Informational Interviewing

WHY DO AN INFORMATIONAL INTERVIEW?
In general, people are much happier to receive requests for information than requests for a job. Also, because most professionals remember how hard it was to be a student, many may be willing to help you as they were helped when they began their careers.

An informational interview, or interest interview, has two purposes:

1. In an informational interview you learn about a particular area of interest. You are trying to learn as much as you can from another person's experience and expertise. It is through this learning process that you will sharpen your career goals, and you will be able to focus on the steps necessary to achieve those goals.

2. It is also a chance for you to learn about different job opportunities. Often, job openings are not publicly advertised, but rather information about openings goes out by word of mouth. Through this one-on-one interaction you may learn of such opportunities. How you present yourself and your credentials matters; if you have made a good impression, the person will remember you when he or she has an opening and/or recommend you to friends when they have openings for which you may be qualified.

The second purpose, to learn of job opportunities, may be implicit or explicit, depending on your approach. Even if you don't mention directly that you are looking for a job, the professionals you contact will probably understand that message, since they too were once students or recent graduates. If, on the other hand, you come right out and say, either in your contact letter or meeting, that you are looking for job opportunities, be careful not to ask for a job with the contact's employer. This will negate the value of the less threatening informational interview tone your are trying to create and may hurt your chances of gaining information or contacts.

WHO SHOULD I CONTACT?
Identify an Area of Interest

The first step in figuring out who you should interview is to identify an area of interest. Think about classes you've liked, areas in which you thought you'd want to work before you came to school, or areas in which you are just plain interested. Read professional journals and national newspapers, paying attention to the stories which attract your interest. Talk to your classmates, professors and the professionals in the Advising and Career Services, and speak with an Advisor to help you generate ideas.

Identify a Geographic Location

Next, limit your geographic preferences. Since you will not only learn about a specific area, but also a specific community when you talk to your contacts, you need to focus your informational interviewing so that you talk to professionals in the location you most want to learn about or
work in. Finally, by talking to many professionals from the same community, you may be able to see a larger picture of working in that area, rather than having to draw conclusions based on one or two viewpoints.

Create a List of Potential Contacts

Now you can begin to create a list of potential contacts. First, think of all the possible connections you have or can make. You should think about your experiences, who you know either through work or social settings. You certainly have connections from your undergraduate activities and clubs; often these organizations keep track of their alumni and you may be able to access them easily. Your undergraduate professors, or college friends may know someone who works in your chosen area of interest. Speak with people and let them know of your interest. Often these people will know someone who works in the field you are exploring; a simple phone call or name reference in your letter can open doors otherwise closed to you. Even if the contacts you develop initially are not exactly in the field or place in which you are interested, don't discard them. These individuals can lead you to others who may provide you with the information you seek or may open your eyes to options you had not considered.

Contacting alumni is an excellent way to network. As a former student, an alumnus or alumna may feel a sense of loyalty to the school and welcome the opportunity to share his or her experiences with you. Also, the professionals will direct you to computer and paper resources that will help you in your search.

Third, do a little research. Also, look through local professional association directories which list names, addresses, and professionals in the community you are targeting.

HOW DO I MAKE CONTACT?

Your list of potential contacts should include the following: name, employer, address, telephone number and email address, if possible. The next step will require you to contact the people on your list. Don't be discouraged: even if you have only one or two names on your list, this is a starting point. It takes just one person to get your informational interviewing network started.

Send an Email or Write a Letter

To initiate contact send an email or, if time permits, write a cover letter. A well-written communication that demonstrates thorough research will be key to your arranging an interest interview. Before you write, you may have to conduct some additional research on each individual contact. Find out where he or she went to undergraduate and graduate school. Also, research the professionals’ present employer to provide you with an understanding of what it is this person does.

You should reference the information you uncovered through your research in your correspondence. Always mention similarities between you and the person to whom you are writing. This will help establish a connection. For example, if the person attended the same school as you did, you can note that by indicating that school in your correspondence; the reader
will make the connection, even if you don't make it explicit for him or her. If a person was referred to you by a mutual friend, always mention that friend's name. For example, begin the email or letter with, "Professor Susan Johnson suggested that I contact you. . ."

