

One of the best ways to learn more about an industry, company or position is to talk to someone in the field. Speaking with industry professionals can provide you with a better sense of the real life experiences, challenges, and opportunities within a particular field. Informational interviewing is a valuable career tool that you can use to initiate these conversations with industry professionals.

What is an Informational Interview?

An informational interview is an interview that *you* initiate to obtain information from people working in the field. Unlike job interviews, informational interviews are generally informal and are conversational. Informational interviews are an opportunity for you to ask specific questions about a career field, brainstorm about your career plans, learn more about other's pathways to success, and find other professionals to contact. They are NOT an opportunity for you to ask for a job or internship.

Why would anyone want to speak with me?

Believe it or not, people enjoy talking about themselves and may even feel honored that someone wants to learn more about what they do. Career exploration is not a time to be shy, so make sure to ask friends, family members, former employers, university staff, and other personal connections if they know of anyone that may be interested in talking with you. Once you have identified potential interviewees, set up an appointment via e-mail, phone or in person. Make sure to include how you obtained the person's contact information and the length of time you would like to speak with them, most informational interviews run between 20 minutes to an hour long.

How should I prepare?

Before the meeting, make sure you do your homework. Think about how you envision the conversation and create a list of 5-10 open-ended questions to ask during the interview. Questions can include topics such as the interviewee's career path, daily work activities, and requests for advice. Make sure that answers to your questions are not readily available on the internet, and you are respectful of the interviewee's time. For help developing your own set of questions, take a look at the example questions on the following page.

Although informational interviews are considered informal, it is important to make a good first impression with the person you are interviewing. Before the interview, consider what type of attire is appropriate during your interview. The interview may not require you to wear a suit, but maintaining a professional appearance is key. You will also want to consider how you will introduce yourself to the interviewee. Developing a short overview of yourself, including your reasons for contacting the person, will provide the person being interviewed some perspective on your interests and help guide the conversation.

Finally, you will also want to prepare for possible realization that you are not interested in the interviewee's field or that the career is not for you. No matter what, be respectful of the person being interviewed; do not end the interview early. Make sure you remain engaged during the conversation. Remember, the person being interviewed has a variety of relevant life experiences that you can learn from regardless of their professional field.

After the Interview

After completing an informational interview, you will probably have a list of next steps you want to take. The first item on that list should always be to write a thank you note to the person you interviewed. Make sure your written note is both personal and timely, and when debating between a hand written note and an email, err on the side of timeliness.

SAMPLE QUESTIONS

Below is a list of questions that you can use to guide your information interview.

Background: Tell me how you got started in this field. What was your education? What educational background or related experience might be helpful in entering this field?

Work Environment: What are the daily duties of your job? What are the working conditions? What skills/abilities are utilized in your field?

Problems: What are the toughest problems you deal with at work? What problems does the industry have as a whole? What is being done to solve these problems?

Lifestyle: What obligation does your work put on you outside the work week? How much flexibility do you have in terms of dress, work hours, vacations?

Rewards: What do you find most rewarding about this work, besides the money?

Salary: What salary level would a new person start with? What are the fringe benefits? What are other forms of compensation (e.g. bonuses, commissions, securities)?

Potential: Where do you see yourself going in a few years? What are your long term goals?

Promotional: Is turnover high? How does one move from position to position? Do people normally move to another company/division/agency? What is your policy about promotions from within? What happened to the person(s) who last held this position? How many

have held this job in the last 5 years? How are employees evaluated?

The Industry: What trends do you see for this industry in the next 3 to 5 years? What kind of future do you see for this organization? How much of your business is tied to (the economy, government spending, weather, supplies, etc.)?

Advice: How well-suited is my background for this field? When the time comes, how would I go about finding a job in this field? What experience, paid or volunteer, would you recommend? What suggestions do you have to help make my resume more effective?

Demand: What types of employers hire people in this line of work? Where are they located? What other career areas do you feel are related to your work?

Job Market: How do people find out about your jobs? Are they advertised in the newspaper (which ones?), on the Web? By word of mouth (who spreads the word?)? By the personnel office?

Referral to other information opportunities: Can you name a relevant trade journal or magazine you would recommend I review regularly? What professional organizations might have information about this career area?

Referral to others: Based on our conversation today, what other types of people do you believe I should talk to? Can you name a few of these people? May I have permission to use your name when I contact them?

*This list of questions comes from the Florida State University's *Career Planning and Job Search Guides* ed. 2007.