



Informational Interviews

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Informal networking is one of the best sources of job leads and opportunities. It gives you a way to investigate a specific career field and help you narrow your target job choices. And while you get advice on where you might find the best fit, you are broadening your network of contacts for future reference.

You can easily develop an impressive network. Look to this list for ideas of potential sources for contacts:

- Professors, friends, relatives, and former employers—or any professionals these people recommend.
- Local Employment Service office.
- Members of professional associations.
- People in the information business—resource center directors or librarians.
- Human Resource directors, public relations officials, or public information specialists.
- Community service agencies or area Chambers of Commerce.
- Alumni which can be accessed through an appointment with your school's career consultant or through your alumni association's web site.

Once you have identified potential contacts, ask for an informational interview. You can contact these people by either phone, mail, or email:

By Phone. Before placing the call, it is a good idea to write an outline of what you would like to say on the phone. Not only will this make you feel more confident, it guarantees that you will ask all your questions, making you appear organized and professional. If you are calling someone by referral, make sure you state that person's name early in the phone call. Also say right away that you only need 20 to 30 minutes of their time. You should mention that you would prefer to meet in person instead of just by telephone.

When scheduling an appointment by phone, keep these points in mind:

- Offer a personal introduction.
- Identify your purpose for seeking an appointment.
- Arrange a mutually convenient time.

By Letter. Follow proper business format when writing the request letter. Double check for spelling, grammar, and typing mistakes. Remember to conclude the letter with a specific action—such as a statement that you will call on a specific date to arrange a meeting time convenient for the person. This is usually a week after you mail the letter.



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Similar to calling for an interview, a letter requesting an appointment should include:

- A personal introduction.
- Your purpose for seeking the appointment.

Conducting the Informational Interview

Before the interview:

(Also refer to the other sections on Interviewing in this toolkit)

- Learn as much as you can about the organization.
- Write down the questions that you want to ask.
- If possible, learn something about the person you are interviewing.
- Dress professionally.
- Bring copies of your resume (Distribute these only if they are requested).
- Arrive 5 - 10 minutes before your appointment.

During the interview:

- Restate your purpose for speaking with this particular person.
- You are the interviewer so be prepared to initiate the conversation.
- Keep to the original time request of 20 - 30 minutes.
- Ask for referrals to other individuals in the field or in related organizations.
- Let the individual you are interviewing bring up the discussion of specific job vacancies.

After the interview:

- Send a thank you note and keep the individual you have interviewed posted on your job hunting progress.
- Evaluate your style of interviewing. Use what you have learned for when you conduct your job interviews.
- Evaluate all the information you received.

What to Ask

Make a list of questions you would like answered about a career field or organization. Your questions will yield the most information if you use open-ended questions to engage your contact in conversation. Listed below are sample questions to help you prepare for your interview.

Questions about the Career Field:

- What types of positions are most often found in your career field?
- What skills will I need to perform responsibilities (such as organizing, supervising, writing)?



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- What specific skills do I need to do the job (academic, experiential, or others)?
- What training or education is required to perform this kind of work?
- What would you change if you could?
- What is a typical entry-level position in this field?
- What opportunities for advancement do employees have?
- What are alternative methods to gain entrance to this field (e.g., part-time, mid-career change, volunteer work or other kinds of training)?
- What is the future of this field in terms of new and expanding opportunities?
- What other information may be helpful (e.g., critique of resume, job seeking tactics, names of other professionals in the field)?

Questions About the Organization:

- What are the short and long-term goals of the organization, such as growth, new products or services, and expansion of facilities?
- What is the philosophy of the organization and the types of training programs available?
- Do you have descriptions of the various positions you have held between your entry-level and present job?
- Could you describe your current job (as defined in the job description as well as what is done beyond the job description)?
- What is the typical career path from entry-level to top management?

