



INFORMATIONAL INTERVIEWING

Purpose: Obtain information from people in the field

How can I break into a new field or a different job in the same field? What special skills or talents will help me the most?

Informational interviewing is a great way to start making a career change. It can help you:

- Learn more about a specific field of interest
- Clarify your career goals
- Gain insider advice from professionals in the field
- Develop and expand your professional network

An informational interview is one that *you* initiate—you ask the questions. Your purpose is to obtain information from people working in the field, not to get a job. The interview is often low-key and informal.

Why would anyone want to talk to me?

Believe it or not, people who are happily employed enjoy talking about their field and may even feel honored that someone wants to know about what they do.

A few important guidelines

- *Never ask for a job:* You are simply seeking information and advice about a job, organization or industry.
- *Be prepared and respectful:* Know what questions you want to ask; honor the time frame the person allotted to talk with you.
- *Get names of other people to contact* before you leave an office, hang up the phone or sign-off an email.

Finding people to interview

- Career exploration is not the time to be shy! Tell your family, friends and acquaintances that you want to learn more about a specific field; ask if they know anyone who works in that field.
- Check career service offices and libraries, two great resources for career exploration.
- Study company/organization websites. Identify companies or organizations in your field of interest,

and find phone numbers or emails of people doing the type of work you want to do.

- If you are still having problems identifying someone, you might need to broaden the area before narrowing it again.

Conducting an Informational Interview

I have never heard of informational interviewing and have never done one. How do I get started?

1. Determine your primary purpose for conducting the interview. Are you curious about the type of work or the work-climate in a particular field? Do you want to learn the steps for getting into that field?
2. Identify people to interview and research the type of work they do. Resources include families, friends, colleagues, staff directories, the phone book, *Isthmus' Annual Manual* and *Capitol Newspaper's Answer Book*. Find out as much as you can about the types of positions and the organization, so you can ask questions that websites cannot answer.
3. Write out 5-10 questions that meet your informational needs; the number will depend on the length of the interview. Ask open-ended rather than yes/no questions; leave time for the person to talk about topics that you may have not asked about.
4. Set up an appointment via email, phone, or in person; be sure to mention your contact (if applicable). Request a specific amount of time, usually between 20 minutes and an hour (a shorter time may encourage the person to see you sooner). Emphasize that you want to set up an informational interview, *not* a job interview.
5. Arrive on time, dress professionally, and have your questions ready. Since you are doing the interviewing, you are in charge: you need to initiate and keep the conversation going.
6. Respect the person's time frame. Before concluding, be sure to ask, "**Whom else should I talk with for more information?**" and, "If I have any questions may I stay in touch with you?" *Important:* Follow up with a thank you card, perhaps noting one or two points you found particularly helpful.

Suggested Questions

Select 5-10 questions that support your interests and values and that could be critical for your career decision making. You may also want to combine some questions—or create your own.

About the person and their present job

- How did you get started in this field? Is that typical? How have entry requirements changed?
- What is your educational background?
- What do you like most (relish/what are rewards) and least (problems/hassles) about your job?
- What do you wish you had known prior to entering this field?
- What would you change about your job/career path if you could?
- Where do you see yourself going from here?

Work Activities

- What do you spend most of your time doing in a typical work day/week?
- What problems/decisions are you likely to face on a given day?
- How much paperwork is involved?
- Do you have frequent contact with customers/coworkers/supervisors/public? What kinds of contact?

Lifestyle

- How does your job affect your lifestyle?
- How much flexibility do you have in terms of dress, vacation, and work hours?
- What obligations does your work place on you, beyond the ordinary work week?
- Does your company offer flexible or comp time? Daycare? Educational benefits?

Work setting/culture/climate

- Who determines what tasks you will work on and how to structure your time?
- How would you characterize your working relations and environment (formal, informal, etc.)?
- Do you primarily work alone or collaborate with others? With whom?
- How are decisions made? What is the company's management philosophy?
- What are the criteria on which your performance is evaluated?

About the career field/industry

- What trends are emerging in this field? Where do you see the greatest need for change?
- What are the most important areas in this field/industry? Key problems? Major projects? Where is expansion taking place?

- Which specific jobs are in demand and which are being cut back?
- Is relocation to another state or company necessary?
- What is the turnover rate?
- What are the salary ranges for the various levels in this field?
- What professional development or training opportunities are there?
- Which companies, organizations, and people in this field/industry do you regard highly? Why?

Preparation/qualifications

- What credentials, educational degrees, licenses, etc. are required for entry? How do college majors fit in?
- What kinds of work experiences provide a good background?
- What specific skills are required? What additional skills will be helpful?
- What is the profile of someone who is successful in this field?
- Are there volunteer opportunities that would help one to qualify for a position in this field?

Advice to you

- Is it realistic for me to plan on working in this field?
- How does someone with my background and skills fit your needs?
- Do you recommend that I gain some new skills and experiences and talk to you again in a year?
- Given my current education and experience, how well would I fit in here?
- What professional associations or organizations might be useful to contact for information or to become a member?
- What steps would you advise someone to take in order to start and build a career in your field?
- Would your advice be different for men and for women? If so, how?

What is next and where do I go from here?

- How are hiring decisions made?
- What were the backgrounds of the last few people you hired?
- Where are these jobs advertised? How else does one hear about openings?
- What other people do you think I would benefit from talking with? May I use your name when I contact them?
- If I have any further questions, may I stay in contact with you?