Keys to Success for Informational Interviewing

Outline, Scripts and Questions
Informational Interviewing
Introduction

An important type of networking is the informational interview. An informational interview is a formal business discussion or meeting about career opportunities in fields that interest you. These meetings are often with someone who is working in a field that interests you and who, if a job existed, could be in a position to hire you. The goals of the informational interview are:

- to gather information and advice regarding careers in a particular field,
- to learn more about the “realities” of working in a certain field,
- to gather information on how to find job opportunities in this field,
- to request names of other professionals with whom you might meet to expand your network.

Do not confuse informational interviewing with an actual job interview. Your informational interviewer should not feel any pressure to find you a job; rather, he/she should feel that he/she is a valued member of your network.

There are four key steps to ensuring a successful informational interview:

1. Plan the interview
2. Prepare for the interview
3. Go to the interview
4. Follow-up after the interview
4 Steps to a Successful Informational Interview

- Plan the Interview
- Prepare for the interview
- The actual interview
- Follow-up to the interview
Step One: Plan the interview

If you are sure whom you want to contact for your informational interview, then make your call or email the person you wish to meet. (refer to examples provided below). If you are not sure whom you want to meet and what you want to learn from your interview, then refer to the Planning Worksheet for Informational Interviews at the end of this document.

You may either call or email the person with whom you want to meet. Please refer to the telephone script and email sample below for directions on how to do this.

Informational Interview Script

Hello Mr. (Ms.)__________ my name is _________ and I am a graduate student at the McCallum Graduate School of Business at Bentley University. How are you doing today?

I am contacting you today to see if you would be willing to assist me with my research. I am doing research on careers in ___________ (e.g. Information Technology, Finance, Marketing, etc.) and I was wondering if you could assist me by allowing me to visit you at your office to ask you a few career-related questions?

Note: If asked what type of questions? Refer to the question sheet.

Answer: “I would like to ask you questions like “How long have you been in your industry?” “What criteria did you use in selecting your job?” Questions similar to these.

Note: If asked “How long will it take?”

Answer: About 25 minutes

What day is best for you?
Record day and date __________________________
What is better for you, mornings or afternoons? ____________________
What time would you like to meet?
Let me confirm that we will meet on _________(day) _________ (date _________ (time)
Now, let me check the address I have for you to see if it is correct. Are you located at _________________? (Research the address and fill in beforehand)

Note: Ask for directions if you don’t know to get to their location.

Is it possible for you to give me directions if I come from Bentley University in Waltham?

Mr. (Ms.) ___________________ thank you for your time. I look forward to meeting you on ______________________ (date).
Email Request for an Informational Interview  
Assumption: Someone else has already made the introduction for you

Dear Mr. Johnson:

Professor John Doe of the McCallum Graduate School at Bentley suggested that I contact you. Thank you kindly for agreeing to meet with me on an informational basis to discuss opportunities in the investment management field. I was wondering if you might have half an hour to meet with me at your convenience.

I am an MBA student at the McCallum Graduate School, with a concentration in Finance. My previous professional experience includes several years' experience in finance departments of high technology and medical devices firms. Upon graduation, I would be most interested in working as an analyst in an investment management firm.

I understand you are very busy and really appreciate your willingness to meet with me. Please let me know a date and time that is most convenient for you to meet.

Thank you in advance for your time and consideration.

Sincerely yours,
Step Two: Prepare for the Interview

Prior to participating in your informational interview, you should do your homework and prepare as much as possible. You should know as much as possible about:

- The person you will be meeting with
- The company whom the person works for
- The industry in which the company is a player

NOTE: Use Library Databases to assist you in researching a company and or industry.

An informational interview is NOT a job interview. However, if you demonstrate superior knowledge about the company, its competitors and the industry, the person you meet with may be inclined to pass along your resume, recommend you to someone else or even interview you for a position.

DON'T UNDERESTIMATE THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING PREPARED!!

After you have done your homework on the areas above, you then need to develop a list of questions you can use during your interview.

