

Informational Interviews

Over the many years that I've been an Employment Counsellor and facilitated those types of programs, one of the most popular workshops has definitely been Informational (or Information) Interviews.

While many people may have heard the term before, most are not familiar with what exactly it means and entails. Quite simply, they are a type of interview process utilized to obtain information. They are used most often to gather more details about career options (the example used in this article), but may also be used to gather information about business, interests, and so on. It's based on the idea that if you're interested in a particular career, let's say, then the best person to ask about it is someone doing the actual job! That way you learn real-life perspectives from experienced individuals.

And while that may sound straightforward enough, many people are a little apprehensive about conducting them because it's not something they have tried in the past. However, once done, the results speak for themselves and participants have found it to be one of the best tools they have under their belt, so to speak.

It's important to note that the purpose of an Informational Interview is *not* to request a job. The purpose *is* to obtain career information from knowledgeable professionals in the field, in order to make a sound career decision. In addition, it enables you to do a reality check on what you've read, heard, thought or assumed so far in your exploration process.

Added benefits of Informational Interviews:

- They provide an opportunity to view the workplace, environment, and other employees on the job.
- They provide an opportunity to obtain a greater depth of valuable career knowledge than is possible with other research methods (i.e. print or internet). As a Chinese proverb says, "A single conversation across the table with a wise man is worth a month's study of books."
- They allow you to gather up-to-date information on trends and shifts.
- They provide an opportunity to gain advice from a potential employer on qualifications required and future job prospects.
- They provide no-pressure interview skills and practice.
- They help to enlarge your circle of networking contacts.

So how does one start? Well, the answer is by networking.

Network, network, network!

- First, you'll want to create a networking contact list or spreadsheet. You can start filling in your list with friends, family, organizations, neighbors, business and community people you know, then of course you must, at some point, branch out by searching online, through the yellow pages, in directories, newspapers, in associations, and so on.

- Each time you talk with someone, don't be shy, and ask for referrals (I always ask for two) and suggestions of whom you might speak to next. Ask if you can mention that they referred you. (This is free advertising for them, and turns a cold lead into a *warm* lead for you!) Work on growing and nurturing your network.
- You'll want to speak to *several* people in the industry before making any decisions, and should consider speaking with all levels of professionals in the field, from the beginner, to the intermediate, to the advanced.

A little preparation goes a long way

- Be able to state concisely what information you're looking for, your objective and goals.
- Create business cards or calling cards to distribute to everyone you come in contact with, to ensure people know how to reach you.
- If you are keenly interested in a particular career, you should have conducted some initial occupational research to establish that it matches your needs, interests, values, skills, etc. Ensure that you have this primary knowledge before going in to an interview. Do your homework first!
- Prepare a list of [questions](#) ahead of time, including ones customized for your specific career research.
- Keep your career exploration information together and well organized. Rather than bringing individual pieces of paper with you, prepare a professional portfolio or binder with your questions, blank paper, research obtained from print or the Internet, company information if applicable, and perhaps a plastic holder for the business cards you receive, your current resume, and any other pertinent information.
- Prepare telephone scripts for setting interview appointments. You'll want one for seeking contacts (i.e. from a receptionist), and one for direct contact. While you might not think this is necessary, even the most seasoned communicators stumble with "uh" and "um", or other fumbles, without one. In addition, if you are asked to leave a voicemail, you are then prepared to leave the most professional one possible.
- Practice by role-playing. If you feel uncomfortable at first with the thought of interviewing a stranger, try with a friend or family member, even if not in your field, just to get in the practice. It can really be a lot of fun!

Set the appointments

- Utilize your phone scripts. They will help you to sound professional, as well as help you to stay focused, articulate, and concise.
- Smile while you dial! People can tell! It works and can change the entire tone of a conversation!
- When speaking directly to your contact, mention your referral if you have one. Explain your purpose and be to the point. This is not a job interview – it is simply a request for information. Most people are flattered! Remember that people answering a business phone are there to provide quality customer service, and your request should be treated no differently. Ask for a set period of time to meet (e.g. 15 or 20 minutes.)

Conduct the interview

- Treat this interview as a formal job interview. Dress appropriately, be well groomed, polite, organized, prepared, punctual, sharp, and alert.
- Always greet people with a warm, friendly smile and a firm handshake.
- Have a good two-way conversation. Ask your questions, making sure you get the information you need about the occupation. At the same time, be willing to share some information about yourself and your occupational goals.
- Be relaxed. There is no need to be nervous or intimidated. This interview is not for a job (not now at least), but you are making the crucial first impression. The balance of control is in your favor, as you know what information you need and what the questions are. The pressure is less on you and more on them as the spotlight is focused on their expertise and your interest in their expertise.
- Take notes, as this will show that you are serious about getting the information, and it will help in your decision making process later.
- Be sure to ask for the names of other people you could speak to. Be open to other ideas and avenues. Ask for at least two other contacts. If you do this at four information interviews, you will have eight new contacts in related occupations! Remember to ask if you may mention that he/she referred you.
- Courteously follow the time frame agreed upon. If it was 15 minutes, stop at that point to thank them for their time. Quite often they are happy to extend, so count on spending more time there just in case!

Follow-up

- Write a thank you note (or at *least* an email) to each person who you interviewed. This reinforces your sincerity and professionalism, and will encourage the contact person to speak with you again if you need to. Let them know your outcome.
- Keep in touch with people who you think might be able to help. Call back, send a note or email with updates on your progress, or by sending/sharing other relevant information.
- It is not uncommon that the contacts gained from Informational Interviews later turn into actual job leads. Statistically, 1 in 200 resumes turns into a job interview, while 1 in 12 Information Interviews results in a job!

So before you jump head first into a new job, career, educational course or program, or even a new (and potentially costly) hobby, if you commit to the research involved with Informational Interviews, you will be able to rest assured that you are making the best possible decision. And have a lot of fun and meet new people in the process!