The Informational Interview

Goals and procedures

Talking with someone already established in a particular profession is a great way to find out what working in that field would be like. No one else can give you a better sense of the challenges and opportunities, the specific and perhaps hidden demands, and the drawbacks and limitations that working in their profession may involve. Additionally, in most fields, people who are already in established positions realize they have a professional responsibility to meet with aspiring newcomers and answer their questions.

When setting up an informational interview, the first thing to mention is that you are not looking for a job, but are seeking information about a certain career field to help make an informed career decision. Having said that, you have an ethical responsibility not to violate this professional trust. You should confine your questions to gaining information about the company, the occupation and the field of interest. You will not violate any trust if you pursue these additional goals:

**Being Remembered**

– A position of interest may become available following your informational interview.

**Being Welcomed Back**

– You may want to return for more information.

**Being Referred**

– Because 80% of currently available jobs are in the "hidden job market," it may not be what you know, but who you know. Building a network of contacts is the best way to find a job.

**Before, during, and after every informational interview, keep these 10 general rules in mind:**

1. Assume that most people in professional positions will be willing to talk with others who are enthusiastic and interested in them, what they are doing, their job, and their company.

2. Be sure that the person you contact understands your true situation: You are looking for information to help you make a career decision. You are not doing a leisurely survey, but neither are you going to ask them for a job.

3. Ask for advice:
   - Regarding your job search strategy.
   - Concerning how your skills and experiences fit the career field.
   - Pertaining to writing/formatting your resume.
   - About contacting other people in the field to whom you could speak.

4. Be ready to talk about (or demonstrate) your skills: Be prepared to articulate your strengths. He/she cannot help you effectively if you do not explain (or show) what you can do!

5. Prepare adequately:
   - Research the organization as well as possible before you contact them.
   - Present your best self, not your limitations.
   - Prepare a three-minute commercial about yourself that will briefly communicate your strengths, skills, experience and interests.
   - Have a copy of your resume.
6. Get your contact involved:
   - Use the enclosed list of questions to start the conversation.
   - Have them talk about themselves and ask advice.
   - Make a good impression as some people will be interested in continuing to help you.

7. Know your agenda (in order of priority):
   - Get the information for which you came.
   - Obtain specifics on what it is actually like to work in their field; does it match your skills and satisfy your interests?
   - Be remembered for your skills and abilities so that you are contacted when a job or referral comes along.
   - Don't ask for a job. If you do ask for a job, you will most likely be refused.

8. Use the Information Sheet during an informational interview to:
   - Rely on pen and paper, not memory.
   - Write down names, titles, addresses, and phone numbers of your contact and possible referrals.
   - Make notes concerning the questions that are addressed.

9. Reflect after an informational interview:
   - Write down a brief summary of what you discussed.
   - Determine what you have learned and how it might affect your career decisions and job search process.
   - Go over your interview in your "mind's eye" and write down the hard questions that threw you.
   - Try to think of what you can change to improve your approach.

10. Write a thank you letter immediately after every interview.

**Arranging the Informational Interview**

Use resources available to you: University of Montana Office of Career Services, family members, friends, neighbors, instructors, academic advisors, and other community members who can help you connect with people in your field of interest.

Do your research! Find local organizations that employ people in your field of interest. If possible, get the names of individuals who are currently working in that field. Once you have the name of someone to contact, call and speak to that individual, or write a letter of inquiry.

**Phone Tactics**

When you call, an administrative assistant may answer. This person may want to know who you are and the purpose of your call. Explain that you are not a job seeker, but rather someone who is in the process of making a career path decision. You are contacting the person to gain insights into his/her respective career field, which would be invaluable to you as you research the career in hopes of making a firm decision about your career choice. Remember to be professional and courteous with whomever you have contact. If you are connected to a person’s voicemail, do not leave a lengthy message, but rather ask about a more convenient time to call back.

If you find your call being transferred to the personnel office, try to make the best of it. Explain again that you are not a job applicant, but would like to talk to someone in your field of interest. The personnel manager may be able to refer you to someone appropriate.

When leaving a message, be sure that it is short and concise. For example: “Hello Ms. /Mr. ________, my name is ________. I was referred to you by ________ and I am interested in talking with you about ________. I thought you would be an excellent resource and I was hoping that you would have some time to speak to me. I can be reached at phone number(s).” Include in the message a statement indicating that if they reach your voicemail, they can leave a time when it would be convenient for you to call back. Remember to remain courteous and professional if a game of phone tag occurs as you both may have busy schedules.

**Important:** Make sure that you have a professional greeting on your voicemail.
Letter of Inquiry

Another way to get an interview is to precede your call with a letter. Write a short note to the contact, indicating your interest in the occupational field and your interest in speaking with them about it. Make sure you indicate how you were referred to them. Tell the contact that you will call within the next few days to see if you can arrange an informational interview at a time convenient for them. The advantage of such a letter is that it serves as a preliminary introduction and helps explain your purpose.