The format of the correspondence should be similar to a cover letter, with an introduction, a body and a closing paragraph. In the first paragraph, introduce yourself and tell the reader why you are writing to him or her. In the second paragraph, tell the reader a little bit about you, why you are interested in this area and/or location and what it is you want to know. Also, you may want to tell the reader why you believe he or she would be a good person with whom to meet. In the last paragraph, thank the reader and suggest a possible time to meet or speak.

You should include a resume with your email or letter. Since it is very hard to introduce yourself in a short email or letter, by sending a resume you are giving the reader a chance to learn more about you. If the professional is sufficiently impressed or intrigued with your credentials, you can increase the odds of securing a meeting.

One caveat about email: as professionals receive more and more emails, both legitimate and otherwise, emails from people they don't know may be seen as spam and deleted unopened or captured in the recipients spam filter. At least with a paper letter you are guaranteed that someone will open the envelope.

Follow-up with a Phone Call

Before you write to your contact, you must commit to doing the best you can to get the interview. This means that you must decide that you will make a follow-up call. Since many of the professionals who you will contact are very busy, you will have to call them after you send your letter to get their attention. In many cases, if you initiate the contact, but never call to follow up, you might as well not have bothered in the first place.

While making the follow-up call seems to be the toughest part for most people, as they fear the rejection, once you make the call and speak to someone, you provide the contact with a voice to go with the email or letter you sent. This makes the process more personal. Also, this further contact demonstrates your sincere interest in and commitment to learning more.

The follow-up call should be made about a week to ten days after you send the email or letter. Try to speak directly with the person to whom you sent it. If you get through to him or her, introduce yourself, confirm that your email or letter was received, and if so, inquire as to whether he or she be willing to meet or speak with you sometime in the near future. Let the person know that you are flexible. For example, be willing to meet at the contact's convenience, at his or her office, even outside the office for coffee. Also, telephonic informational interviews are a good option if you can't be in the contact's area when he or she can speak to you.

Should the contact indicate that he or she cannot meet with you, politely thank the person for his or her time. Before you get off the phone, if you are feeling extra confident, you may ask if he or she could possibly recommend someone else for you to speak with. As long as you ask the question in a professional manner and graciously take "no" for an answer if it is given, there is
no harm in asking for additional contacts. You may actually develop other useful leads with this technique.

However, if, at first, you are unable to speak with your contact by phone, don't give up. Instead, ask if you can leave a message or voice mail. When you leave a message, speak clearly and identify yourself and your reason for calling. Make sure you leave a number where you can be reached. You should have a professional answering machine message on your phone in case your contact returns your call when you are away from home.

Get Organized

It is very important for you to keep records of who you contact and the outcome of that contact. If you don't get and stay organized you may miss chances to talk to people because you have lost their phone numbers or forgotten to call them back when you said you would. Also, charting your progress helps you to evaluate your efforts, so in the future you can make modifications to your game plan. Finally, if you maintain good records now, you may be able to talk with some of your contacts in the future when you contemplate permanent employment or job changes later in your career.

Record when you sent the initial email or letter, when you followed up by phone, and the results of that contact. If you were unable to make contact, make a note of that as well. Once you meet with someone by phone or in person (see below), write down when you met with them, what you discussed during the meeting, and when you sent a thank you note. There is a sample progress chart at the end of this handout which you can copy or review to give you organizational ideas.

WHAT IS THE INTERVIEW LIKE?

Treat the informational interview as you would a job interview. For example, you should wear business attire, conduct research and practice your presentation skills.

First, before the interview, refresh your memory about the person you are going to meet. Look over the research you have collected about this person. Once in the interview, you can gain more insight and show how interested you are in this person by formulating questions based on this knowledge. For example, you might mention that you know this person went to a technically-focused undergraduate university and wondered if such training were helpful in this field of practice.

