

CONDUCTING INFORMATIONAL INTERVIEWS

An informational interview is an appointment that you schedule with a particular individual for the purpose of gaining current, regional, and/or specialized information from an "insider" point of view. Use informational interviews when exploring an academic major, making career choices, changing careers, or beginning a job hunt. Unlike job interviews, information interviews do not require that you sell yourself to an employer and do not depend on existing job vacancies. Information Interviews are arranged with those likely to provide information directly or with those who can refer you to persons with information.

Why do informational interviews?

- To get valuable information for your job hunting and career planning (e.g. choosing an academic major or career). It's a good way to "reality check" what you've read, heard, and thought.
- To learn about a particular organization or field, how you might fit in, and what problems (or opportunities) are present in the industry. Knowing these things will help you slant your qualifications towards the needs of the organization if you choose to apply for a job at some point.
- To increase your interviewing skills by discussing yourself and your career interests with professionals.
- To enlarge your circle of "expert" contacts in a field. Remember, it is who you know (or get to know) that gets you a job. It's never too early to establish contacts.
- To ask for other referrals (e.g., "Can you suggest some other people that I might talk to about jobs in this field?")

Who do I contact?

Identifying who to talk to often blocks people from doing informational interviews. ("I don't know anyone in this field..."). Look for those who:

- Share a common academic major, interest, enthusiasm, or involvement in some activity or lifestyle that appeals to you.
- Work in a setting that appeals to you (e.g., hospitals, textile company, colleges, airlines).
- Work in career areas in which you're interested (e.g. counseling psychologist, market researcher, public relations).
- Work in specific jobs in specific organizations (e.g., counseling psychologist at a university counseling center, consumer education representative at a utility company, market researcher at IBM).

How do I find potential contacts?

- Ask friends, family, neighbors, colleagues, and former employers... anyone you know for an informational interview or for a referral.
- Contact faculty, Career Services Center staff, or other University offices.
- Use LinkedIn (www.linkedin.com/) to find alumni and other individuals willing to speak with you.
- Call community service agencies, trade, and professional organizations (e.g., women's organizations, Chamber of Commerce) or review their web sites.
- Attend meetings (local, state, regional) for professional associations in your career interest field(s).

How do I prepare?

- Remember, people are generally interested in talking about what they do and how they do it. But, don't waste their time or your time; be prepared!
- Know your interests, skills, and values and how they relate to the career field represented by the person(s) you're interviewing.
- Read about the career area using O*Net (www.onetonline.org) and the Occupational Outlook Handbook (www.bls.gov/ooh) and research the organization of the person you'll be interviewing. Know exactly what kinds of information you want and have a list of questions in mind. Don't ask something routine that is readily available elsewhere. Also check the Internet for any Web sites associated with the organization or career field in which you're interested. Use the following list of questions to help in formulating your own.

Questions to ask:

- **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 as a whole have? 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?
- **Hiring Decision:** What are the most important factors used to hire people in this work (education, past experience, personality, special skills)? Who makes the hiring decisions for your Department? Who supervises the boss? When I am ready to apply for a job, who should I contact?
- **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?
- Do you have any other advice for me?

How do I arrange the interview?

- Phone or e-mail to explain your request and obtain an appointment. E-mail requests for appointments are most effective if followed up by a telephone inquiry to confirm an appointment time.
- Introduce yourself using a personal referral.
- If possible, have a mutual acquaintance or Jefferson as the bridge for your contact. (e.g., "I'm Stan Jones, a sophomore at Jefferson. I found your name on a LinkedIn group).
- Explain your request to schedule an appointment for gathering information about their field of work. If questioned, indicate clearly that you are not applying for a job at this time, but simply conducting career research to help you make better decisions. If the person you are trying to reach is not in, you can leave a message or ask when to call back.
- Try to schedule a 20-30 minute appointment, to be conducted by phone or in person at their convenience. If the present time is too busy for the person you contact, ask when would be a better time or ask if he /she can suggest another contact in the organization that could provide you with helpful information.
- If your intent is to speak with the individual in person (which is optimal), try to avoid letting your phone call to schedule the appointment turn into the actual interview. However, sometimes the person might say over the phone: "I have some time now... What did you want to ask me?" You should be prepared

to conduct the interview over the phone if the person gives you an opportunity to do so. If you are able to schedule an on-site visit, remember to ask for directions and parking information.

During the interview:

- Do not exceed your requested time, but be prepared to stay longer in case the contact indicates a willingness to talk longer.
- Dress as if it were an actual job interview. First impressions are always important.
- Get to your appointment a few minutes early and be courteous to everyone that you meet.
- Take the initiative in conducting the interview- you are the interviewer, Ask open-ended questions which promote a discussion and cannot be answered with one word responses.
- Once inside the organization, look around. What kind of working environment is present--dress style, communication patterns, sense of humor, etc.? Is this a place you would want to work?

After the interview:

- Evaluate your experience: Did you get the information you sought? What information do you still lack? Do you need to interview more people in order to get more than one biased viewpoint or additional information? What do you need to do next? Write notes about your experience so you don't forget.
- Follow-up with a thank-you note, expressing your appreciation to your contact for his/ her time. You may also want to include your conclusions/ decisions resulting from the interview. Record the information that you obtained: names, comments, and new referrals for future reference, and make appointments to interview the referrals.

Summary

- After doing several informational interviews you will be more informed. You will be able to make better decisions which are based on accurate, current information.
- If you were trying to choose a major, you now are more familiar with various career paths a major might lead to. You also may have learned numerous methods to prepare for a particular occupation, not only through academic majors, but also work experience and college activities.
- If you were trying to choose an occupation, you now are more aware of position titles, job descriptions and qualifications, types of employers, the skills utilized, as well as the interests and values expressed in several occupations.
- If you were preparing for a job hunt, you now are more familiar with potential employer contacts and the hiring process. You have developed your interviewing skills and received feedback on your resume and job hunting strategies. You also have demonstrated assertive job hunting behaviors by selecting, scheduling, participating in, and following through with interview appointments.