Informational interviewing is an effective tool in your approach to career planning. It can be one of your most valuable strategies in gathering information and establishing contacts as you begin or continue to build plans for the future. Like all other components of career planning, informational interviewing requires planning and focus on your part. Consider each informational interview a valuable step towards beginning your career.



How to Interview Effectively

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The interview is one of the most important elements in the job search process. When an employer invites you to an interview, he/she is indicating an interest in bringing you on board. The interview gives both of you the opportunity to exchange enough information to determine if you are a good “fit” for each other. Think of an interview as a highly focused professional conversation. You should use the limited amount of time you have to learn about an employers needs and discuss the ways you can meet these needs. In many cases, you will interview at least twice before being hired for a position—once in a more brief screening interview and at least once again in a more serious meeting when you may also speak with many of your potential coworkers.

The job interview is a strategic conversation with a purpose. Your goal is to show the employer that you have the skills, background, and ability to do the job and that you can successfully fit into the organization and its culture. The interview is also your opportunity to gather information about the job, the organization, and future career opportunities to figure out if the position and work environment are right for you.

Most employers do not hire people based on merit alone. Personality, confidence, enthusiasm, a positive outlook, and excellent interpersonal and communication skills count heavily in the selection process.

After your cover letter and resume, the interview is your best opportunity to wow the employer—regardless of your background and experience. To do this, use every possible strategy to develop effective interviewing skills. The best way is to prepare a selective presentation of your background, thoughtful answers to potential interview questions, well-researched questions about the organization, and an effective strategy to market yourself. Also consider your career goals and what the available job offers so that you can discuss both of these topics with employers. Interviewing is a skill that improves and becomes easier with practice. Check with your school career center or your local Employment Service office to see if it offers workshops and individual videotaped mock interviews for practice.

Be prepared. It is to your advantage to carefully research the job and the organization. There are many ways to do this. You can request printed materials from the employer, such as annual reports and job descriptions. This is an entirely appropriate request, so don't hesitate to make it. Use your library and career center resources. Ask colleagues, friends, and faculty about the organization, and about any personal contacts at the organization they might have. Look at the organization's home page.

Knowing about the job will help you prepare a list of your qualifications so that you can show, point by point, why you are the best candidate.

Practice, practice, practice. Prepare a succinct, clear answer to each of the questions in the interview questions section. Practice answering questions with a friend, or in front of a mirror. Ask your



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friend to give you constructive criticism on your speaking style, mannerisms, and poise. As you practice, avoid colloquialisms, such as “like” and “you know.” Make sure you don’t script all your answers—you’ll sound as though you’re reading cue cards! It’s important to prepare yourself for talking with complete strangers.

Find out the logistics of the interview. The more you know, the more focused your answers will be. Find out when the interview is scheduled, what to expect during it, and how long you will be there. Also find out if you will be talking to just one person, or to several.

Be prompt and professional. Always arrive early. If you don’t know where the organization is located, call for exact directions in advance. Leave some extra time for any traffic, parking, or unpredictable events. If you are running late, call right away and let someone know. The best time to arrive is approximately 5 - 10 minutes early. Give yourself the time to read your resume one more time, to catch your breath, and to be ready for the interview.

Once you’re at the office, treat everyone you encounter with respect. Be pleasant to everyone as soon as you walk in the door.

Dress for success. Wear a professional business suit. This point cannot be emphasized enough. First impressions are extremely important in the interview process. Women should avoid wearing too much jewelry or make up. Men should avoid flashy suits or wearing too much cologne. It is also important that you feel comfortable. While a suit is the standard interview attire in a business environment, if you think it is an informal environment, call before and ask. Regardless, you can never be overdressed if you are wearing a tailored suit.

Be organized. Carry a portfolio notepad or at the very least a manila file folder labeled with the employer’s name. Bring extra resumes and have the names, addresses and phone numbers of references, in case the employer asks. Also, bring a list of questions for the employer. You may refer to your list of questions to be sure you’ve gathered the information you need to make a decision. Do not be preoccupied with taking notes during the interview.

