

**THE COMPLETE GUIDE TO
INFORMATION INTERVIEWING &
NETWORKING**

CAREER PLANNING SERIES

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The Complete Guide to Information Interviewing & Networking

“I use not only all the brains I have, but all I can borrow.” Woodrow Wilson

WHAT IS INFORMATION INTERVIEWING?

Information interviewing is the process of gathering career information from people who are already working in target occupations, organizations, or geographic locations. The information, as well as the process of gathering it, will help you to refine your goals and possibly discover new ones. Information is obtained through one-on-one, informal conversations. These conversations are initiated and controlled by you.

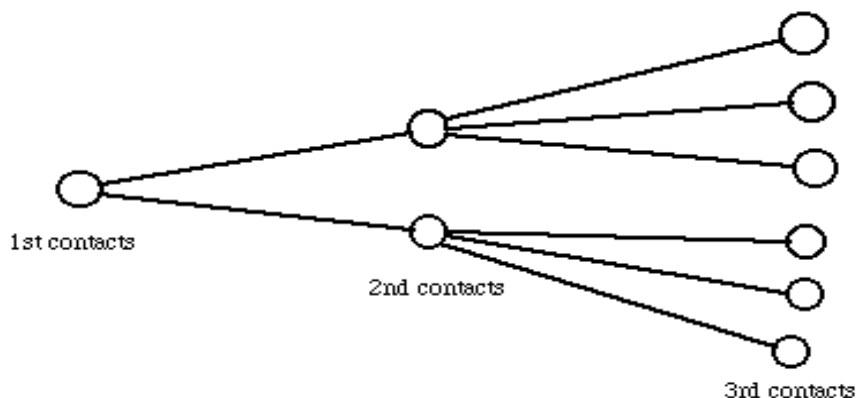
More specific purposes of Information Interviewing may be to:

- Validate the choice of career by investigating the day-to-day experiences of someone working in the field;
- Narrow the list of potential employers, developed from your research, to those who are the most likely to benefit from your qualifications;
- Obtain additional leads to jobs and/or information interviews;
- Develop a knowledge of the vocabulary of the field;
- Gather information that will make a positive impression on employers in a cover letter or a job interview; and
- Build confidence in your ability to discuss your career interests and goals.
- Tap into the “hidden” job market.

The vast majority of jobs, an estimated 75 – 85 percent, are never advertised. They make up the “hidden” job market. You can find out about these positions only through networking.

“Networking” refers to the process of discovering and utilizing connections between people. Everyone knows other people, and thus has a network. But “networking” involves moving beyond one's immediate network and tapping into other people's networks, perhaps far removed from one's own. Being able to uncover these opportunities by networking is a critical job search skill, as jobs that are advertised tend to be extremely competitive.

The following diagram shows how quickly networks can grow...



Your career network will help you explore career fields and identify job opportunities.

STEPS FOR CONDUCTING SUCCESSFUL INFORMATION INTERVIEWS:

- 1) Identify Contacts
- 2) Set up Interviews
- 3) Prepare, prepare, prepare
- 4) Conduct the Interview
- 5) Follow up

FINDING PEOPLE WITH WHOM TO TALK

It is not easy for some people to start Information Interviewing. There are two types of approaches that are used, and you may wish to start with the low risk, indirect approach until you gain confidence.

THE INDIRECT APPROACH

Write down the names of everyone in your circle: friends, relatives, classmates, alumni [especially recent graduates], present and former co-workers, neighbors, professors, coaches, members of community organizations or clubs to which you belong, and anyone else you can think of. There is probably at least one person in your circle who has information about the career/organization/geographic location you are considering. Ask everyone on your list to suggest the names of people who are employed in companies or fields you are investigating and ask for permission to use his/her name in contacting these people.

For example, Bob is interested in starting out as a personnel assistant. He found that the father of one of his friends was in charge of personnel for a major local consulting firm, and he was able to arrange an information interview by contacting his father's friend on the phone. From his first interview, he obtained the names of other personnel managers in the area who might be able to supply him with additional career information.

Alice started by interviewing one of her marketing instructors, who then referred her to computer marketing representatives in two of the target companies she had researched.

THE DIRECT APPROACH

You can also target specific organizations, identify potential interviewees, and ask directly for an interview. To do this you must get the names of persons who are in charge of the departments that interest you. If the names are not mentioned in the company's literature, they are usually obtainable from the organization. It is a simple process to call an organization and ask for the name of the person who is in charge of a particular department (e.g., the marketing department manager).

