

INFORMATION INTERVIEWS

Information interviews are a type of networking conversation. These are interviews that you conduct in order to obtain information about a position, field or career, often during the process of deciding upon a career or a career change. Informational interviewing can be the most powerful of all the tools in your toolkit, provided that it is done well. Below are some tips on using informational interviews effectively.

Information Interviewing Tips

- **Ask for information and advice.** Most people don't have a job for you, and if they think that you expect a job from them, they may resist talking to you. Reassure your contacts: "At this point, I am simply looking for some information and guidance."
- **Be respectful.** If your contact sounds rushed, ask if this is a good time to talk, and offer to call back whenever it is convenient for your contact. Put the time in your appointment book and make sure you follow up.
- **Don't insist on a face-to-face meeting.** Many people can squeeze in a phone or video call but don't want to commit to an appointment. If the contact is an important one, you may wish to follow up with a brief meeting, but use the phone as your main source of information interviews.
- **Be prepared.** Have a list of questions in front of you, and work through them in priority order. That way, if you run out of time, your most important questions have been answered.
- **Know what you want.** You don't know *exactly* what you want to do, or you wouldn't be going through this process. At the same time, you should be able to tell your contact something about yourself and your objectives, if only in general terms. For example, you might say "I'd love your thoughts on where else I could use my legal and financial experience." Work on a short, four or five sentence introduction that describes who you are and what you want.
- **Monitor your time.** I usually suggest that you request 20 minutes of someone's time. It is up to you to keep track of the time and begin to wrap up the interview. If you have more questions, say that: "Our twenty minutes is up, but I have a couple more quick questions. Do you have time now, or should I send them along by email?" Then, do as you have promised—ask quickly, or finish up and follow up.

- **Show them how you'll treat the contacts they give you.** How you treat your information contacts will demonstrate to them how you are likely to treat the people whose names they give you. So be respectful, keep track of your time, don't push for anything that seems uncomfortable to your contact, and say thank you. If the person likes their interaction with you, they are likely to pass you on to others they know. If they don't like how you treat them, they won't give you their most important contacts, if they give you any.
- **Don't lead with a resume.** Handing someone your resume first thing can put him or her on the defensive, because they probably don't have a job for you. Lead with your questions. A great way to get the resume into the conversation is to solicit your contact's reactions to it.
- **Have a resume handy.** Many contacts want a resume because it is a good summary of who you are and what you have done. If they ask, you should be able to produce one immediately. If they don't ask for one, solicit their suggestions on your resume, and use that as opportunity to put your resume in their hands.
- **Get two new contacts from each interview.** One of your objectives is to get additional contacts so that you can continue to explore the field. Ask if your contact can suggest other people that you can speak with. If you get only one name, ask if there is anyone else. Ask your contact if you can use their name when contacting these individuals.
- **Send a thank you note.** This part is mandatory. Every information interview must be followed up with a thank-you note. This is how you build a network of people willing to help you.
- **Send a LinkedIn Invitation.** This is an excellent way to stay connected and build your network.

Questions to Ask in an Information Interview

As noted above, you should prepare a list of questions before doing any informational interviews. Many questions will be tailored to your interests. Below are some suggested questions. Note the question on salary, and the form of that question. You don't want to ask what your contact makes, but you do want specific information on salaries in the field, so ask about the average salary range for the position you are interested in. This will be important information to know when you are conducting salary negotiations.

- What background does one need to enter this field/career?
- How did you start in this field?
- Do you know anyone who has changed from another field into this career field?

- ❑ Are there specific skills or abilities in high demand?
- ❑ What is a typical workday like?
- ❑ What are the career opportunities in this field?
- ❑ What are the key issues in this field? What is the future of this field?
- ❑ What is the “standard” career path in this field or for this job?
- ❑ Are there alternative methods for entering this field? Specific examples?
- ❑ What are the best/worst aspects of the job?
- ❑ What associations/magazines/websites etc. are most important in this field?
- ❑ What is the average salary range for this position?

If you are exploring a specific company, ask about the corporate culture, how performance is rewarded, what turnover is like, what the average workday is like, what the best and worst aspects of the company are, what the options are for flexible and telework, how the company uses teams, who are its competitors, suppliers, customers, what its plans are for the future, how its stock price has been doing.

Finally, Always Follow-up

Always send a thank-you note. You can use email, but don't neglect this critical task. If you really want to leverage this information interview, make sure that you follow-up. Make this person part of your ongoing network. You can do this by letting them know what came of their advice, especially if it led to something positive:

“Thank you again for giving me Jane Doe's name. She was incredibly helpful, and gave me three other people to contact. Your advice was really valuable.”