Know yourself. You will make the interview process easier for the employer if you volunteer relevant information about yourself. Think about how you want to present your strengths, experiences, education, work style, skills, and goals. Be prepared to supplement all your answers with examples that support the statements you make. It is also a good idea to review your resume with a critical eye and identify areas that an employer might see as limitations or want further information. Think about how you can answer difficult questions accurately and positively, while keeping each answer brief.

Be honest. An interview gives the employer a chance to get to know you. While you do want to market yourself to the employer—answer each question with an honest response.

Be positive. Never say anything negative about past experiences, employers, or courses and professors. Always think of something positive about an experience and talk about that. You should also be enthusiastic. If you are genuinely interested in the job, let the interviewer know that.



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Show your interest. One of the best ways to show you are interested in a job is to demonstrate that you have researched the organization prior to the interview. You can also show interest by asking questions about the job, the organization, and its services and products. The best way to impress an employer is to ask questions that build upon your interview discussion. This shows you are interested and paying close attention to the interviewer. It is a good idea to prepare a few questions in advance, but an insightful comment based on your conversation can make an even stronger statement.

At the end of an interview, it is appropriate for you to ask when you may expect to hear from the employer.

Save discussion of salary for later. Find out as much as you can before the interview about the salary levels for the position you are seeking. Do not bring up the issue of salary during the first interview. If the interviewer asks about your salary expectations, give only a general answer, such as that your expectations seem to be within, or close to their range.

After-interview notes. After the interview, take time to write down the names and titles (check spelling) of all your interviewers, your impressions, remaining questions, and any information that may influence your decision to accept a position with the organization. If you are interviewing regularly, this will help you keep employers and circumstances clearly differentiated.

Always follow up. You should write a thank you note within 48 hours after an interview, even if the interview (or the interviewer) was not productive and/or you are not interested in the position. It is important to say thank you for the time the interviewer spent with you. This letter should be brief. (Refer to the section on writing thank you letters.)



The Interview Structure

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Before receiving a job offer from an employer, you will typically have a series of interviews.

The first interview is a screening interview conducted either over the phone or at the employers office. On-campus interviews are considered screening interviews. Screening interviews are brief, usually lasting 30-60 minutes. During that time, the employer will want you to elaborate on experiences and skills outlined in your resume. Many employers use the screening interview as a chance to describe the organization and the position. If the employer is impressed with your performance in this interview, you will be invited to a second (and perhaps third or fourth) interview.

The second interview is longer, lasting anywhere from two hours to a whole day. It could include a variety of questions, some form of testing, lunch or dinner, a tour, as well as a series of interviews with various employees. You should come away from the second interview with a thorough understanding of the organization's culture and environment, job responsibilities, and have enough information to decide on a job offer—if one is extended.

I. The Warm-Up

Each interview follows a rather predictable pattern of warm-up, information exchange, and wrap-up conversations. During the first few minutes of the interview (the warm-up), an employer will be formulating a first, lasting, impression of you. The way you greet the employer, the firmness of your handshake, and the way you are dressed, will all be a part of this initial impression. An interviewer may begin by asking common-ground questions about shared interests, the weather, or your travel to the interview. Some interviewers might start by saying "Tell me about yourself." This is an opening for you to briefly and concisely describe your background, skills, and interest in the position.

II. The Information Exchange

The information exchange will be the primary part of the interview. This is when you will be asked the most questions and learn the most about the employer. In screening interviews, many employers will spend more time describing their opportunities than asking you specific questions. The reverse will be true in second interviews. Interview questions may range from "Why did you choose to pursue a business degree?" to "What are your strengths/weaknesses?" and "What are your long-range career goals?" If you are prepared for the interview, you will be able to emphasize your qualifications effectively as you respond to each question. By practicing for interviews, you will gain confidence and have more polished answers.

