



Interviewing for Information & Networking

Information interviewing is the process of gathering career information from people who are already working in target occupations, organizations, or geographic locations. Both the content of the information and the process of gathering it will help you to refine your goals and possibly discover some new ones.

In this handout we will cover the steps for conducting effective Information Interviews:

- 1) Why Do Information Interviews
- 2) How To Find People With Whom To Talk
- 3) How To Actually Set Up An Interview
- 4) How To Prepare For An Information Interview
- 5) How To Conduct The Interview
- 6) What To Do After The Information Interview

1) WHY DO INFORMATION INTERVIEWING

To gain information

The main goal of Information Interviewing is to obtain information and advice on career fields or job search strategies through one-to-one, comfortable conversations with persons already working in a particular career. Information Interviews are initiated and controlled by the student.

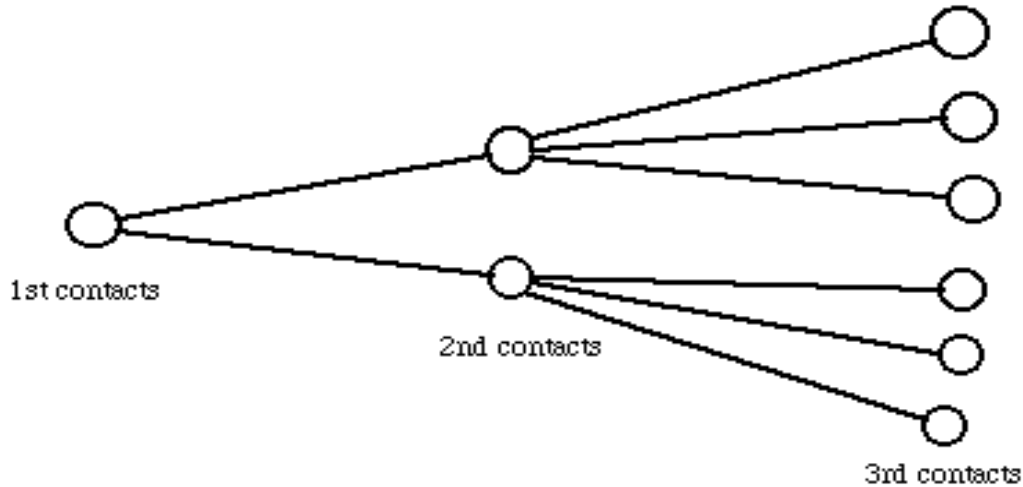
More specific purposes of Information Interviewing include:

- To validate the choice of career by investigating the day-to-day experiences of someone working in the field;
- To narrow the list of potential employers, developed from reviewing background literature, to those who form the most likely market for your qualifications;
- To make contacts and obtain current information;
- To get additional leads to jobs and/or information interviews;
- To develop a knowledge of the vocabulary of the field;
- To gather information that will make a positive impression on employers in a cover letter or a job interview; and
- To build confidence in your ability to discuss your career interests and goals.

To develop networks

One important benefit of Information Interviewing is to establish a career network. Networking is the process of discovering and utilizing connections between people. Genuine networks stem from friendships or business relationships. Everyone knows other people, and thus has a network. But "networking" involves movement beyond one's immediate network and tapping into other people's networks, perhaps far removed from one's own.

The diagram below shows how quickly networks can grow.



Networks prove very helpful for both exploring career fields and actually finding jobs.

2) FINDING PEOPLE WITH WHOM TO TALK

It is not easy for some people to start Information Interviewing. There are two types of approaches which are used, and you may wish to start with the low risk, indirect approach until you gain confidence.

The Indirect Approach

Write down the names of everyone in your circle (friends, relatives, classmates, present and former co-workers, neighbors, faculty members, members of the club[s] to which you belong, and anyone else you can think of). There is probably at least one person in your circle who has information about the career you are considering. Ask everyone on your list to suggest the names of people who are employed in companies or fields you are investigating and ask for permission to use his/her name in contacting these people.

For example, Bob is interested in starting out as a personnel assistant. He found that the father of one of his friends was in charge of personnel for a major local consulting firm, and he was able to arrange for an interview. From this first interview, he obtained the names of other personnel managers in the area who might supply him with career information. Alice started by interviewing one of her marketing instructors, who referred her to computer marketing representatives in the companies she had researched.

