related information and advice that is typically not available from written or Internet sources. Informational interviewing also allows you create contacts and build relationships with people in your career field.

An informational interview can be a face-to-face conversation at a workplace, an in-depth telephone conversation or a brief exchange about a specific issue.

While contacts and relationships with valuable networking sources are some of the most effective ways to find a professional position, do not confuse an informational interview with a job interview. Informational interviewing should NEVER be used as a guise for asking for a job. If you feel you have established rapport with someone, it is reasonable to re-contact the person when you have narrowed your focus and begun your job search.

Informational interviewing requires time, energy and a positive and appreciative attitude. However, the investment repays itself many times over by generating invaluable information, skills and contacts in a process you can use throughout your life.

ALL STUDENTS can benefit from informational interviews. For undecided students, informational interviews can help in choosing a major or minor, as well as with overall career decision-making. For students who have already begun to focus on a specific career, informational interviews can provide detailed information needed to make more specific decisions in a major or career field (e.g., deciding what professional area to focus on with a degree in political science) and start creating a personal networking list.

WHO SHOULD I INTERVIEW?

Anyone who is knowledgeable about a certain career field and/or can provide networking sources is a good informational interview source. This is a very small world, and chances are you know more people that are good sources of information than you think. First, brainstorm people you already know: friends, roommates, classmates, family members, professors and past supervisors. Even the person who cuts your hair can be a potential contact, if they're connected to others who are in positions or organizations that interest you! You may or may not discover any "first degree" contacts that are connected to your interests, so the second step involves thinking of how you can reach people you don't know that are in your career field. College or university alumni are great sources for information (in fact, the UNM Alumni Association maintains a "Career Mentors" program for this very purpose). Professional associations in your field can be extremely helpful in providing professional contacts, and many have mentor programs that connect students with professionals already working in the field. Attending their regional or national conferences is also an excellent way to make new contacts. In addition, consider contacting authors of articles in the press or professional journals that you have read and interest you.

Don't be shy to ask for an informational interview. Many students feel they are imposing in asking, when in fact studies show that informational interviewing is something most people enjoy doing very much. From the perspective of the professional, you are not being asked to incur any financial cost, it is a relatively short time commitment, and most of all, it

makes the person feel good. Not only is he or she helping someone else, but is being looked to as an “expert,” which makes most people feel important.

GETTING STARTED: HOW TO PREPARE FOR AN INFORMATIONAL INTERVIEW

Do Initial Research

You should conduct some initial research on the career field and/or industry before an informational interview. Remember, an informational interview is done to get information you can't find in career literature, trade publications, company information or on the Internet. Therefore, ask questions that go beyond the obvious. This is your opportunity to get “the inside scoop.” Also, try to find out as much as possible about the professional and his or her organization, as you want to appear knowledgeable, informed and interested.

Develop Interview Questions

Through your initial research, you will develop questions you would like answered in the interview. Think about what you hope to learn and the kinds of questions that will elicit that information. Most people prefer to answer questions that require them to reflect on their work. Open-ended, evaluative questions are often an effective way to start the conversation. The order and phrasing of your questions will depend on your own style and the flow of the conversation. It is recommended to develop a list of questions prior to the interview, but don't be discouraged if you never make it to the list, or run out of time before having all of your prepared questions answered. This is part of the fun of the process!

Specific questions will depend on the stage of your career exploration. Customize questions to fit your personality, interests, values, career goals and other criteria that are important to you. Potential areas for questions can include:

- **What the Job/Work is Like** - The challenges, frustrations, rewards encountered; kinds of decisions required; problems solved; how time is spent on the job.
- **Motivation and Interest** - What attracted the professional to this career? What advice do they have for students considering this occupation?
- **Essential Skills and Abilities** - Both necessary and desirable skills, education, experience required, training or preparation.
- **Professional Development** - Career paths and advancement.
- **Lifestyle Implications of the Work** - Salary/benefits, travel, pressure, flexibility, security.
- **Work Environment** - Physical setting, people (colleagues and clients), organizational structure and culture.
- **Current Issues in the Industry** – Personal perspective that goes beyond what you have read.
- **Ways to Get More Information** - Professional journals, professional organizations, other contacts or networking sources.