III. The Wrap-up

Eventually the employer will probably say, "Do you have any questions?" This is your cue that the interview is moving to the wrap-up stage. *Always* ask questions. This demonstrates your



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research and interest in the job. Your questions might be direct, logistical questions such as, “When can I expect to hear from you?” (if that has not been discussed); questions to clarify information the employer has presented; a question regarding the employer’s use of new technology or practices related to the career field; or a question to assess the culture and direction of the organization such as “Where is this organization headed in the next five years?” or “Why do you like working for this organization?” Do not ask specific questions about salary or benefits unless the employer broaches the subject first. The employer may also ask you if you have anything else you would like to add or say. Again, it’s best to have a response. You can use this opportunity to thank the employer for the interview, summarize your qualifications, and reiterate your interest in the position. If you want to add information or emphasize a point made earlier, you can do that, too. This last impression is almost as important as the first impression and will add to the substance discussed during the information exchange.

Communicating Effectively

Because a job interview is a communication process, if you communicate your skills, experiences, and interests effectively, there is a greater chance the employer will remember you. Keep the following rules in mind:

- *Be yourself.* Speak clearly and enthusiastically about your experiences and skills. Be professional, but don’t be afraid to let your personality shine through.
- *Listen carefully.* You will want to remember what you learn about the job, and you will want to answer the questions that were asked.
- *Be positive.* Employers do not want to hear excuses or bad feelings about a negative experience. If you are asked about a low grade, or a weakness in your background, don’t be defensive. Focus instead on briefly stating the facts and what you learned from the experience.
- *Be poised.* Pay attention to your nonverbal behavior. Look the interviewer in the eye, sit up straight with both feet on the floor, control nervous habits, don’t giggle or play with your hair, and smile as you are greeted.
- *Don’t be afraid of short pauses.* You may need a few seconds to formulate an answer. The interviewer may need time to formulate an appropriate question. It is not necessary to fill up every second with conversation.

Most interviewers are looking for specific skills. Keep the following list in mind while practicing your answers and also during the interview. Employers are looking for:

- Communication skills—the ability to think on your feet, formulate ideas, and relate them in a succinct manner.
- Leadership skills, managing, and directing people.
- Management of resources.
- Direction setting.
- Computer savvy.
- Knowledge of business and organizational management.
- Teamwork experience.
- Trustworthiness, responsibility, dependability.
- Diligence.
- Adaptability.



Interview Questions You Should Expect

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About Your Qualifications

- Tell me about yourself.
- How do you think a friend or someone who knows you well would describe you?
- What do you think is your greatest weakness?
- Can you summarize the contribution you would make to our organization?
- Please tell me about the greatest professional assignment you've ever handled.
- What accomplishment has given you the most satisfaction?
- Tell me about your experiences at school.
- What has been the most rewarding college experience?
- Tell me about your most significant work experience.
- How would those who have worked with you describe you?
- Why are you the best candidate for this position?
- Have you ever supervised anyone?

About Your Ability to Work in the Environment

- Why are you interested in this job?
- What do you know about us?
- In what kind of work environment are you most comfortable?
- What criteria are you using to evaluate the organization for which you hope to work?
- Are you a team player?
- How do you work under pressure?
- How do you handle conflict?
- What major problem have you encountered and how have you dealt with it?
- How competitive are you?
- What do you expect from your supervisor?
- What qualities should a successful manager possess?
- Describe the relationship that should exist between a supervisor and those reporting to him or her.

About Your Career and Personal Choices

- What are your long-range career goals? When and why did you establish these goals and how are you preparing yourself to achieve them?
- What are the most important rewards you expect in your business career?
- What do you do in your spare time?
- What kind of salary are you looking for?
- Are you willing to relocate?



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Welcome to the Real World:

For the most recent graduate, here are some tough questions specifically tailored to discover your business potential.