The Direct Approach

The most direct way of finding people who can furnish useful information in Information Interviews is to approach companies and organizations, identify potential interviewees, and ask directly for an interview. To do this you must get the names of persons who are in charge of the departments that interest you. If the names are not mentioned in the company's literature, they are usually obtainable from the organization. It is a simple process to call an organization and ask for the name of the person who is in charge of a particular department (e.g., the personnel or marketing department manager). Requests for this information are frequently made in the normal course of business.

Try also the University Career Resource Library for sources of organizations and people--including CareerSearch, an online database of over 1,000,000 companies, as well as the numerous volumes in the "Directories" section of the University Career Resource Library. Make full use of the terrific networking opportunity you have with UVA Alumni in every imaginable industry. UCAN, The University Career Assistance Network, is a database of people drawn from 21,000 alumni, who have volunteered to be mentors for UVA Students and other Alumni. The way to gain access to alumni is to check a recent copy of the UVA Alumni magazine for alumni chapter activities in the cities in which you are interested. The UCS Counselors also have lists of alumni clubs around the country and the world and the presidents of those groups.

3) SETTING UP THE INFORMATION INTERVIEW

Having done your research on organizations and having identified the people with whom you wish to speak, you are now ready to arrange your Information Interviews. Contact each person to ask for a time when you can meet to discuss his/her organization and, in particular, what this person does on the job. Be sure to make it clear that you are interested in gathering information and advice--not a job. Be prepared to explain the kind of information you want. (More about this later.)

If you feel a bit nervous or anxious about arranging your first few "interviews," here are some ways to overcome your reticence: (1) practice what to say before you call, perhaps even jotting down the important points you want to mention; (2) begin your interviews with people who are "low threat"--family, friends, previous employers; (3) practice the process with a low priority organization or in an area where you feel you have nothing to lose (e.g., talk to someone working in a hobby area of yours).

If your nervousness is compounded by wondering why any busy professional would be willing to take time to grant you such an interview, keep in mind that: (1) people enjoy helping others--information and advice are free to give--jobs aren't; (2) people enjoy talking about themselves, their ideas, and their opinions; (3) people enjoy a break in routine; and finally (4) very few people are actually so busy that they don't have a free half-hour during a week.

Example of an initial phone conversation:

You: "Mr. Adams, my name is _____. I was given your name by _____. I'm very much interested in advertising, but don't feel I have enough current information on the field. I thought that if I could talk to someone knowledgeable in advertising, like you, I would have a clearer picture of the profession.

I've heard that your department has been doing some very creative things, particularly with your recent radio-TV campaign. I would like very much to get your personal opinion about corporate advertising and would enjoy the opportunity of coming to your office to discuss your views."

(Note: If he or she cannot see you, ask to talk for a few minutes on the phone. Also ask for names of others you might contact in the same career field.)

In summary, there are four major strategies in contacting the individual with whom you want to meet:

- 1) Write a letter or send an e-mail (remember to proofread all your correspondence so that it is error-free), and follow it up with a phone call. Introduce yourself, explain your interest in the individual's organization and job, and propose a meeting. Also, mention that you will call to confirm a date, and then follow up with a phone call promptly. You will be hard to ignore.
- 2) Telephone the person directly. The response will be quicker, whether yes or no. If no, always ask who would be an appropriate person for you to contact. You should then begin again with that person.
- 3) Drop in on the person in hopes of meeting right away without an appointment. This approach is more risky, yet the spontaneity may be impressive and generate a favorable response.
- 4) Have one of your contacts (e.g., a parent, friend, sibling) arrange an appointment for you.

Use whatever approach feels most comfortable and appropriate for you.

4) PREPARING FOR THE INFORMATION INTERVIEW

This is a critical step! Too many students often set up interviews, then "drop in" for their appointments without doing any homework. Employers are often frustrated when they talk with a student who knows nothing about their field.

Also, the more you know about an area or an organization, the more intelligent and productive your questions can be -- plus your interviewees will be impressed by this knowledge and preparation on your part.

You can research for your Information Interview in some of the following ways:

- Go to the UVA library and research recent magazine or newspaper articles written about the organization;
- Search via UCS's Internet home page (<http://www.virginia.edu/~career>) for a World Wide Web site maintained by the organization or for other information on the company;
- Read literature on the specific career field in the University Career Resource Library;
- Talk to someone (a friend, neighbor, parent, alumnus, a person who knows this field or organization) -- and ask him or her about the career or company.

