

Set Up Informational Interviews

Sometimes the best way to find out about a career that interests you is to talk to the people who are already doing it.

Informational interviews are a great way to:

- * Learn what you really want to know about a career
- * Build your network of contacts for future job-hunting
- * Practice interviewing skills
- * Get to see first hand what the work place is like
- * Ask questions you usually wouldn't ask in a job interview, such as how much can you expect to make? What should I focus on learning or doing to make me an attractive applicant for this field?

To set up an informational interview, follow this step-by-step plan:

1. Find People to Interview
2. Schedule the Interview
3. Prepare for the Interview
4. Attend the Interview
5. Follow-up and Reflect

1. Find People to Interview

Remember: you're not looking for a job; you're simply looking for someone working in your career of interest that is willing to give you information and advice.

Places to look: Family, friends, neighbors, and former co-workers are a great resource. Ask them if they know anyone in your career of interest that may be willing to talk to you.

The One Stop Career Locator Tool

<http://www.acinet.org/acinet/employerlocator/employerlocator.asp?id=14&nodeid=18> can help you find employers in any state. Use key words to research a particular company or find employers in an industry.

The Online Yellow Pages <http://www.magicyellow.com/categories.html> can help you to find basic contact information for employers. You can search by geography and industry.

Call professional and trade associations in your area.

Create a contact list of the people you'd like to interview. Include their name, employer, job title, contact information, and notes of how you learned about them.

2. Schedule the Informational Interview

Write a letter or an email to give the person a 'heads up' that you'll be contacting them over the phone soon. This should be only a single page and include the following information:

- * Who referred you (or how you learned about the person)
- * Why you are writing (to request an informational interview!)
- * Your interests or experiences in the person's career
- * The last paragraph of the letter should always include a sentence about how and when you will contact this person again. Make sure to follow up!
- * Proof read your letter for mistakes before sending (better yet, ask a friend!)

* Check out the Quint Careers Website for more sample letters.

Here is a sample template of a 'heads up' letter or email.
<http://memphis.earnbenefits.org/explore/HeadsUpLetter.doc>

Or Call them on the phone. Remember, first impressions are important. If you do not sound professional, they may not think it is worth their time to give you an interview.

Before you call:

- * Make sure you are in a quiet place where you will not be disturbed
- * Have a copy of the letter that you sent ahead of time (see above)
- * If you did not send a letter, prepare a list of key points you want to discuss
- * Be flexible about the dates you are available to meet with them (remember, they are doing you a favor!) and have your calendar in front of you
- * Clearly write down the date and time you and this person agree to
- * Check out the Quint Careers Website for more tips on scheduling interviews by phone.

3. Prepare for the Informational Interview

Remember, this person is taking time out of their busy schedule for you so it is important to make the best use of their time. Also, although you are not interviewing for a job, sometimes informational interviews can lead to job interviews. You always want to make a good first impression.

A. Learn about the career area and organization of the person you'll be interviewing. You don't want to waste their time by asking questions that you could have answered by reading the organization's website! Going online is the easiest way to find information ahead of time.

B. Prepare a list of open ended questions. Open ended questions require more than a one word answer. So for example instead of asking -- do you like your job? You should ask -- why do you like your job or what about your job do you like best?

This sample list of questions can help get you started:

- * Can you tell me how you got started in this field?
- * What does a 'day in the life' of your job look like?
- * What do you find most rewarding about this work? Most challenging?
- * What educational background, skills or related experience do you think are needed to enter this field?
- * What salary range/fringe benefits could I expect as a new hire?
- * What trends do you see for this industry in the next 1 to 5 years?
- * How do people usually find out about jobs in this field? The internet? Word of mouth? Newspaper advertisements?
- * Based on our conversation today, what other types of people do you believe I should talk to? Can you name a few of these people? May I have permission to use your name when I contact them?

C. Update your resume and think about your interests, skills, and values and how they relate to the career field.

D. Call to confirm your appointment the day before the interview. If you need directions, look them up online at maps.google.com or this is the time to ask.