Identify organizations using:

- 1) The Yellow Pages;
- 2) CareerBeam, a career research tool featuring info from Dun & Bradstreet; access is free to UH students and alumni through the UCS website at <http://www.career.uh.edu>

- 3) The “Directories” section of UCS’ Career Resource Library;
- 4) Alumline, University of Houston’s Alumni magazine; or
- 5) Job Choices, a publication targeted to new college graduates, available at UCS.

Be creative!

SETTING UP THE INFORMATION INTERVIEW

Having done your research on organizations and having identified people with whom you wish to speak, you are now ready to arrange your Information Interviews. Contact each person to ask for a time when you can meet to discuss his or her job and/or organization. Make it clear that you are interested in gathering information and advice-you are not asking for a job. Be prepared to explain the kind of information you are looking for.

If you feel a bit nervous or anxious, try practicing what you want to say before you call. You may even want to jot down the important points you want to mention. Begin your interviews with people who are "low threat," like family, friends, former employers, and low priority organizations. And keep in mind that people enjoy helping others. They enjoy talking about themselves, their ideas, and their opinions, and they enjoy a break in routine. And contrary to what you may think, very few people are actually so busy that they don't have a free half-hour during a week.

Example of an initial phone conversation:

You: “Hello Mr. Adams, my name is _____. I was given your name by _____. I am a student at the University of Houston, and I am very interested in learning more about the field of advertising. I have been doing a lot of research on the industry, but I don't feel as though I have enough current information on the field to make informed career decisions. I thought that if I could talk to someone knowledgeable in advertising, like you, I would have a clearer picture of the profession.

I've read about some of the creative things your department is doing with your radio and TV campaign. I would like very much to get your personal opinion about corporate advertising and would enjoy an opportunity to of coming to your office to discuss your views.”

(Note: If he or she cannot see you, ask to talk for a few minutes on the phone. Also ask for names of others you might contact in the same organization or career field.)

Strategies for contacting individuals with whom you want to meet:

- 1) Write a letter or send an e-mail (remember to proofread all your correspondence so that it is error-free). Introduce yourself, explain your interest in the individual's organization and/or job, and propose a meeting. Also, mention that you will call to confirm a date, and then follow up with a phone call promptly.

- 2) Telephone the person directly. The response will be quicker, whether yes or no. If no, remember to ask to be referred to an appropriate person for you to contact. Begin again with that person.
- 3) Dress in professional attire, and drop in on the person in hopes of meeting right away without an appointment.
- 4) Have one of your contacts (e.g., a parent, friend, sibling) arrange an appointment for you. This approach is not as impressive as contacting the person yourself, but do whatever works.

PREPARING FOR THE INFORMATION INTERVIEW

“People don’t mind being used, what they mind is being taken for granted.” Christopher Matthews

Preparing for the Information Interview is a critical step! Too many students set up interviews and "drop in" for their appointments without doing any homework. Employers are often frustrated when they talk with a student who knows nothing about their organization or career field.

The more you know about an industry or organization, the more intelligent and productive your questions will be. In addition, your interviewees will be impressed by your knowledge and preparation.

Research for your Information Interview:

- Check out UCS’ Career Resource Library, and visit room 156 at UCS for information on the company.
- Search via the Internet by typing the name of the company into your favorite search engine. Visit the company’s homepage (if they have one) at a minimum!
- Research the specific career field using the Occupational Outlook Handbook, located on-line at <http://www.bls.gov/oco/>.
- Read on-line job postings, like those on <http://www.monster.com/>, to get an idea about the responsibilities and/or qualifications that are required.
- Talk to someone (a friend, neighbor, parent, alumnus, or anyone who knows this career field or organization).
- Utilize the University Career Advisory Network (UCAN). UCAN is a database of people who have volunteered to be mentors for UH Students and Alumni. Access UCAN through UCS’ website at www.career.uh.edu.
- Make sure you check out the “Employer Research Guide,” a comprehensive handout available at UCS.

Plan open-ended questions that will stimulate discussion and enable both of you to learn about each other. A list of sample questions follows. Also, make sure you think about what you want to communicate about yourself, including your interests, skills, experience, and career goals. You will want to get these attributes across by means of the questions you ask and the way in which you conduct the interview.

CONDUCTING THE INFORMATION INTERVIEW

Remember that you will be the one conducting the interview, and your purpose is to gather information. You are not asking for a job! Not all Information Interviews are alike. As such, your goals for each individual interview will change. You may be conducting general career research at one interview and specific job research at another.

