

JOB SEARCH STRATEGIES

Informational Interviewing

Informational Interviewing is an effective networking technique in which you interview individuals who do work in your field/position/organization of interest. It allows you to:

- Get first-hand information and a personal perspective on occupations, fields and organizations of interest to help you decide or refine your career path
- Obtain advice and information that may help you target your job search efforts and your job search tools (resumés, cover letters, interviews)
- Practise communication, interviewing and networking skills
- Hear about opportunities before they are posted and receive offers of help from those people with whom you truly connect
- Broaden your network by getting referrals to other networking opportunities

General Tips for Informational Interviewing

- Keep the meeting brief – if you are setting up the informational interview, ask for 15-20 minutes of an individual's time
- Preferably meet face-to-face to facilitate relationship-building and check out the work environment
- Prepare 5-10 questions before phoning to arrange the meeting in case the person cannot meet with you in person but can answer your questions over the phone.
- Listen attentively, ask if you can take notes, and be receptive to advice or feedback the individual may have for you
- Do not be presumptuous – Wait for the individual to offer other help if he/she wishes
- NEVER ASK FOR A JOB – focus on getting information, advice, the individual's perspective and referrals to others who may be able to provide you with similar information
- Thank the individual for any and all help they are able to provide

Steps to Informational Interviewing

STEP 1: Identify what you want to learn about

- Select one occupation or field you want to learn more about / work in.

STEP 2: Identify whom to interview

- Develop leads, start with your family, friends and acquaintances. Ask them, "Who do you know who works as a..." Try sending out an e-mail to everyone you know and ask them to forward it to others.
- Read the business section of your local newspaper and research the companies and organizations you learn about there.
- Once you have your first information interview and still want to learn more, it's a good idea to ask the person you're interviewing whether there's anyone else they would suggest you talk to.

STEP 3: Plan the specific questions you want to ask

- Research the company or organization's website; if you were referred to this organization by someone close to you, be sure to ask him/her for some inside information (e.g. current challenges).
- Make a list of all the questions you might like to ask. Then choose the ones that stand out as most important and put them in the order you would like to ask them. 5 to 10 questions are ideal.
- Create a format that contains enough space between questions to record the interviewee's answers.

STEP 4: Arrange for the interview

- To arrange an interview, contact the person and set up an appointment - that is, agree on the date, time and place.
- Introduce yourself and how you came to contact them (e.g. "Your name was suggested to me by...") and let them know why you want to talk with them (REMEMBER YOU ARE NOT ASKING FOR A JOB).
- Be clear about how much of their time you would like to take; 15 - 20 minutes is a reasonable amount of time to request.
- Make it convenient for the person you are interviewing.

Example of a 20-second Introduction for Requesting an Informational Interview

"Hi Laura, my name is Amy Myers. I received your name from Joe Bowman from Virtual Comp who spoke at a presentation I attended at York University. I'm currently a third year student studying I.T. at York and have two years of experience designing web sites. I was wondering if I could come meet with you briefly to ask some questions about what you do, how your business has developed, and what you think about using different software in web marketing campaigns. I would only take 15-20 minutes, but I'd be really interested in hearing what your advice would be for someone like me."

STEP 5: Conduct the interview

- It is important to establish rapport with the person you are interviewing to set a positive tone. It may be as simple as thanking the person for taking the time to meet with you.
- Start the interview by telling the person a little more about your background, skills and interests beyond the 20 second introduction they have already heard. Tell them specifically why you are interested in their occupation, field or company.
- If you begin to get nervous, focus on really listening to the other person instead of on yourself and what you're going to say next. Remember: Most people love to talk about themselves!
- Take notes during the interview. You will want the information for reference later and it shows you are interested in and value what the person is saying.
- Respect the time line you have agreed to for the interview.
- Ask if there might be one or two other people they would suggest you speak to for advice and information (referrals).
- Leave open the possibility for a follow-up visit or call by asking if it is okay to keep in touch with him/her; be sure to ask how they prefer to keep in touch (phone or e-mail).
- Be sure to thank the person for his/her time.