A good question for an informational interview is one that meets the following criteria:

- Open-ended  Not close-ended
- Neutral  Does not presuppose an answer or viewpoint
- Short/easy to say  Not a long explanation
- Clearly-stated  Not ambiguous or vague
- Interesting and thought provoking  To the asker and to the respondent

Your informational interview should only last 20-30 minutes; carefully select 5-10 questions from this list to gather the information you are looking for.

Questions About the Job Function:

- Could you describe your position? What are your responsibilities?
- How did you get into this position?
- Could you describe a typical day at your job?
- What kinds of tasks do you do on a typical day or in a typical week?
- What types of tasks do you spend most of your time doing?
- What excites you most about your job?
- What are some of the more frustrating or difficult parts of your job or this career?
- What kind of problems do you deal with in your job?
- I really like doing XYZ. Do you have an opportunity to do this type of work in this career?
What skills does a person need in this job? What skills are critical for success?
Can you name the best X (job you are seeking, for example marketing associate or financial analyst) you have ever known?
  o What are the three reasons why this person was the best at their job?
Do you usually work independently or part of a team?
What types of decisions do you make?
How does your work fit into the mission of the organization?
What are the job opportunities for an MBA or graduate student in business in your career?
What types of advancement opportunities are there in this career?

Questions about the Industry
I have read that such and such are issues in this field. Have you found this to be true?
I have read that there are 2 key trends influencing the industry. They are (1) and (2). Do you agree? How do you feel about this?
Is this career/industry changing? If so, how?

Questions about Networking in the Industry
Where do you network with other professionals in your field?
Which trade magazine do you read?
Which professional organizations do you belong to?

Questions About the Working Conditions
How would you describe the work environment?
What type of hours do you work?
If your schedule flexible or set? Is there flexibility built into this job or industry?
Does this career include or require travel?
How does this career affect your lifestyle?
Could you please comment on work/life balance in this industry or career?

Questions About Training
How did you prepare for this career? Is there any special training or certification that is required?
Do you have any advice about how people interested in this career should prepare?
Do MBA/MS students participate in any special training when they are hired?

Questions About Careers?
Do you know of any other careers that use skill XYZ?
Do you know of other careers that would value my skills XYZ?

Questions about Contacts?
Do you know of other people in this career who would be willing to spend some time with me?
Can you suggest anyone else that I can contact for information? May I use your name? Or May I tell them that you have referred me?
Questions About the Company?
• What is your company’s mission? What are the company’s core values?
• What is the company culture?
• Is the company involved in community activities?
• What obligations, outside of normal hours, are involved with the job?
• Does this company have a formal/informal mentor program?
• What is the structure of this department?
• How would you describe the work environment at this company?

Questions You May be Asked During an Informational Interview

How can I help you?

Why did you want to see me?

Describe your background for me.

Tell me about yourself.

What do you know about this field (industry, position)?

Why are you considering this field?

What are your career goals?

What is your job search plan? What have you done so far?

What do you consider to be your strengths/weaknesses?

*Practice answers to these and other tough questions that may come up so that you can answer them confidently. Never apologize for yourself or offer negative information. Always speak positively about yourself and your experience!

*Describe a definite focus, purpose, and/or goal—even if you are not sure that you want it. People can help you more effectively if you appear to have a clear direction. If you aren't sure about your career path yet, have a few different scenarios and choose from as appropriate.
Step Three: The Actual Interview

During the actual informational interview, YOU drive the meeting so don't be afraid to take initiative and start the meeting. Please adhere to the time schedule you agreed upon with the individual when scheduling the meeting. If you both agreed the meeting would last thirty minutes, do not exceed this limit without the person's agreement.

The following is a breakdown of how the meeting should proceed:

Step One: Introduction (1-2 minutes)
- Introduce yourself and explain how you know the person or where referred
- Thank them for seeing you
- Be clear that you are here to gather information and not to seek a job

Note: Be prepared to hand over your resume should the person you are meeting with wishes to recommend you to other individuals in the firm.

