Turn the Tables: The Informational Interview

To make the best possible decisions about your career, you need to have all the information available. In simple terms, informational interviews are brief meetings that allow you, as a jobseeker, to meet and enjoy a dialogue with a professional who is already established in your preferred field. Informational interviews may take place in person, over the phone, via Skype or Facetime, or even via email. Ultimately, informational interviews are about two things: relationship building and information gathering. Scheduling one helps you to prepare for an eventual real job interview and determine appropriate ways to position yourself for a job in an industry you admire. It also offers you a useful networking opportunity that will potentially point you toward more people who can help you somewhere down the line.

Whom to ask:

- Identify a person who a) works at a company you admire and b) holds a job position you would like to (one day) have.
- Use LinkedIn and directories from company websites to identify the right person. Check those sources plus Google and Twitter to find an email address.
- **Look for common ground**: Target people with whom you share connections or an alma mater.
- **Don’t aim too high**: You’re looking for somebody in an “aspirational role,” but not the CEO of the company; target somebody who has an influential position who will realistically have time for you.
- **Ask for connections**: Start with your family and friends, internship or job supervisors, and professors, and ask for a referral. Expand your network.

How to ask:

- As a general rule, start with an email rather than a phone call. A written letter gives you more time and space to articulate your request and your potential interviewer more time to consider it.
- Include, briefly, your current status (e.g. “I am in the fourth year of a Bachelor of Arts in Criminology,” or “I am a recent English Literature graduate working as a freelance writer.”)
- Begin your letter with a polite greeting, and end it with a polite salutation.
- If you have one, explain your connection to the recipient quickly.
- Be clear about what you do and do not want; you are not asking for a job or for resume advice, but you are looking to meet or open up an ongoing dialogue. Why should a busy professional take time out of his or her day to help you?
- Provide some general guidelines regarding when you might be available to meet; offer to meet near them, on their terms, and provide options.
- You may attach a resume or direct the recipient to your LinkedIn profile. Although not required, these gestures will give your recipient a broader understanding of your academic and career trajectories.
- Try multiple modes of communication if you don’t get an initial response (i.e. phone and email). Follow up after one week. After you’ve been ignored twice, whether or not you continue to reach out is up to your personal comfort level. If your request is denied, leave it at that.
- As a general rule, plan on meeting at a location convenient for the person you are interviewing. If you’re invited to a workplace, always go; this is the ideal situation as it will allow you to get a feel for a real-world professional environment. Meeting for coffee is appropriate (you’re paying), but asking to meet for a full meal is too demanding. Meeting for (alcoholic) drinks is inappropriate. Mondays and Fridays are generally the most difficult days for working people to fit in meetings.

Preparation:

- If you land an informational interview (congratulations!), make sure to prepare for it. Spend half an hour beforehand reviewing your questions and your interviewee’s profile. Even though you’ve scheduled the interview to gather information, you’ll make a stronger impression if you already know (some of) what you’re talking about. Prepare questions ahead of time.
• Research the company (show that this is something you’re taking seriously).
• Research your interviewee (you can ask them specific questions about their career path).

Goals:
• *Get a job (one day):* The person you interview may be in a position to help you land a job at his or her company or in his or her industry. Normally, though, this happens indirectly. Never ask for a job.
• *Learn something:* Use your interview to “fast-track” the answers to some of your questions about your career path.
• *Start small:* Aim to open the door to stepping-stone experiences like internships, volunteer opportunities, summer jobs, and part-time or contract work.
• *Clarify your independent research:* You’ve likely already been looking into the area in which you want to work. If anything you’ve read or heard elsewhere is unclear, this is your opportunity to clarify.
• *Be realistic:* You may need to settle for a 15-minute phone call or FaceTime conference. Be prepared to compromise and get the most out of whatever opportunity you’re given.