E. Dress for success -- first impressions are important!

Interviews start from the moment you walk in the door. How you look, act, and dress can be as important as the conversation you have with the interviewer. Remember--"You never get a second chance to make a first impression."

Tips: Dressing for Success

- * Look businesslike
- * Your clothing should be neat, tidy, and appropriate
- * Make sure your shoes are in good condition
- * Women should not wear a lot of makeup for business situations
- * Men should have their hair neatly combed.
- * Don't wear tennis shoes or flip-flops since they are generally inappropriate.
- * Don't wear clothing that is too informal for the job.
- * Women should not wear excessive make-up or jewelry.

Nothing to wear?

Get tips on what to wear and find organizations that can help you get free, work-appropriate clothing on our Clothing Resources page.

F. Actions speak louder than words - use effective body language. Keep in mind the following for your interview:

- * Make eye contact
- * Give a firm (but not too firm!) hand shake
- * Sit up straight

Check out more Body Language Tips to learn what to do with your face, hands, and feet at an interview.

Check out "The 2-Minute Drill," an article about non-verbal cues interviewers are sure to notice. Scroll down to the section entitled "The Drill" for a list of tips on making a great impression.

4. Attend the Informational Interview

Remember: this isn't a job interview, so relax! An informational interview is an opportunity for an informal conversation about a career that interests you both. Your purpose is to learn valuable information about this person's career path and personal experience. And, it's a great opportunity to find new contacts in your field of interest.

Here are some tips for conducting your interview:

- * When to arrive? - Arrive 10 minutes early and be polite to everyone you meet.
- * While you wait? Look around! What is the work environment like? How are people dressed? How are people talking to each other? Formal or informal? Is this a place you would want to work?
- * What to bring? Bring a notepad, your list of questions, your resume, and a professional attitude.
- * What to ask? Refer to your list of questions and take notes.
- * When to stop? Do not go over your requested time, but be prepared to stay longer in case the contact seems willing to talk longer.
- * Before you leave? make sure to ask for the names of other people who might also be helpful. Ask permission to use your interviewee's name when contacting these new people.
- * And...remember to thank the person for their time.

5. After the interview: Follow Up and Reflect

Following up after the informational interview is a critical step in the process. It helps you make a lasting impression with the interviewee and helps to make sure you reflect and make use of what you learned.

Take these steps to make the most of your follow up:

- * Write a brief thank you note (within a few days of the informational interview).

Here is a sample follow-up thank you note.

<http://memphis.earnbenefits.org/explore/ThankYouLetter.doc>

- * If someone else referred this person to you, thank them for providing you with the contact and let them know you had the interview.

- * Evaluate your experience. Review your notes immediately following the interview and add to them.

- * Add any new contacts to your contact list and make appointments to interview them.

- * Keep track of the people you've interviewed. It may help to know who told you what.

Questions to ask your self after the informational interview:

- * What did you learn about your career of interest?

- * How well did you prepare for the interview?

- * How might you better prepare for the next one?

- * Do you think you would be satisfied with the career your interviewer described?

- * Do you think you would be unhappy with the same thing(s) your interviewer described as not satisfying to them?

- * What is your reaction to the number of hours and type of schedule (set/flexible) described?

- * What do you need to do to make yourself a competitive candidate?

- * Do you need additional training or education

<http://memphis.earnbenefits.org/page.php?pageID=179> to apply for a job in this field?

- * Have any changes taken place in your opinion of the job as a result of your interview?

- * What are the most important new facts and understandings that you have acquired?

- * What additional information about this job do you still need to learn?

- * What do you need to do next?

Want more information on informational interviews? Check out these websites:

- * QuintCareers Informational Interviewing

http://www.quintcareers.com/informational_interviewing.html

- * About.com Job Search & Informational Interviews

<http://jobsearch.about.com/od/infointerviews/>

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