General Career Research Interviews

Your goal is to acquire basic information about work responsibilities, lifestyles, working conditions, and the required education and experience. At the same time, you are building a network of acquaintances in a career field or organization of interest to you. This type of interview will dominate your early career planning activities.

Specific Job Search Advice Interviews

Once you know what you want to do, your goal will be to find out how to break into the field or organization of your choice. You will want to be particularly sure to communicate clear ways in which you can contribute, while at the same time seeking information and ideas. Though job leads can come from such interviews, it is vital that you not go into such an interview seeking a job. You are seeking advice. Instead of focusing generally on the occupational field, your questions should focus on the job search and/or a specific employer.

Remember, Information Interviews should be low-stress, enjoyable conversations, not anxiety-provoking interviews.

Stages of the Information Interview

It is normal to spend a few moments engaging in “small talk,” or chitchat about the weather, mutual contacts, recent news events, etc. However, more than a few moments and the person may begin to think you are wasting his/her time.

Restate your time goal at the beginning of the interview and do not exceed it without negotiating an extension.

You may want to begin with questions about the person’s job, or his/her personal career development, likes and dislikes. (See sample list of questions that follows.) These types of questions help build rapport.

As you are nearing the conclusion of an Information Interview, always ask, "Can you think of any other individuals who can provide me with additional information about this occupational field or potential employers?" Also ask, “May I say that you suggested that I call?" In most cases, your contact will be pleased to refer you to others.

Thank the contact at the end of the interview, and ask if it would be all right to inquire about new developments or leads in the future. In other words, get permission to call on this individual again in the future.

FOLLOW UP

Always follow up an Information Interview with a thank you letter or e-mail. A few lines thanking them for their time and help will indicate your appreciation and will keep you in their memory. In addition, it will smooth the way for future contact. Make sure you keep a record of

your interviews. Names, titles, addresses, dates, and major points of discussion will enable you to remember who told you what, and how to get back in touch with your contacts. Once you've landed your dream job, be sure to tell your contacts the good news. Continue to maintain relationships with your pre-employment network while adding new contacts from your new workplace.

What If You're Offered a Job?

Sometimes a job hunter who is doing an Information Interview is offered a job or a job interview during the course of the Information Interview. Use your own judgment, but remember that it is always appropriate to ask for time to think about it and to call your contact in a day or two with your response.

QUESTIONS TO ASK IN THE INFORMATION INTERVIEW

You may find that one or two prepared questions on your part will lead to a free-flowing conversation in which you will learn a great deal. Be careful not to let the conversation get off track, or you will leave without gaining the information you came for.

Listed below are sample questions. You are encouraged to think of others that meet your needs more specifically. The questions are divided into two categories, General Career Research and Specific Job Search Advice.

General Career Research

General Career Research questions help you determine what sort of job you want to do. In other words, they help you with your career planning by providing in-depth information on a particular field or closely related fields. These types of Information Interviews may help you:

- Learn about the realities of the work world and what to expect.
- Learn about opportunities available in a given career field that you hadn't thought of before.
- Confirm your aspirations. The career turns out to be everything you thought it would be.
- Determine what additional skills or training will be necessary.
- Realize that your "dream job" is actually a career nightmare.
- Choose among various career paths.
- Clarify your values.

Specific Job Search Advice

The answers to "Specific Job Search Advice" questions will tell you how to get that job in the least possible amount of time. In other words, they assist you with your job search by helping you find out:

- The needs of the company or department that is the subject of the interview. This information will help you explain how you can meet those needs in an interview situation.
- How to break into and succeed in the chosen company.
- The names of other companies that are hiring.
- About unadvertised job openings within the company.
- The hiring procedures of a particular employer.

GENERAL CAREER RESEARCH QUESTIONS...

PREPARATION:

- What credentials or degrees are required for entry into this field of work?
- What types of prior experience are absolutely essential?
- How did you prepare yourself for this work?

PRESENT JOB:

- Describe a typical day. How do you occupy your time during a typical work week?
- What skills or talents make someone successful in this job?
- What aspects of the job do you find most challenging? What do you find most rewarding?
- If you were to leave this kind of work, what factors would probably contribute to your decision?

LIFESTYLE:

- What obligation does your work place upon your personal time?
- How much flexibility do you have in terms of dress, hours of work, vacation schedule, place of residence?
- How often do people in your line of work change jobs?