Before your Information Interview, plan open-ended questions that will stimulate discussion and enable both of you to learn about each other. See the list of sample questions on the following pages.

Plan ahead what you want to communicate about yourself: skills, traits, and goals. Think about ways to get these attributes across by means of the questions you ask and the way in which you conduct the interview.

Focus on the interviewee's views, opinions, thoughts, and feelings rather than cold facts. Your interviewer will enjoy the interview more, and will feel more positive about you as a result. He or she will be flattered.

5) CONDUCTING THE INFORMATION INTERVIEW

Remember that your purpose is to gather information from someone who is working in a career area of interest to you. **YOU ARE NOT ASKING FOR A JOB!** You are seeking information to help you understand the realities of working in a specific career field. You will be doing the interviewing.

In preparing for your interview, it is important to recognize that all Information Interviews are not alike -- your goals for such interviews will change along a continuum like this:

General Career Research ----- Specific Job Research Advice

General Career Research Interviews

Your goal is to acquire basic information about work responsibilities, lifestyles, working conditions, educational and experience entry requirements, while accumulating acquaintances in a field or in a particular kind of work environment or organization of interest to you. This type of interview will dominate your early career planning activities. You are seeking information.

Specific Job Search Advice Interviews

After you know what you want to do, but are unsure of how to achieve it, your goal is to acquire advice on how to break into the field or organization of your choice. In these interviews you will want to be particularly sure to communicate clear ways that you can contribute, while at the same time seeking information and ideas. Though job leads can come from such interviews, it is vital that you not go into such an interview seeking a job. You are seeking advice.

After clarifying your objectives for the Information Interview and doing the necessary background research, you are now ready to conduct the interview. Remember, this should be a low-stress, enjoyable conversation, not an anxiety-provoking interview.

Stages of the Information Interview

Begin by setting the stage. Give your introduction and remember that **you are in charge of the progress of the interview**. It is normal to spend a few moments in establishing a climate of relaxation through chitchat about mutual contacts, the office environment, or weather. More than a few moments of this will make a contact think you are wasting his/her time. Restate your time goal at the beginning of the interview and do not exceed it without negotiating an extension.

Developing Rapport:

One way of developing rapport is by asking people to talk about their jobs, their personal career development, and their likes and dislikes about the field. (See list of questions in the next section.)

Getting Referrals:

Once you are nearing the conclusion of an Information Interview, you should always ask, "Can you think of any other individuals who can provide me with additional information about this occupational field and its employers? May I say that you suggested that I call?" In almost all cases, your contact will be able to refer you to others and will be pleased to do so.

Ending the Interview:

It is a thoughtful gesture to thank the contact at the end of the interview and to send a thank you letter to him/her. It will create a favorable impression and smooth the way for further contact in the future.

Stay in Touch:

Ask if it would be all right to inquire about new developments and leads in the future. Extensive networks of satisfying personal and professional relationships have been built through Information Interviewing.

The completion of successful Information Interviews gives you solid data on where jobs are and what employers expect. It can help you decide which employers you wish to approach and may help unearth new job leads. This is a good time to refine a resume because you have a more precise concept of the skills, knowledge, and experience an employer will be looking for in a job candidate.

Note: *What If You're Offered a Job?* Sometimes a job hunter who is doing an Information Interview is offered a job or a job interview during the course of the Information Interview. Use your own judgment regarding the offer of a job interview, but remember that you had asked only for information. One strategy is to say you will think it over and call him or her back.

Questions to ask in the Information Interview

Again, *you* are conducting the interview. Often you will find, however, that one or two prepared questions on your part will naturally lead to a free-flowing conversation in which you will learn a great deal.

However, remember also that it is easy to let the conversation get off the track, and then you leave without gaining the information you wanted. Listed below are sample questions. You are encouraged to think of others that meet your needs more specifically. The questions are divided into two categories:

- 1) **Occupational Field:** Questions to generate more in-depth information on a particular field and on closely related fields.
- 2) **Employer:** Questions on the work setting and hiring procedures. Notice that most of the questions begin with who, what, when, where, why and how. Beginning with these key words can help you develop good, open-ended questions for your interview.

QUESTIONS REGARDING THE OCCUPATIONAL FIELD

Preparation:

- What credentials or degrees are required for entry into this kind of work?
- What types of prior experience are absolutely essential?
- How did you prepare yourself for this work?

