

Informational Interviewing

Informational interviewing and job shadowing are two essential ways to get real-life, practical information and advice on different careers and endeavors during your exploration process and throughout your career when you want to pursue what is involved in starting a new project. If you Google “informational interviewing” you will find many potential questions to ask people during an informational interview. What follows is the excellent content from the University of California, Berkeley’s Career Center site: <https://career.berkeley.edu/Info/InfoInterview>. You will find helpful short video tutorials on their website also.

Overview

Often the most current information about a career field, especially in a specific geographic location, may not be available in print or online resources. The best information comes from people who are actually working in that career field.

An informational interview is an informal conversation with someone working in an area of interest to you who will give you information and advice. It is an effective research tool in addition to reading books, exploring the Internet, and examining job descriptions. It is not a job interview, and the objective is not to find job openings.

You may feel awkward making arrangements to talk with people you don't know about their work. However, most people actually enjoy taking a few moments out of their day to reflect on their professional life and to give advice to someone with an interest in their field.

Real-Life Example: Finding a Person to Interview

A student developed an interest in marketing but wasn't sure how to find people in the field to talk to. She had worked as a clerk/typist in the payroll office of University Extension for several years. She decided to talk over her career interests with her supervisor, who pointed out that Extension had a marketing department and that she'd be happy to introduce her to the director. This "right in your own back yard" referral led to a great informational interview and lots of other contacts.

Benefits of Informational Interviewing

- Get firsthand, relevant information about the realities of working within a particular field, industry, or position. This kind of information is not always available online or in print.
- Find out about career paths you did not know existed.
- Discover what others with your same major are doing in their careers.
- Get tips and insider knowledge about how to prepare for and land your first career position.
- Improve your communication skills and confidence speaking with professionals.
- Learn what it's like to work at a specific organization.
- Gain knowledge that can help you in a job search. Resume writing and job interviewing become much easier when you have a good sense of what interests you and how your background and skills match the qualifications of a particular field, industry, or job.

- Initiate a professional relationship and expand your network of contacts in a specific career field; meet people who may forward job leads to you in the future.
- Learn about how others have balanced their work and other priorities.

Six Steps for Informational Interviewing

1) Research Career Fields

- Do some initial research on the [career field](#) or [employer](#) using internet and print resources.
- You will find many resources to research career fields and employers on the following web pages: <https://career.berkeley.edu/Plan/CareerFields> and <https://career.berkeley.edu/Resources/ResEmp>

2) Identify people to interview

- Pursue your own contacts. People you already know, even if they aren't in fields of interest to you, can lead you to people who are. This includes family, friends, teaching assistants, professors, and former employers.
- Visit your university's career center to review employer directories, past job listing binders, and other resources like the Book of Lists, a directory of leading employers in major urban areas.
- Identify names of your university's alumni who may have expressed an interest in being available for career information through your university's career center.
- Use LinkedIn to identify possibilities, including university alumni through your university's LinkedIn page and connections of your contacts.
- Read newspaper and magazine articles.
- Contact professional or trade associations. You can find lists of these on the career research sites www.onetonline.org and www.bls.gov/OOH/.
- Call organizations directly or visit their website for the name of someone working within a particular area of interest.

3) Prepare for the interview

- Develop a short (15-30 second) overview of yourself, including your reasons for contacting this person, as a way to introduce yourself and define the context of the meeting.
- Plan open-ended [questions to ask](#). Select questions that are appropriate for your target career field and stage of decision-making. You can ask about such topics as the nature of a person's work, how to get started in the field, or effective approaches for the job search. Use some of the following questions or make up your own.

- What are your main responsibilities as a...?
- What is a typical day (or week) like for you?
- What do you like most about your work?
- What do you like least about your work?
- What kinds of problems do you deal with?
- What kinds of decisions do you make?
- How does your position fit within the organization/career field/industry?
- How does your job affect your general lifestyle?
- What current issues and trends in the field should I know about/be aware of?
- What are some common career paths in this field?
- What kinds of accomplishments tend to be valued and rewarded in this field?
- What related fields do you think I should consider looking into?
- How did you become interested in this field?
- How did you begin your career?
- How do most people get into this field? What are common entry-level jobs?
- What steps would you recommend I take to prepare to enter this field?
- How relevant to your work is your undergraduate major?
- What kind of education, training, or background does your job require?
- What skills, abilities, and personal attributes are essential to success in your job/this field?
- What is the profile of the person most recently hired at my level?
- What are the most effective strategies for seeking a position in this field?
- Can you recommend trade journals, magazines or professional associations which would be helpful for my professional development?
- If you could do it all over again, would you choose the same path for yourself? If not, what would you change?
- I've read that the entry-level salary range for this field is usually in the range of _____? Does this fit with what you've seen? (Don't ask about the person's actual salary.)
- What advice would you give someone who is considering this type of job (or field)?
- Can you suggest anyone else I could contact for additional information? May I say you referred me?

4) Initiate contact

- Contact the person by phone (or email). See sample scripts below.
- Mention how you got his or her name.
- Ask whether it's a good time to talk for a few minutes.
- Emphasize that you are looking for information, *not* a job.
- Ask for a convenient time to have a 20-30 minute appointment.
- Be ready to ask questions on the spot if the person says it is a good time for him/her and that s/he won't be readily available otherwise.