In the room:
• Dress to impress; bring a resume.
• Remember that you’re not in a job interview; don’t expect the interviewee to take charge. You are the interviewer.
• Be respectful of the parameters you established when you set up the interview. In particular, do not take more of your interviewee’s time than you originally proposed.
• Assume everything is “off the record.” While your interviewee isn’t likely to reveal any important company secrets, it’s still a good idea to keep your discussion confidential.
• At the outset, let your recipient know something about your general line of questioning. Are you interested in his or her career path, the nature of the field more broadly, or the culture at a specific company? This will provide structure and purpose to your conversation.
• Start with a personal hook (e.g. “I admire your work”) to appeal to ego. People love to talk about themselves and to feel like “experts.”

Next steps:
• Ask for referrals to continue the professional-development conversation. Does your interviewee have any colleagues or contacts whom would we worth meeting?
• Send a thank you note! Follow up with a quick email to express your gratitude and remind your interviewee of any next steps to which you agreed.
Sample Questions for Informational Interviews

As a general rule, we don’t recommend reading questions off a script. An informational interview is most effective when it’s a genuine conversation motivated by curiosity and mutual respect. That said, reading the following list of questions might help you to prepare a list of (slightly different) questions of your own and develop an understanding of which topics are appropriate in this context.

Personal work narratives:
- How did you choose your current career – or how did the career choose you?
- What does a typical weekday look like for you?
- What is your favourite part of your job?
- What is your least favourite – or the most difficult – part of your job?
- If you lost your job tomorrow, do you think your training and experience has prepared you for other types of work? What other jobs could you realistically perform?
- Describe your work/life balance. Do you have to compromise your personal time outside of work to lead your career?
- Would you do it all again?

About the field:
- What types of prior experience are essential and/or beneficial to your line of work? Can you recommend any types of entry-level employment or internships outside the field for somebody looking to get into it?
- What are the prospects for entry-level employment in your field? Do you see this changing?
- What is the current state of your field, as you understand it? Is the field growing, shrinking, or changing in another important way, and do you see that trend continuing?
- What is the key to performing well in your field? What skills are most essential?
- How do recruiters in your industry typically advertise new opportunities? Are good jobs normally posted publicly or internally? Where are they posted, and who can apply?
- What are some good companies to work for in your field? Where would you recommend I apply?
- Are there any specific expectations for resumes and cover letters in your industry (or at your employer) that I should know about?
- Based on what you know about me, what entry-level roles in your field would be a good fit?
- What are the benefits of graduate school or other post-undergraduate certificates for your field?
- What entry-level salary (as a general range) should I expect?
- Do employees at your company (or in your industry) change jobs frequently? Is employee turnover normal/expected?

Company-specific questions:
- How large is your company and what, briefly, is its organizational structure?
- What are some ways in which your company differs from others in your field?
- How would you describe the office/workplace culture where you work?
- What types of formal training programs (mandatory and voluntary) does your organization provide?
- If I were to apply to a job posting, what attributes does your employer value in incoming employees? What aspects of my history should I emphasize?

Next steps:
- Is there a specific person within your organization whom I should contact to inquire about a position?
- May I use your name in any capacity during my job search?
Can you recommend any other useful contacts in your field for me to interview?
What are some other resources (e.g. books, websites, or seminars) that would be good to explore?
What is the most effective way to follow news related to your industry on an ongoing basis?

**Further Reading:**
- [How to Land and Ace an Informational Interview (Forbes)](http://www.forbes.com)
- [Networking: How to Make Contact and Informational Interviews (Cawley Career Education Center at Georgetown University)](http://www.cawleycenter.com)
- [How to Ask for an Informational Interview (Professional Direction, LLC)](http://www.professionaldirection.com)

**CAREER AND EMPLOYMENT SERVICES OFFERS A VARIETY OF RESOURCES TO HELP YOU LAUNCH YOUR CAREER:**
- Job searching ● Career Planning ● Work experience ● Career preparation workshops
- Personal appointments ● Resume critiques ● Mock interviews ● Interest testing ● Job fair
- Networking opportunities ● Volunteer Internship Program (VIP)