Step Two: Brief Overview (2-3 minutes)
- How you got to where you are and why
- What excites you and why?
- Where do you want to go and why?

Step Three: Building the Relationship (10-15 minutes)
- Ask your questions
- Make a personal connection with the person you are meeting with
  - Ask them what issues they face in their job
  - Find out what interests them in their professional life
  - Looks for clues as to what interests them personally
- Looks for clues for follow-up
  - The person may say "Please let me know in a month how you are doing and how I can help". Remember to follow-up with this person if they indicate that they would like you to do so. If you do not, this can result in damage to your professional relationship with this person. Additionally, it will make you look unprofessional!
  - The person may say, "Please let me know when you find a position".

Step Four: Ask for the Referral
- Ask the person if they could recommend other people you could have similar meetings with.
- Ask them if they have heard of any companies in the industry that are hiring?

Step Five: Conclusion
- Thank the person for their time
- Summarize on what you have agreed during the meeting
  - Example: Mr., X. Thank you for agreeing to introduce me to Mr. Y. We agreed that I would not contact Mr. Y until you have made a call to him and sent me an email.
Step Four: Follow up to the Actual Interview

Don't forget to send the person a thank you note after the informational interview. The following guidelines should assist you in preparing your follow up documentation.

Guidelines for Creating a Powerful Thank You Note for an Informational Interview

If someone meets with you regarding your career search, you should send him or her a thank you note. Even if you did not find the meeting particularly helpful, always send an enthusiastic follow-up note.

• Send the thank you note within two days of your meeting. This prompt letter conveys you have a good sense of business protocol. If the person is inclined to recommend you to someone else, your timely response will indicate that you will repeat the behavior and not embarrass him or her.
• Tailor and customize the note to the person with whom you met with. If they gave you help in a specific area, be sure to mention this. Be sincere. Here are some sample phrases:
  o Thanks for your help.
  o I sincerely appreciate your assistance.
  o Your help is greatly appreciated.
  o Your advice on XYZ is greatly appreciated.
• Keep your note short and sweet.
• Focus on content. Remind the person why you met, what you gained from the meeting and the steps you plan to take from the recommendations.
• Make sure they have all your contact information in case they need to reach you (i.e., a JOB!).
• If the person indicates they would like to be kept in the loop regarding your career moves, then by all means send them a note when you find a job. You can even follow-up with them at interim points in your career search.
• The closing. You can add another thank you again in the closing paragraph. Some suggestions include:
  o Thanks again for all you have contributed to strengthening my career
  o Thanks again for providing additional contacts to my referral network
  o Thank you for introducing me to Mr. X
• DO NOT, UNDER ANY CIRCUMSTANCES, ASK FOR A JOB. Keep the focus on informational issues.
Mr. John Smith  
Vice President of Corporate Marketing  
XYZ Software Inc.  
285 Appletree Way  
Boston, MA 02215

Dear Mr. Smith:

Thank you again for meeting with me this morning to discuss my career search in high technology marketing. I know how busy you are and your input is greatly valued.

Your advice on “networking” within the high tech community was most helpful. I have already ordered a subscription to Mass High Tech and the Boston Business Journal. I will also visit the various websites you recommended during our meeting.

Your willingness to introduce me to Ms. Susan Philbin and Mr. Mark Jones is greatly appreciated. As we agreed, I will await your email confirming that the contact has been made before I call them directly.

Once again, thanks for the steps you have taken to strengthen my career search. I will keep you informed as my search progresses.

Sincerely,

Susan Holmes
Appendix A: Planning Worksheet
Informational Interviews

• About which industry/field or job function do I most want to learn?

• What do I want to learn about this industry or job function?
  o List the 3-4 most important things you want to learn/validate?

• Who would I like to talk to and learn from?

• Who do I know that could introduce me to this person?

• If I do not know of anyway to get introduced to this person, how might I go about setting up the Informational Interview?

• What research and due diligence do I need to do before this Informational Interview?