**What is informational interviewing?**

*Informational interviewing* is an often-used term that can be confusing because it doesn’t represent the activity very well—largely because it’s so different from interviewing for a job. You may want to think of this activity primarily as a fact-finding mission, with you as the fact finder.

Informational interviewing, which is part of networking, is a way for you to gather "inside" information about a new area, field, or career direction to further your job search. It involves scheduling meetings with people in your career area of interest. At these meetings, you “interview” the person you’re meeting with by asking a series of questions you’ve prepared in advance, and other questions that arise from the conversation.

**What an informational interview is *not***

*An informational interview is not a situation in which you play a passive role*. On the contrary, you are the driver of the meeting and must come to it as informed as possible about the person you’ll be meeting with and about his or her group or organization. In addition, you must bring a list of questions to use as you start up the conversation and keep it moving.

*An informational interview is not a job interview.*

*An informational interview is not a job interview.* You should *not* assume that if the conversation goes well it will lead you to a job prospect or a job offer. This does happen-but only occasionally. So we recommend you set all such assumptions aside, including the expectation that the person you’re talking with will take the initiative to ask questions of you. On the contrary, you should be fully prepared to take the lead from start to finish.

At the same time, a “job interview” mindset is called for. This is true because the person you’re talking with *may* become interested in you professionally (either directly or on someone else’s behalf) and begin to ask you questions that make the meeting feel more like a job interview. Or in other words, the person *may* end up evaluating you from a professional viewpoint, although (again) we recommend against *expecting* this to happen.

The bottom line is that anytime we meet someone, he or she is likely to evaluate us in general terms (e.g., with regard to how you carry yourself, your level of confidence, the quality and thoughtfulness of your questions and comments, and your knowledge and experience). So in preparing for and conducting the interview, keep this in mind. It’s in your best interest to make a positive impression, as the ideal outcome is to make each person you meet an advocate for you in the job search. This advice may sound a bit paradoxical or even contradictory, but this is only a reflection of the mixed nature of informational interviewing.

*An informational interview does not usually lead to a job offer*. While you should always assume that the person you’re talking with *may* be evaluating you during the conversation, you arrange informational interviews first and foremost so that *you* (not the person you interview) can gather information.

**Why are informational interviews an important part of my job search?**

Informational interviewing is not only an excellent way to explore careers and determine what's right for you, but it’s a surprisingly effective way to grow a useful network. Below is a list of some of the gains you can achieve through informational interviewing:

* (*If you’re on a clear career path*) To learn up-to-date information about what’s happening locally in your career field, including key employers, key people, and the current ins and outs of the job market
* (*If you’re exploring career options*) To explore careers through learning about a particular field of interest through the eyes and experience of the people you interview--and to help clarify your career goals
* To help identify your professional strengths and weaknesses
* To identify local professional opportunities for which you may be a good fit, including those in the “hidden job market, since about 80% of jobs are reportedly not posted on job sites (Keep in mind, though, that this possible outcome is by no means guaranteed.)
* To build or enhance your professional network by becoming acquainted with the person you’re interviewing and also asking him or her to recommend other people you could talk with
* To build confidence and practice for your job interviews

**I’ve never been on an informational interview before. What will I need to do?**

Actually, you may well have held an informational interview before—but just not called it that. If you’ve met people—regardless of the setting—and over the course of the conversation learned a lot about them and what kind of work they do, count yourself as an experienced informational interviewer.

The first thing to keep in mind is that even though your ultimate goal is to get the person you’ll be interviewing interested in your career, the best way to get there is for you to show an interest in him or her.

**Prepare: Steps To Take**

***1. Identify your goals***

For each informational interview you arrange, you should identify a goal or goals. What makes you want to meet this person? Below are a few examples:

* To determine whether a specific career, profession, or field is the right one for you
* To gather information about what actions you would need to take to pursue a particular profession or career (e.g., education, credentials, experience, and how job searches are typically conducted)
* To build or expand your local professional or career network

*…when it comes to informational interviewing, you’re the one carrying the ball.*

* To identify local employers in your chosen profession or career
* To evaluate a potential employer with regard to such factors as interest and fit
* To generate ideas about how to pursue a job in your chosen profession in this area

***2. Choose people you may want to interview***

See the dual career program guide on networking for ideas about developing a networking list and for guidance about reaching out to people you would like to meet (<http://www.provost.umich.edu/programs/dual_career/> ). Once you have this list, identify people with whom you may want to do informational interviews. If you have an indirect connection to a person on your list through someone else in your network, ask the other person to contact the person you want to interview (e.g., through email or a phone call). Ask him or her to either copy you on the message or to let you know when the contact has been made--so that you can follow up.

***3. Make the contact and settle on a time and location***

Again, see the dual career program guide on networking (see item #2 above for URL) for guidance about reaching out to the people on your list. With regard to where the two of you will meet, this will depend on the person you want to interview. The person’s office may be most appropriate, or you may meet in a more informal setting such as a coffee shop. Invite the person you’re contacting to take the lead in deciding where to meet. If you meet in a coffee shop, you may want to offer to buy the person a beverage. Although these meetings can last for up to an hour, 20 to 30 minutes is more typical.

***4. Do your homework****.*

Before the interview, do research on the person and/or organization. This will make you more knowledgeable and allow you to customize your questions.