STEP 6: Follow up on the interview, show your appreciation, and keep in touch

- Write a short follow-up letter or e-mail thanking the person for their time and their information. Be sure to send it promptly within 24 hours of the informational interview.
- Your contact would probably appreciate hearing updates from you on any suggestions of theirs that you implemented and on your progress in general. Also, look for articles, information or resources you can send your contact in order to make it a mutually beneficial relationship.

STEP 7: Reflect on what you have learned

- Although this appears as the final stage of information interviewing, in fact, you need to be doing it all along, if you are to benefit from each of the steps you take. The point here is to ask yourself reflective questions such as the following:
 - What did I like best about what I did?
 - Did I find out what I wanted to know?
 - Is there anything I'd change for the next time?
 - How does what I learned fit with my previous research?
 - Are the work environments in this occupation appealing to me?
 - What should my next steps be?
- How could I use this information in looking for work opportunities?

Sample Questions to Ask During an Informational Interview

Select 5 - 10 questions you would like to ask in your informational interviews.

About the Individual's Career Story

- Could you tell me a little about your own career story, and how/when you got started in this field/organization?
- What motivated you to pursue a career in this field/organization?
- Could you tell me a little about how you got to this position? What contacts, strategies, timing, advice and decisions were involved?
- What education/training and experience have you had, and how have they helped you in your career?

About the Work

- What specifically would you say is the most enjoyable aspect of your work? What would you say is the most challenging?
- Could you describe a typical day on the job for you?
- What are some of the benefits of being in this line of work (or working in this organization)? What are some of the most common pressures or challenges you encounter in your work?

About Career Exploration

- Based on your own observations and experience, what other career possibilities are there for individuals interested in this field? I have a particular interest in *[interest]*. Do you know of any opportunities that involve *[opportunity]*?
- What other jobs would you say you could do with the skills/expertise you have gained in this field/occupation?
- What kind of person would you recommend go into this field/occupation?
- If you were going to change your career direction now, what would you do? How would you go about changing career directions?

About the Field/Organization

Could you give me some insight into what it is like to work in this field/organization, and what types of entry level opportunities exist for students and/or new graduates?

What is your sense of the job prospects or future outlook for this occupation/field? What kinds of trends are affecting this outlook?

What opportunities are there for advancement within the field/organization?

How is *[work value - e.g. creativity]* expressed or fulfilled in this job, occupation, field or organization?

How would someone with *[personality, style, values]* fit in within this field/organization?

Could you give me some insight into the recruitment process here at *[name of organization]*?

How often might you have the opportunity to do *[activity you specify]* in this occupation, position, or organization?

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What makes this *[occupation, position or organization]* exciting/satisfying?

Do you know of any professional organizations in this field that you would recommend I get involved with?

Do you have any suggestions for staying relevant and resilient in this field/occupation in difficult times?

What types of people seem to excel in this field/occupation?

When someone is being considered for this occupation or job, how important is:

A) Education / Training? B) Experience? C) Personality? D) Other?

I have read that *[name of organization/unit]* is working on an initiative (or project) to *[goal of initiative]*. That's something I'm very interested in. Could you tell me more about that initiative/project?

What specifically do you like about working here at *[name of organization]*?

What do you consider to be *[name of organization/unit]'s* most important assets or strengths? What do you consider to be key areas that need attention or improvement?

Advice for Students/New Graduates

- Based on what I've shared about my interests, skills and experience, what advice would you have for me in trying to enter this field?
- What advice do you have for students and new graduates regarding how and where to find entry-level positions in this field/occupation?
- Is there anything you wish you had known when you were job searching or getting started in your career that could have helped you to get where you are today more quickly and easily?
- What specific advice would you give to students like me about what we can do today to prepare ourselves for a career in this field, or more specifically, in your line of work?
- What courses do you suggest for an undergraduate as preparation for this work? Is there any additional professional or skill development that you would recommend? What educational institutions do you recommend I go to in order to obtain these upgrades to my qualifications?
- What kind of entry-level jobs do you think are good training grounds for a person entering this field right now?
- Would you be open to taking a look at my resumé and giving me some feedback on it based on your knowledge of this field?
- What skills, experiences, or knowledge could students like me be acquiring during our university studies that could increase our chances of success both in our job applications and on the job?