Present Job:

- Describe how you occupy your time during a typical workweek.
- What skills or talents are most essential for effective job performance in this job?
- What are the toughest problems you must deal with? Apart from external motivators such as salary or fringe benefits, what do you find most rewarding about your job?
- If you were to leave this kind of work, what factors would probably contribute to your decision?

Lifestyle:

- What obligation does your work place upon your personal time?
- How much flexibility do you have in terms of dress, hours of work, vacation schedule, place of residence?
- How often do people in your line of work change jobs?

Career Future/Alternatives:

- If things develop, as you'd like, what sort of career goals do you see for yourself?
- How rapidly is your present career field growing?
- How would you describe or estimate future prospects?
- If the work you do was suddenly eliminated, what different types of work do you feel that you could do?
- What types of employers hire people with your background; what are some representative job titles?
- Which related fields are you exploring?

Job Hunting:

- How do people find out about these jobs? Are they advertised in the newspapers (which ones?), by word-of-mouth (who spreads the word?), by the personnel department?
- How does one move from position to position? Do people normally move to another agency (company, division), or do they move up in the agency (company, division)?
- If you were to hire someone to work with you today, which of the following factors would be most important in your hiring decision and why?
 - Educational credentials
 - Past work experience
 - Personality, personal attributes
 - Specific skills, talents
 - Applicant's knowledge of your organization, your department, your job
 - Other _____

Advice to Me:

- How well suited is my background for this type of work?
- Can you suggest other related fields?
- What educational preparation do you feel would be best?
- What types of experiences, paid employment or otherwise, would you most strongly recommend?
- If you were a college student and had it to do over again, what would you do differently to prepare for this occupation?

Referral to Others:

- Based on our conversation today, can you suggest other people who may be able to provide additional information?
- Would you suggest a few of these people who might be willing to see me?
- May I have permission to use your name when I contact them?

QUESTIONS REGARDING THE EMPLOYER

- What is the size of the organization/geographic locations?
- What is the organizational structure?
- Explain to me what the organization does.
- What is the average length of time employees stay with the organization?
- How much freedom is given to new people?
- What types of formal or on-the-job training does the organization provide?
- How often are performance reviews given?
- What are the arrangements for transferring from one division to another?
- How much decision-making authority is given after one year?
- What new product lines are being developed?
- Where is the organization expanding? How does it compare with its competitors?

6) AFTER THE INFORMATION INTERVIEW

Evaluation

As an important final step, you need to evaluate the information that you have gathered. Answering the following questions should help you in this evaluation.

- 1) What positive impressions do you now have about this area of work? (Think in terms of yourself: interests, skills, values, and goals).
- 2) What negative impressions do you have?
- 3) How does this interview help you to clarify your own career or job objective? If it was not helpful in this respect, why not?
- 4) What are your "next steps"? With whom else do you plan to talk? (Beware of relying too heavily on the views and advice of only one or two people). What other steps do you plan to take based upon the advice of your interviewee?

Follow Up

Remember to send thank-you notes! A few lines thanking them for their time and help will indicate your appreciation and will keep you in their memory. Additionally, you should keep a record of your interviews for your own information. Names, titles, addresses, dates, and major

points of discussion will enable you to remember who told you what, and how to get back in touch with your contacts.

Conclusion

The benefits of interviewing for information can be substantial. These conversations enable you to gain information and insight into career fields of interest. Your knowledge will be increasingly impressive as you continue to "interview" key people in a field. You may wish to supplement your knowledge by reading professional or trade literature as well.

Your new knowledge will help you to develop confidence and to make potentially valuable contacts for the future, contacts you can easily re-establish at a later date. You are getting inside the communication network of people with the best information about employment possibilities.

Additional Resources

UVA Alumni networks such as the University Career Assistance Network (UCAN). The Center for Engineering Career Development and the McIntire School of Commerce Career Services websites.

Read Chapter Six of What Color Is Your Parachute by R. N. Bolles (in University Career Resource Library, also available for purchase in most local bookstores).

The Complete Job-Search Handbook, Howard Figler; Chapter 9 provides good information on how to information interview.

Information Interviewing, Martha Stoodley.

Networking: How to Enrich Your Life and Get Things Done, Donald R. Woods and Shirley D. Ormerod.

Job Search Networking, Richard Beatty.

The New Network Your Way to Job and Career Success, Ronald L. Krannich and Caryl Rae Krannich.

Good luck!

**Some sections of this publication were excerpted from The Job Hunter's Guide, a document of the Career Service Office of George Mason University.*