Important: In the letter of inquiry, do not ask the subject to call you! You must take the initiative and make the call to set up the informational interview yourself!

Your written inquiry may also be sent via email. Write the inquiry in the main body of the email, not as an attachment. Be sure to have a subject line that clearly defines the message so the reader will not think it is spam and delete it. Example: “Career decision-making inquiry.”

Conducting the Informational Interview

During the interview itself, it is important to remember that you are not asking for a job. Your purpose is to get information from someone who has real-world experience in your field of interest. You are looking for information that will help you understand the day-to-day realities of the person’s line of work. If nothing else, this meeting will be one in which you ask the questions. In an employment interview, it would be the other way around.

During the interview you will have two main goals:

1. Obtain specific information on what it is actually like to work in their field. Does it match your skills and satisfy your interests? You need this information to help you decide if this is indeed the career for you!
2. Determine the needs and challenges you might face if you were to choose this line of work. This will help you decide how well you can meet those needs. It can also help you when you become an active job-seeker. You will be better prepared to tell a prospective employer how you can meet those needs.

Normally, you should pursue these goals in order. If the job doesn't satisfy the first goal (it is not right for you), then there is little reason to pursue the second. It can be helpful then to arrange the order of your questions so you can consider goal number one first. It is also important that you recognize that they are two different goals and be careful not to get them confused.

It is a good idea to prepare a list of questions in advance. You don't need to take them with you, though it is probably a good idea, especially on your first few interviews. It helps you keep the discussion on track and assures that you come away with all the information you need. You will probably find that the interview departs from the "script" suggested by your list of questions. You want to get the answers to each of your questions of course, but you also want to stimulate discussion. A person who talks freely can provide valuable insight on subjects you might not have even considered.

An open discussion might also give you the opportunity to mention your skills and interests. Remember, one of the goals of the informational interview is to be remembered. If you have the opportunity to sell yourself to the individual, he/she might think of you should a position become available or if a colleague calls for a referral.

In Closing…

Thank the subject for their time and assistance. Tell them that they have been most helpful and ask if it is all right to keep in touch. Ask if you could leave a copy of your resume in case they see or hear of a position they feel might be right for a person with your skills and experiences. Also, ask them if they could suggest the names of other people (colleagues, acquaintances) who they feel would be a further source of information about the field. Most people know other local members of their profession to which they can refer you. This can lead to multiple people to interview.

The Follow-up

After the interview, make a careful record of the results. Determine what you have learned and how it might affect your career decisions and job search process. Also, send a short thank you note to everyone who assists you. This kind of courtesy will help them remember you.
March 23, 20xx

William Johnson
Publisher
Tri-City Times
Davenport, IA 65069

Dear Mr. Johnson:

Thank you so much for taking time from your busy schedule to answer my questions about a possible career in Journalism. You gave me a wealth of information that I could never get from a course or textbook.

Based on what I learned from you, I feel that I am indeed on the right course. I certainly appreciated your insight and advice, and look forward to meeting with Mr. Herald and Mr. Times as you suggested. I will keep you informed of my progress in my career search.

Sincerely,

Sean A. Morrison
Suggested Questions for an Informational Interview

In general, what is the nature of your work as a (name of occupation)?

How does your job fit into the overall operation of this organization?

How did you get into this field?

Why did you choose this profession?

What does the future look like for this profession?

Please describe a typical day on your job.

What do you like most about your job?

What do you like least about your job?

What skills and abilities have you found most important in your work?

How did you prepare yourself for this kind of work?

What advice would you have for someone starting out in this profession?

What other types of careers are related to this field?

What would you look for on a resume if you were screening candidates to interview for a starting position in your area? (this is where you could ask them to review your resume to see if you would be considered a viable candidate for a position based on your current skills and experiences)

Could you suggest a couple of colleagues/acquaintances who you feel would be a good additional source of information about the field? Could I use your name when I contact them?

Is there anything else that you feel I should know about this profession?
# Information Sheet for an Informational Interview

| Interviewee Name: | ______________________________ |  
| Title: | ______________________________ |  
| Organization: | ______________________________ |  
| Address: | ______________________________ |  
| Date Interviewed: | ________________ | Phone Number: | ________________ |  

What aspects of this person's work particularly interest you?  

What skills does this person use that you have or feel that you could develop?  

What other types of careers are related to this field?  

What attracts you now about this kind of work?  

What negative impressions do you have about this kind of work?  

What advice about future job searching did the subject give you?  

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Other possible interview subjects:  

| Contact: | ______________________________________________ |  
| Organization: | ______________________________________________ |  
| Address: | ______________________________________________ |  
| Phone: | ______________________________________________ |  

| Contact: | ______________________________________________ |  
| Organization: | ______________________________________________ |  
| Address: | ______________________________________________ |  
| Phone: | ______________________________________________ |  

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