***5. Develop a list of questions tailored to the situation.***

Develop a list of five to ten questions. We recommend against one-size-fits-all questions. Instead, customize a set of questions for each interview you do. Since you never know how much time you’ll actually have, prioritize them by how important they are to you. Also be ready to follow the lead of the person you’re speaking with. By being a keen listener, you’ll be able to take advantage of new avenues of questioning that arise naturally from the conversation. Trust your inner judgment and follow such leads. For sample questions, see the box on page 3 for a sample of the types of questions you may want to ask during an informational interview. Also see the box on page 4 for a list of online resources that includes links to websites with more sample questions. Above all else, remember that when it comes to informational interviews, *you’re* the one carrying the ball.

**On the day of your meeting**

* For the reasons mentioned above, dress professionally (i.e., as you would for a job interview).
* Make sure you know where you’re going—ahead of time. Give yourself a comfortable margin of time.
* Bring a copy of your resume, but since you’re not there to ask for a job, bring it out only if the opportunity clearly presents itself.
* Arrive on time for your meeting.
* Limit the interview to 20-30 minutes unless it’s clear that the person wants to keep the conversation going. Even then, at the half-hour mark you may want to pause in the conversation to be sure the person doesn’t have another obligation.

**A List of Sample Questions for Informational Interviews**

The list of questions below is only a sample. You’ll want to customize your list of questions to your particular profession or career. You’ll want to choose questions that align with your goals for the conversation.

* Please tell me about your current job.
* What is a typical day like for you?
* What do you find most rewarding about your position? In what ways does it challenge you (in a positive way)?
* What led you to decide to be interested in, apply for, and accept a position with XYZ [office, unit, or organization]?
* Who are your major clients? [OR] What services do you provide?
* Who are your major competitors?
* In your opinion, what are the greatest strengths of your [office, unit, or organization]? What are your [office’s, unit’s, or organization’s] goals for the future?
* What kinds of professional development opportunities are available to you?
* In your profession [or career], what licensing or professional training is required?
* When XYZ [office, unit, or organization] is looking to hire new people, what skills or attributes do you most look for?
* What recommendations do you have for me as a person interested in ABC [profession or career]?
* From your perspective, what are some of the most important issues affecting this field today?
* What type of education is needed for a career in this field?
* What additional training, education, or experience might enhance my chances for finding a position in this field?
* What levels of work-life balance are possible in this profession or career? What are the consequences, if any, for people who try to achieve such balance?
* I would like to talk with some other people in the field [or perhaps in related fields] to expand my exposure and understanding. Are there other people you suggest that I get in touch with or professional organizations that might be useful? [If so, may I mention that you gave me his, her, or their names?]

**After your informational interview**

* Afterward, send a thank you note—preferably hand written.
* Also send the person you talked with any information that you promised to send.
* Send any other resources to the person that you think he or she might find to be useful. By continuing to share potentially helpful resources with the people you’ve connected with, you show that you’re a valuable resource. By staying in touch you also indirectly remind people to keep you in mind as you continue your job search.
* Follow up on the leads you’ve received with regard to other people for you to contact. Or, in instances when you decide not to follow up (e.g., because you’re taking your job search in a different direction), as a courtesy let the person know and thank him or her again.
* If relevant job openings arise, keep in mind the people you’ve done informational interviews with as possible resources or advocates for you.
* Let the person know the eventual outcome of your job search. This closes the loop, gives you another chance to thank the person, and strengthens your network.

**Additional Resources Online**

For a more in-depth look at informational interviewing, including sample materials that may be useful, we invite you to check out the resources provided below. These resources are also available at <http://sitemaker.umich.edu/dualcareer/informational_interviewing> .

***About Informational Interviews***

“Informational Interviewing: Do’s and Don’ts” (Quintessential Careers)

<http://www.quintcareers.com/informational_interviewing-dos-donts.html>

“What is an Informational Interview and How it Can Help Your Career?” by [Alison Doyle](http://jobsearch.about.com/bio/Alison-Doyle-2335.htm) (About.com)

<http://jobsearch.about.com/cs/infointerviews/a/infointerview.htm>

***Informational Interview Request Templates***

“Informational Interviewing Tutorial: Scheduling the Informational Interview by Letter” (Quintessential Careers)

<http://www.quintcareers.com/information_letter.html>

Informational Interview Template by Tory Johnson (women for hire)

<http://www.womenforhire.com/advice/resumes_examples_and_cover_letter_templates/informational_interview_template>

Sample Letter and Email Informational Interviewing Requests (Career Center, California State University at Fullerton)

<http://campusapps2.fullerton.edu/Career/students/jobSearch/Chapter7/SampleInformationalInterview.aspx>

***More Informational Interview Questions***

“Informational Interviewing Tutorial: Questions to ask at the Informational Interview” (Quintessential Careers)

<http://www.quintcareers.com/information_interview.html>

“Informational Interview Questions: Questions to Ask During an Information Interview” by [Alison Doyle](http://jobsearch.about.com/bio/Alison-Doyle-2335.htm)

<http://jobsearch.about.com/od/infointerviews/a/infointervquest.htm>

Informational Interview Questions (CareerChoiceGuide.com)

<http://www.careerchoiceguide.com/informational-interview-questions.html>

Informational Interview Questions (Job Employment Guide)

<http://www.job-employment-guide.com/informational-interview-questions.html>

See also: Dual career guides about resumes and CVs, networking, and cover letters. See U-M Dual Career Guides for Job Search Success:

<http://www.provost.umich.edu/programs/dual_career/>