INFORMATIONAL INTERVIEWING

WHY IS INFORMATIONAL INTERVIEWING HELPFUL?
Informational interviewing is a significant part of networking. Almost 90% of all jobs come from a personal job search, and networking is the primary means for uncovering positions in the hidden job market.

Employers want to know about you:
- Are you capable of doing the job?
- Are you motivated to do the job?
- How will you get along with your co-workers?
- How will you fit the job?
- How will you add value to the company?

When employers ask you these same questions, you will want to answer with strategic, appealing responses.

An informational interview is one method of obtaining critical information from knowledgeable, credible, and up-to-date resources.

A well-planned informational interview can be a non-threatening, candid, and dynamic conversation. You design the questions to give you insight into the workings of your career interests as well as to accumulate a range of information helpful to your job-search.

WHAT DO YOU LEARN IN AN INFORMATIONAL INTERVIEW?
Your conversation can cover a wide variety of topics and provide immeasurable benefits:
- You can investigate a specific career, industry, company, or job.
- You can develop an understanding of the economy and the marketplace.
- You can narrow your options from infinite to the possible to the probable.
- You can find out where you best fit and what will bring you satisfaction.
- You can learn jargon and current issues in your field.
- You can create a strategy for getting the job or career you want.
- You can become more productive in your job search efforts.
- You can improve your professional communication skills and learn how to present yourself to best advantage.
- You can increase your self-confidence in interpersonal relationships.
You can broaden your network of contacts; you will meet people who will give you good advice and become respected inside references as well as hiring managers who control job opportunities.

You can be in the right place at the right time, before a position is advertised or even created!

**HOW DO YOU STRUCTURE AN INFORMATIONAL INTERVIEW?**

The informational interview gives you the opportunity to shine: by preparing for this interview as if for a job interview, you can demonstrate personal characteristics that may make you a desirable candidate in your contact’s mind when an opening does arise.

A proven approach to informational interviewing is to develop a short series of targeted questions which you then use over and over in a number of interviews to a variety of people who can give you different perspectives. Focus your questions to your most pressing career/job concerns and your areas of professional interest. Then, look for emerging patterns to guide you where you best fit.

As you prepare, write your questions to encourage clarity, logic, and a natural flow in the ultimate conversation. Ask open-ended questions, using words like “how, why, or in what way?”

What do you need to know most about an industry, a company, or job to help you make your career decision? Whom should you contact? Research each organization before you make your appointment. Do not ask questions about anything which you could easily find in accessible material. Your contact will appreciate your doing your homework and remember your initiative.

Most people love to talk about themselves and what they do. Take advantage of this enthusiasm but not of your contact’s time. Request a 30-minute face-to-face meeting or a 15-20 minute phone conversation. If your questions are organized, you will cover what you need to know, and, in many cases, if the interview is enjoyable, you will get more time.

**HOW DO YOU ARRANGE AN INFORMATIONAL INTERVIEW?**

Begin with your network and your network’s network. If you have no relationship whatever to the person with whom you wish to speak, try to forge some connection, whether through similar career interests or your
admiration for their distinction or position in their field. Upon first contact, be able to tell that person why you desire this particular interview and what the focus of your conversation will be.

WARM AND COLD-CALLING
Making a call to a network contact is considered “warm” because you have a reference, a mutual connection. Initiating a telephone conversation to a total stranger is a “cold” call.

Telephoning people you don’t know is a critical part of almost every job, so this mastering this skill is useful for your professional development:
- You polish your oral communication skills, especially learning to use the power of persuasion effectively and appropriately.
- You practice the art of relationship building.
- You gather useful and timely information for decision-making.
- You actively put yourself in control of your future.

Call early in the morning and choose a day that you can receive return calls. Prepare a message for your contact’s answering machine or for an administrative assistant to deliver. Be concise and polite. State your name and phone number clearly, the reason for the contact, ask for a brief meeting in person or by phone, and repeat your name and phone number.

Be ready to be flexible and to adapt to your contact’s busy schedule.

HOW CAN YOU MAKE THE INFORMATIONAL INTERVIEW SUCCESSFUL?
First impressions are important. Dress professionally and arrive early. Greet your contact by name with a ready smile, offer a firm handshake, and maintain appropriate eye contact. After small talk, thank the person for seeing you.

Remember that your non-verbal physical behavior is important to establishing rapport and moving the conversation along. Be assertive, enthusiastic, and a good listener.

Be open to information which falls outside your written list of questions:
- Learn what the industry/organization/job is really like beyond the public face.
- Understand how all the parts of a complicated organization fit together.
• Figure out the “spaces” between the organization chart.

Watch and listen for cues that indicate the interview needs to end.

At the conclusion of your interview, always ask for names of possible contacts, including hiring managers, and ask if you may use the contact’s name as a reference.

When you conclude the interview, get a business card to use in sending a thank-you note, in keeping your contact updated about your job search status, or just for staying in touch.

Thank your contact sincerely.

HOW SHOULD I FOLLOW UP THE INFORMATIONAL INTERVIEW?
Send your resume with either a hand-written thank-you note or a professional letter, immediately following your appointment. You may use e-mail for a quick response but always send a snail mail, too.

A good thank-you note has a simple format:
• An opening in which you state your appreciation for the meeting
• The body in which you paraphrase salient points in your conversation of benefit to you
• A sentence or two about your follow-through on suggestions
• A closing in which you restate your sincere gratitude and your intentions to keep in touch.

Organize and maintain a complete list of contacts with title, organization, address, e-mail, phone number, and date of conversations.

Evaluate your style of interviewing after each contact so that you improve every time.

WHAT ARE SAMPLE INFORMATIONAL INTERVIEWING QUESTIONS?

• What is your job title and how long have you been in this position?
• What are your major job responsibilities? What is the scope of your authority? What are your priorities in a typical day, week, or month? Does your work vary day-to-day, week-to-week? What is the work flow pattern? When are your times of activity/inactivity/pressure? Do fluctuations in the market effect your job security?

• What percentage of your time do you spend alone, in teams, with peers, with superiors, with subordinates, in meetings, in travel? Do you have interaction across departments or other organizational areas?

• What business issues or problems do you address? What is your personal impact on the industry, the company, and your department?

• What background did you bring to this job? What experience, education, expertise, and skills do you need/use in your work? What personality, values, interests, and skills best fit this job? How did you get to this position?

• Why did you come to this company? Describe the company work environment, the culture, and the people.

• Describe the profile of a successful person in your department/company. What is the career path in this industry/company/job and how can I move in a forward direction?

• What do you like most/least about your work? What are the rewards and satisfactions? What are your career goals? What opportunities do you have for professional development?

• What are the lifestyle implications of your work?

• How entrepreneurial can you be? Can you have flex-time? Can you work part-time?

• Would moving or changing jobs help or hurt your career?

• How do you perceive the supply and demand for this field?

• How do you keep up with the changes in this field? What do you wish you knew before you chose this path? What do you wish you knew about the industry/company/job before you began?

• How can I learn more about the field/industry/company/job? What should I read? With whom should I talk? Should I join a professional association?

• Would you be willing to review my resume as a potential candidate for this industry/company/job? Am I a good fit for this type of work? What experience, education, and qualifications should I emphasize? What obstacles will I face and how can I overcome any deficits or problems?