CAREER FUTURE/ALTERNATIVES:

- Where do you see yourself in five years?
- How rapidly is this career field growing?
- What related careers could someone with your experience transition into easily?
- What types of employers hire people with your background? What are some representative job titles?

JOB HUNTING:

- How do people find out about these jobs? Are they advertised in the newspapers (which ones?), by word-of-mouth (who spreads the word?), through the human resources department, or a professional association?
- How does one move from position to position? Do people normally move to another organization or division, or do they move up in the organization or division?
- If you were to hire someone to work with you today, which of the following factors would be most important in your hiring decision and why?
 - Educational credentials
 - Past work experience
 - Personality, personal attributes
 - Specific skills, talents
 - Applicant's knowledge of your organization, your department, your job
 - Other _____

ADVICE TO ME:

- What educational preparation do you feel would be best?
- What types of experiences, paid employment or otherwise, would you most strongly recommend?

- If you were a college student and had it to do over again, what would you do differently to prepare for this occupation?
- Would you look at my resume? What do you see as my strengths as they relate to this type of work? What are my weaknesses?
- What would you recommend I do from now until the time I graduate to prepare myself for this type of work?

REFERRAL TO OTHERS:

- Based on our conversation today, can you suggest other people who may be able to provide additional information?
- Would you suggest a few of these people who might be willing to see me?
- May I have permission to use your name when I contact them?

SPECIFIC JOB ADVICE QUESTIONS...

- How does the employer recruit new hires?
- Where do they post their positions?
- Do they hire interns? If so, how do they recruit? If not, would they consider hiring an intern?
- Do the departments do their own recruiting, or does one department (e.g. human resources) recruit for the entire organization?
- What is the size of the organization/geographic locations?
- What is the organizational structure?
- What is the average length of time employees stay with the organization?
- What is the company “culture”?
- What types of formal or on-the-job training does the organization provide?
- How often are performance reviews given?
- What are the arrangements for transferring from one division to another?
- How much decision-making authority is given after one year?
- What new product lines are being developed?
- Where is the organization expanding? How does it compare with its competitors?
- Why do employees enjoy working for this particular employer?
- What makes individuals successful in this organization?

CONCLUSION

The completion of successful Information Interviews gives you solid data on where jobs are and what employers expect. It can help you decide which employers you wish to approach and may help unearth new job leads. This is a good time to refine a resume because you have a more precise concept of the skills, knowledge, and experience an employer will be looking for in a job candidate. You may wish to supplement your knowledge by reading professional or trade literature as well.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES (AVAILABLE IN UNIVERSITY CAREER SERVICES' CAREER RESOURCE LIBRARY)

The Very Quick Job Search , published by JIST (video)

Build A Network For Work And Life, published by JIST (video)

The Hunt For Green Octobers, by Bob Rule

A Foot In The Door - Networking Your Way into the Hidden Job Market, by Katharine Hansen

What Color Is Your Parachute by R. N. Bolles

The Complete Job-Search Handbook, Howard Figler

University Career Advisory Network – UCAN (accessible from www.career.uh.edu)

Informational Interviewing

1. How did you get into this career field?
2. What kind of preparation is typical to get into this career field? Is that really required, or just the typical approach?
3. What was different from what you expected? What was the biggest surprise when you went into this? Any myths you want to shatter for me?
4. Who else does this? What other companies? Who else should I be talking to?
5. What ensures continued advancement?
6. What is the typical career path out of this position or field? What does this prepare you for next? For example, What's next for you?
7. What advice do you have for someone like me?

And maybe an eighth question could be about salary, but *be careful!* If you ask about salary, don't ask about *their* salary or salaries at *their* company. Ask, "What could a person expect to make in a position like this?" Or, "What would be a typical salary industry-wide for a position like this?" Then subtract 10 to 40 percent.

Informational Interviewing

Part II:

How to convert an info interview Into an application interview

When you are conducting informational interviews, you will stumble across promising openings for internships and permanent positions. If you want to apply for one of these openings, *you must apply for a change in status.*

As a good informational interviewee, you are a polite novice seeking access to insider information. As an applicant, you are a confident provider of needed skills, seeking an appropriate fit or match. These are very different conditions. Also, managers who provide access to you on the basis of providing information are doing you a favor. They may resent it greatly if you suddenly start applying for an open position.

So, apply for a change in status by saying this:

“That sounds like a very interesting opportunity. How would I go about formally applying for that position?”

Then, follow their instructions precisely.

Adapted from *The Foolproof Job-Search Workbook*, by Donald Asher, Ten Speed Press, 1-800-841-BOOK.

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