Potential Questions

You will undoubtedly have questions that you are dying to ask. However, if you are having difficulties generating specific questions, here is a list to get you started (adapted from the National Career Development Association's Facilitating Career Development Student Manual – 2nd edition):

- How did you get into this field?
- What is typical day like for you?
- What has your career path been like? Where might you go from here?
- What professional organizations do you belong to? Is professional development an important part of your career?
- What training can I expect in this field?
- What trends do you see influencing the profession?
- What is the biggest problem facing the profession today?
- What are the best sources for learning more about the industry?
- What is the preferred way to network within this field?
- What next steps might you suggest for me?
- Is there anyone else you know that I should be talking to? May I let them know you referred me?
- What are the most effective techniques for getting a job in this field?

Asking for an Informational Interview

Write, Call or Email

A student can either write, call, email or a combination of all three. The initial contact method should be in the preference the referral source has indicated. If there was no preference given, choose the method you feel most comfortable with. For example, a student might prefer to write a letter first to guarantee that the request is clear and concise, then follow-up by phone. This is also a less intimidating method for many students. A letter may garner more attention than an email.

Important Factors to Remember When Contacting a Perspective Informational Interviewer:

- **Be clear and direct about the goal of the interview**
Remember, you are requesting information, not a job.
- **Always cite the person(s) who provided you with the contact source**
“Joe Smith suggested I contact you as a source of information in the field of biology.”
- **Stress that you will meet him or her at their convenience**
However, be prepared to settle for a phone interview on the spot (this is why it is important to have already prepared for the interview prior to contacting the potential source).
- **Indicate how much time you will require**
Most interviews will last 30-60 minutes. Asking for any more than that may be overstepping your bounds.

Informational Interviewing Etiquette

Confirm the Interview

Call or email to confirm the interview about 48 hours prior.

Dress Appropriately

While this is not a formal job interview, appearances matter. If you have a business suit this is a great opportunity to wear it. If not, wear appropriate professional/business attire.

Arrive Early

Arrive about 15-20 minutes prior to your interview. As with any professional meeting, never be late.

Act Professionally

This is not a job interview; however, it is a professional meeting. You want to showcase your professional attitude and composure to make a good impression. Remember, informational interview contacts are networking contacts that can put either a good or bad word in for you with other professionals and employers.

Be Prepared

You have requested the interview, and it is your job to come prepared with well-researched questions. Don't expect the person being interviewed to drive the meeting. Be prepared to respond to questions from the professional such as, “What can I do for you?” or, “What can you tell me about yourself?”

Jot Down any Special Points

Clarify any terms you don't know or anything you don't understand, and keep track of any referrals or suggestions. Finish writing down what you have learned immediately after the interview.

Stay Within Your Time Limit

Unless the professional indicates otherwise, never go beyond the amount of time requested. Be sensitive to nonverbal clues that it is time to end the interview.

Know How and When to Present Your Resume

You should always bring copies of your resume to an informational interview. Make sure that you treat it as an effective way to give your contact a sense of your background, or as something you seek advice on, rather than a ploy to get a job. For example, at the end of the interview you might ask, "Would you be willing to take a look at my resume to give me some feedback, as a professional, on what I might do to improve my resume? Or, what experiences I should work towards gaining before entering the field?"

Send a Thank You Letter

After an interview, always send a thank you letter.

Frequently Asked Questions

How many informational interviews are enough to get a good representation of my career field?

As with anything in the career exploration process, the more people you speak to, the better. This doesn't mean you have to do 200 interviews, but many times students feel that if they speak to one or two people they have a good representation of the field, which is false. Don't let one disappointing interview deter you (or one overly optimistic interview sway you). Seek to gain multiple perspectives so that you can gain an accurate picture of the profession, based on a number of reports. If you hear over and over again that you will need a master's degree to advance in the profession, this is a good indicator that this is an accepted norm in the profession. However, if only one of ten people gives you this information, it may only be true in that professional's niche area, or an outdated perspective. The earlier in your student career you start doing informational interviews, the more people you can speak with in a comfortable time frame and start establishing professional relationships.

I requested an informational interview and the person suggested we speak over lunch. Who pays?

Most professionals remember what it was like to be a student on a tight budget. If a professional suggests meeting during lunch or dinner, chances are he or she will offer to pick up the tab. However, the general rule is he or she who invites pays, which is you. Be prepared to pay for both meals or at least your own. Again, chances are the professional will pick up the tab but you don't want to be in an awkward situation if this doesn't occur. If the professional does pay, make sure you thank him or her.

I did an informational interview with an alumni and he was not able to help me as much as I had thought. Do I still need to send a thank you letter since I will not be contacting him further?

YES. As with any type of career development contact, a thank you note is just common courtesy. Also, even if the professional is not in a position to help you now, you never know when you might run into him or her again and in what situation.