Second, have a list of questions ready. Keep in mind that rather than fielding questions, as you would in a job interview, in this context you are the one with the primary burden to keep the conversation going and ask questions to gain the information you want. Therefore, knowing beforehand what questions you will ask and what information you seek will make the interview go more smoothly and yield better results. For example, if you are primarily interested in learning about a particular subject area, have questions about those areas ready. By doing research ahead of time, you can show the contact that you have real interest in the field and ask intelligent questions. If you are more focused on finding job opportunities that may be available or connecting with people who might know of those opportunities, then gear your questions in
those directions. Finally, you may choose to ask each and every person the same set of questions. This technique may allow you to gain broader understanding and find more contacts and opportunities. See the end of this handout for a list of sample questions.

Third, although you are the one asking questions, recognize that the professional with whom you are speaking is also evaluating you for future employment or to pass your name along to colleagues. Thus, you should always bring an extra copy of your resume with you, just in case the first one you sent has been misplaced. Not only will this give your contact a better understanding about you, but he or she may want to keep the resume on file or passing it along to friends. Even if you are not explicitly looking for job opportunities, the contact will implicitly understand that you would probably be open to positions that he or she knows of, so make sure that you present yourself and your credentials in a way that leaves the contact with a good memory of you.

Fourth, be prepared to discuss your experience and background since you know that you are being evaluated by the contact. You should prepare and practice a two-minute summary introducing yourself which you may need to help get the ball rolling at the beginning of the interview. In general, be ready to address any publications you have written, job experiences, and your interest in the profession. Also, don't be surprised if your contact wants to discuss recent events related to his or her professional area. By evidencing your knowledge of the field you can go a long way toward convincing the contact that you are truly interested in this area of profession and would be a positive addition to this or other employers.

Finally, be positive. Your attitude during the meeting is very important. If you appear disinterested the interviewer will be less likely to offer you suggestions and advice. Remember, you sought this person out for guidance. Show your contact that you want to be there.

When your interview is over, take a moment to jot down notes about your interview. Not only should you memorialize the substance of the conversation, but you should also try to capture those things that will help you connect with this person again in the future. Again, try to stay organized: either record this information on your progress chart or keep a system of note cards for each person you talk to. It is very easy to have a great conversation with someone and then lose touch with them or forget important things or additional contacts you discussed.

**WRITE A THANK YOU NOTE**

After meeting with someone for an informational interview, write or type a brief note thanking this person for spending time with you. Not only will this demonstrate gratitude, but this will also leave this person with a positive impression of you.
Sample Progress Chart

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<tr>
<th>Contact name/organization</th>
<th>Phone number/email</th>
<th>Letter sent date</th>
<th>Phone call date</th>
<th>Meeting date</th>
<th>Thank you date</th>
<th>Notes</th>
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Sample Questions: Information about Practice Areas/Locations

- How did you get started in this career?
- Was your pathway similar to other people who do the same kind of work?
- Did you take any courses or do any internships that helped you get started in this area?
- What is your typical day like?
- What percentage of your day is spent dealing with people? What percentage of your day is spent dealing with paper?
- What do you most enjoy about this work?
- Is there anything about this work that you would change?
- What do you know now that you wish you'd known before you entered this field?
- What skills are necessary for a successful career in this field?
- What professional publications do you read and why?
- Can you suggest other people who may be helpful to me in gathering information about this field/location?
- Can I use your name when contacting others?
- Can I call on you again in the future?

Sample Questions: Job Opportunities

- How do I put myself in a position to take advantage of opportunities in this field?
- Do you know of any resources (e.g., websites, books, journals, etc.) which might lead me to learn of job or internship opportunities in this field?
- Which employers (e.g., government agencies, public interest employers, etc.) should I work for to prepare me to work at a place like this? Is there anyone at such organizations that you know who I could contact?
- Can you suggest other people who may be helpful to me in searching for job opportunities in this area?
- Do you know of anyone who might be looking for an employee with my background and interests?
- Can I leave my resume with you in case you learn of opportunities you think I might be interested in?
Can I use your name when contacting others?
Can I call on you again in the future?

*Originally from http://law.wlu.edu/career/page.asp?pageid=182*