- Why did you choose [school]?
- What led you to major in _____?
- What course have you liked the least? The most?
- I'd be interested to hear about some things you learned in school that could be used on the job.
- Do you think your grades adequately represent your abilities?
- If you could do so, how would you plan your academic study differently? Why?
- We have tried to hire people from your school/your major before, and they never seem to work out. What makes you different?
- Have you ever had difficulties getting along with others?
- What problems do you see in your school? How would you go about correcting them?
- What have you done that shows initiative and willingness to work?

Hard Questions

- Did you ever have a group leader or boss you disliked? Why did you dislike him/her?
- How would someone who dislikes you describe you?
- Talk about a group situation in which there were problems. How did you handle the situation and what was the outcome? What role did you play in the group? How could the group improve its performance?
- Tell me about a time when you experienced a failure and how you reacted to it.
- Tell me about a time when you were under considerable pressure to meet one or more goals.
- Describe a situation where you had to resolve a problem at work and explain how you resolved it.
- Give me an example of how you are a risk taker.
- If you could have any job in the world, what would it be?
- What motivates you?
- Why do you want to work for us and not for our competitor?
- Why should we hire you over everyone else we spoke to today?
- What do you think is the most important/difficult ethical dilemma facing corporations today?
- Give a one sentence positioning statement of yourself.
- How do you go about deciding what to do first when given a project?
- Tell me about an experience you have had in a working environment (school, work, or community).
- Describe a situation where you did not agree with something your boss asked you to do and how you resolved the problem.
- Can you work under pressure?
- What did you like/dislike about your last job?
- What would you like to be doing five years from now?

The Stress Interview

- Would you like to have your boss's job?
- See this pen I'm holding? Sell it to me.



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- Why should I hire an outsider when I could fill the job with someone inside the organization?
- Why were you out of work for so long?
- Describe a situation when your work or an idea was criticized.
- Your application shows you have been with one organization a long time without any appreciable increase in rank or salary. Tell me about this.

For Career Changers

- Why would you be interested in this kind of work?
- How do you expect to get up to speed in all the areas which will be unfamiliar to you?

And, the Most-Dreaded Question, Tell Us about Yourself

This is also your greatest opportunity. You are likely to be asked this, so plan to use the open-ended nature of the question to your advantage. It is not necessary to answer autobiographically. You may choose to organize your thoughts around your interest in the job and why you are prepared to do it.

Do You Have Any Questions for Us?

The right answer is always yes, or you risk appearing uninterested. Prepare some questions in advance, but, above all, ask questions that show a response to what you have learned from the interviewers, and that are lively, rather than formulaic. Some examples include:

Advancement

- Can you tell me how success in this position is measured?
- What skills would I need to be successful in this position?
- How do you encourage your employees to keep current with professional developments in the field?
- Could you tell me about your training program? What are some of the typical career paths followed by others who have been in this position? What would be a realistic timeframe for advancement?
- What are the opportunities for personal growth?
- What is the retention rate of people in the position for which I am interviewing?
- Is it organizational policy to promote from within? What is the work history of your top management?

Responsibilities

- Tell me about a typical day in this job.
- Who would I work with most closely on a day-to-day basis?
- How often can I expect to relocate during the initial years of employment with your organization?

Being New on the Job

- What do you consider the most challenging aspect of this position for someone who is new to your organization?
- What does the new [job title] need to accomplish in the next 6-12 months?
- What qualities are you looking for in your new hires?
- What are your expectations for new hires?
- Could you describe a typical first assignment?
- What are the most challenging facets of the position?



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More about the Organization

- Why is this position available?
- What are your department's major projects in the coming year?
- What do you think are your organization's greatest competitive strengths with clients?
- What is the overall structure of the department where the position is located?
- What is the work environment like?
- What makes your organization different from its competitors?
- What are your organizations strengths and weaknesses?
- How would you describe your corporation's personality and management style?
- Why did you join the organization? Why have you stayed with the organization?