

Informational Interview

“Connecting Curriculum and Career”

Conducting an informational interview is an effective way to begin either occupational research or the networking process – especially when you are researching a field where you currently don’t have contacts. You will find out important details about the company and position of the person you are interviewing, and have an opportunity to begin a relationship with this person.

Prepare and practice

Informational interviews are, “a safe environment to ask questions.” You want to come across in a way that inspires others to help you. Do your homework. Study up on industry lingo. Learn who the players are. Be able to talk about the most important trends. You don’t want to waste your expert’s time asking Google-able questions. Work on your listening and conversation skills, practice asking great questions and conveying memorable energy with people who are easy to talk to, such as your family, your friends, and friends of friends.

Keep your introduction short

It’s **not** a venue to practice your elevator pitch; it’s a place to “absorb information and find stuff out.” prepare a “brief, succinct explanation about yourself that you can recite in three minutes max: “Here’s my background, here’s what I’m thinking, and I’d like your feedback.” People can’t help you unless they understand what you’re looking for, be brief.

Set the tone

You want to leave a positive impression and enough information to recommend you to others. At the beginning state that “you’re interested in talking to 10 industry experts” during your information-gathering phase. So, the person knows that you are looking for additional sources. If you wait until the end to ask for other referrals, she might be caught off guard. Ask about time constraints. At the end of the time allotted, you’re having a good conversation, say, ‘I want to respect your time. I would love to keep talking, but if you need to go, I understand.’

Think like a journalist

Prepare informed, intelligent questions. You don’t need to stick to the script, but if you’re unfocused, you risk offending the person. Approach your interview like “an investigative journalist.” You’re not cross-examining your expert, and you don’t want to come across as “pushy or difficult,” but “gently probe through curiosity, then listen.” Consider Daniel Porot’s “Pie Method”:

- How do you get into this line of work?
- What do you enjoy about it?
- What’s not so great about it?
- What’s changing in the sector?
- What kinds of people do well in this industry?

You can adapt these questions; the idea is to help you spot the roles and fields that match your skills and experience and give you an understanding of how top performers are described.

Deliberately test your hypotheses

Your mission is to grasp the reality of the industry and the job so you can begin to decide if it's right for you. Don't shy away from sensitive topics. Such as:

What are the worst parts of your job?

What didn't you know before you got into this industry that you wish someone had told you?

Some topics, may seem taboo but can be broached delicately, Say something like, 'I've done some research and it seems that the typical salary range is this,' so you're asking for confirmation of public information.

It's also okay to ask for advice on "how to position yourself" for a job in the industry by making your experience and skills sound relevant. "Based on what you know about my background, what do you see as my weaknesses? And what would I need to do to allay the concerns of a potential hiring manager?" If the feedback is negative, consider it valuable information but get second and third opinions. "One person's word is not gospel,". "You may not be qualified, but you also may have spoken to a stick-in-the-mud who discourages everyone. Don't let him limit your career options."

Follow up with gratitude, not demands

Thank the person for their time via email or send a handwritten note to express gratitude right after you meet. It will help you be remembered. Your thank-you letter should describe how the person was helpful to you and, ideally, that her guidance led to "a concrete outcome" in your job search.

Play the long game

Don't think of this as one time meetings in which "someone gives you 15 minutes of his time." Take the long view and think about ways to cultivate your new professional connection. Forward him a link to a relevant magazine article, for instance, or invite her to an upcoming conference or networking event. In other words, be helpful. You want to be seen as giving, not constantly taking. It can be tricky when there's a wide age or professional gap between you, but if you focus on keeping the person "apprised of your progress" — perhaps writing him a note saying you read the book he suggested or that you joined the professional association he recommended, it shows you listened and that his advice mattered.

Remember

Do:

Your homework. You should do enough background research before going in that you sound like a credible candidate who's committed to moving into a new sector.

Prepare a succinct explanation about your background and what you're looking for

Send a handwritten thank-you note. It's good manners and makes you memorable.