Sample Telephone Script Requesting an Informational Interview

Hello. My name is Jane Wilson, and I'm a junior majoring in English at UC Berkeley. Is this a good time for you to talk briefly? I heard you speak at an event sponsored by the Undergraduate Marketing Association last semester. Although I am not currently looking for a job, I have become very interested in public relations and would like to find out as much as I can about the field. Would it be possible to schedule 20 to 30 minutes with you at your convenience to ask you a few questions and get your advice on how best to prepare to enter the field?

Sample Email Script Requesting an Informational Interview

Subject Line: Informational Interview

Dear Ms. Jones:

(Immediately introduce yourself and how you identified this person. If you were referred by another person, say so here.)

I am a junior majoring in Political Science at the University of California, Berkeley and spoke with you briefly at Cal's Nonprofit Career Fair in February.

(Next, clearly state that you are not contacting them about a job—rather, you are seeking advice. Do NOT attach a resume.)

Although I am not currently looking for a job, I am very interested in learning all I can about typical career paths in the field of public policy and what skills I might need to develop during my last year at Cal. I would greatly appreciate 15 to 20 minutes of your time to ask you a few questions about your position as Health Policy Analyst with the City of Berkeley, as well as other opportunities in the field.

(Conclude with a politely assertive statement that you will contact the person—also provide your telephone number and email address in case this person wants to contact you.)

Thank you for your consideration. I will contact you next week to arrange a convenient time to meet with you.

Sincerely,
James Chan
1234 Exeter St.
Oakland CA 94444
(510) 555-5555
jc@gmail.com

5) Conduct the informational interview

- Dress neatly and appropriately, as you would for a job interview in the particular industry or field.
- Arrive on time or a few minutes early, especially if you are meeting in an unfamiliar setting.
- Bring your list of questions and something to take notes on, as appropriate.
- Restate that your objective is to get information and advice, not a job.
- Be ready to give a brief overview of yourself and your education and/or work background.
- Be prepared to direct the interview, but also let the conversation flow naturally, and encourage the interviewee to do most of the talking.
- Start with your most pressing questions.
- Listen well and show genuine interest in what the person has to say.
- Take notes if you'd like.
- Respect the person's time. Keep the appointment length within the time span that you requested.
- Ask the person if you may contact him or her again in the future with other questions.
- Always ask for names of other people to talk with for additional information and different perspectives. Also ask if you can say that they referred you.
- Thank the person sincerely for their time and help.

Note: You can bring a resume, but don't take it out right away or lead with questions about it or your interviewee may think you're actually fishing for a job opportunity. You may wish to ask for input about it at some point in the interview, but first make sure you've established a comfortable rapport with the person.

6) Follow-up

- Keep records. Right after the interview, write down or type up what you learned (including the suggestions or advice given to you), what more you'd like to know, and your immediate reactions in terms of how this industry, field, or position would "fit" with your lifestyle, aptitudes, interests, skills, and future career plans.
- Send a thank-you note within 1-2 days to express your appreciation for the time and information given. Based on whether the informational interview was relatively informal or more businesslike, this may be a brief handwritten note, an email, or a business letter.
- The below examples are suggested guidelines, but always be sincere and authentic.

Sample informational interview thank you note:

Dear Mr. Brown:

Thank you for the opportunity to spend yesterday at your manufacturing facility in Sunnyvale. The discussion we had was very informative, and I really enjoyed the tour of your plant and the informal conversation with your engineering staff.

I was impressed with the effective manner in which Consolidated Engineering has adapted the management-by-objective system to their technical operations. This philosophy aligns well with my interests and training.

The entire experience has confirmed my interest in joining the team at Consolidated Engineering, and I look forward to hearing from you soon.

Sincerely,

James S. Moore

415.555.0999

James.moore@gmail.com

Sample business-style letter if the conversation was more formal:

1234 Jane Lane
San Francisco, CA 94555
(415) 555-0999

December 12, 2020

Tom Watson
Public Relations Director
San Francisco Ethnic Arts Center
PO Box 121
San Francisco, CA 94555

Dear Mr. Watson:

I appreciate your meeting with me yesterday to talk about the work that you do as the Ethnic Arts Center's Public Relations Director. I now have a much better understanding of the field, particularly within a large nonprofit arts organization.

It was helpful to hear that an entry-level position often requires some experience with media relations. I have decided to take on those responsibilities for the annual fundraising event sponsored by my student organization. I have also called your colleague, Cindy Jones, at the East Asian Art Gallery to make an appointment to talk with her.

It was very helpful to have had the opportunity to talk with you. Thank you again for your time and advice.

Sincerely,

Tamar Espinoza

Tamar Espinoza

Sample informal handwritten note:

Dear Simone,

Thank you so much for staying a few minutes after your campus information session to talk with me yesterday. You must have been very tired, and I really appreciate your time.

Your suggestions of additional people to talk with about my interest in corporate communications were great. I've already visited the websites you mentioned and have an appointment with Kathy Smith next week. I'll keep you posted about my progress.

Thanks again,

Jim Spencer

(510) 555-8190

Jim.spencer@gmail.com

Keep in touch with the person, especially if you had a particularly nice interaction. Connect with him or her on LinkedIn. Let him or her know that you followed up on their advice and how things are going as a result. This relationship could become an important part of your network.