

# INFORMATIONAL INTERVIEWS

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This handout is designed to acquaint you with one valuable technique for gathering information about the world of work – informational interviewing. It tells you what it is, benefits to be gained and how to go about it. Browse through...read it...adapt it for your own use. Give it a try!

## What is Informational Interviewing?

Broadly defined, interviewing for information is talking with another person in a low-stress situation for the sole purpose of gathering information about a particular field of interest or occupation. You may engage in informational interviews during your career exploration process, or when you are seriously seeking employment. In this type of interview **you** get to ask the questions. Finally, even though the purpose is not to get a job, informational interviewing is a great way to start connecting with people who could remain a part of your professional network in the future.

## What's in It for Me?

As mentioned, one of the best ways to gain knowledge about a career area is to talk to people doing that work. More specifically, by conducting informational interviews you can . . .

- Gain first-hand knowledge of an occupation from professionals currently working in an area of interest to you. This is beneficial not only for personal understanding, but the experience can also help you become a more impressive job candidate.
- Learn about the nature of work in that particular occupation, a perspective that goes beyond the limitations of job titles to the actual skills that are used.
- Determine a fit between your personality, skills and values in relation to a specific occupation.
- Define career goals more clearly and identify your professional strengths and weaknesses.
- Obtain information about specific companies that interest you.
- Gain self-confidence by talking with people in a professional setting, which will ultimately improve your job interviewing skills.
- Expand your network of contacts, which may be helpful in a future job search.

The Bureau of Labor and Statistics estimates that more than half of available job openings are never advertised, and some say that **70% of all jobs are filled through networking**. That said, it's never too soon to start building your professional network!

## Steps to Follow when Conducting an Informational Interview

- ❶ **Define Your Interests, Skills, and Values** – It is important to know where you are going before you begin the journey. This can be done on your own, as well as with assistance from family, a mentor, professors, or an Advisor in Academic and Career Services (MSAB #140, 865-8501).
- ❷ **Identify Occupations** – Once you have learned more about yourself, you are ready to start researching fields that match your interests, skills and values. Select one or more occupations you would like to investigate and begin your research.
- ❸ **Identify People to Interview** – Start with lists of people you already know – friends, relatives, professors, advisors, fellow students, current or former co-workers, supervisors, etc. Company websites, professional organizations, the yellow pages, organizational directories, and public speakers are also good resources. You may also call an organization and ask for the name of the person by a certain job title. Some organizations screen calls so it might be necessary to emphasize that you are **not** interested in a job but in information **only**. Also, remember to aim high, there's no one in the world you can't attempt to contact. \*Helpful websites: [www.switchboard.com](http://www.switchboard.com) [www.linkedin.com](http://www.linkedin.com)
- ❹ **Prepare for the Interview** – Read all you can about the field prior to the interview. Decide what information you would like to obtain about the occupation/industry. This will allow you to develop relevant and thoughtful questions. Having a solid base of knowledge about the topic will also enhance your credibility with professionals you interview. To learn more about an occupation you can access an organization's public relations materials or visit the website. You can also visit Academic and Career Services where there are many resources with occupational information.

The more you know, the better you'll be able to formulate questions pertaining to the organization and the job. The more knowledge you have, the more confident you will feel about your ability to communicate effectively. \*Helpful websites: [www.onetcenter.org](http://www.onetcenter.org) <http://stats.bls.gov/oco/>

- ❺ **Arrange the Interview** – Contact the person to set up an interview: by telephone or e-mail, with a cover letter followed by a telephone call, or by having someone who knows the person make the initial contact for you. Arrange the time, projected length of time, and a place to meet. If the person is not within traveling distance, then you may ask to arrange a telephone interview. Be prepared to tell the person what you are interested in and why. You could begin the conversation with...

“Hello, my name is \_\_\_\_\_ and I am a student majoring in \_\_\_\_\_ at the University of Nebraska at Kearney. I am interested in learning more about \_\_\_\_\_ (the work he/she does) and wonder if you might have 20 or 30 minutes during which you could talk with me about the work you do.”

- ❻ **Conduct the Interview** – Dress appropriately, arrive on time, and be polite and professional. Refer to your list of prepared questions; stay on track, but allow for spontaneous discussion. Take notes so you can keep a record of what you learn. Before leaving, ask if this professional can suggest others who might be helpful, and ask permission to use your contact's name when contacting these new people. Do not leave your résumé, but send one if it's requested.
- ❼ **Follow Up** – Be sure to send a thank-you letter or note within three days of the interview. (Handwritten is usually best, but e-mail is acceptable, too.)

## What Questions Should I Ask?

You want to ask questions that will elicit the information you need, so it's important to develop your own list. Following are some examples to get you started:

1. How did you get into this work?
2. What do you like best about this occupation?
3. What would you like to change?
4. What do you do on a typical day?
5. What do you find to be most challenging?
6. What is the most rewarding?
7. What personal qualities or abilities are important to being successful in this field?
8. What college courses were the most helpful to you in your present career?
9. What opportunities for advancement are there in this field?
10. What entry level jobs are best for preparing a person for the type of work you do?
11. What is the salary range at various levels in this field?
12. How do you see jobs in this field changing in the future?
13. Is there current demand for people in this occupation?
14. What types of training do companies offer people entering this field?
15. What are the basic prerequisites for jobs in this field?
16. Which professional journals and organizations would help me learn more about this industry?
17. With what you know about my background, what other fields or occupations would you suggest I research further before I make a final decision?
18. Is special certification, licensing, or an advanced degree required for your job?
19. How can I gain experience in this field while still in college?
20. Can you suggest another person who might be willing to talk to me about opportunities in this field?

▶▶ Remember: This interview is for information only . . . DO NOT ASK FOR A JOB ◀◀

## Evaluating the Interview

In order to make best use of the information you gather, it is important to review and evaluate soon after conducting the interview. Ask yourself the following questions:

1. What did I learn from this interview (both positive and negative impressions)?
2. How does what I learned fit with what I know about myself (interests, skills, values)?
3. Based on what I learned from this interview, how interested am I in pursuing a career in this area?
4. What do I still need to know? How/where can I find it out?
5. What plan of action can I make?

## Final Thoughts

Use standard business protocol when taking part in an informational interview. For example . . .

- If you ask for 30 minutes of a person’s time, stick to it. Don’t overstay your welcome.
- Don’t settle for just one interview about a given area of work. A broad information base is important to making good decisions.
- Avoid forming an impression about an area of work based on the likeability of the person.
- When you arrive, shake hands, smile, and restate the purpose of your visit. Build rapport by engaging in a few minutes of small talk, but then focus on your interview questions. You want to gain as much information as you can about the occupation in a brief amount of time.
- Share enough information about yourself that you have the basis for a productive relationship, but don’t dominate the interview.
- Try not to be too rigid about getting answers to every one of your questions. Letting the person talk may lead into productive, but unanticipated, areas of information.
- Be an active listener – when you can, ask follow-up questions to allow the person to expand on a previous response.
- Note your reactions on an objective level, but don’t ignore personal feelings. What you naturally flow *toward* or *away* from is very important.
- Talking to people about their work doesn’t have to be a formal process or one you practice only when job hunting. Chat with people casually whenever you have an opportunity – on a plane, when waiting in line, at social gatherings, etc. Most people enjoy talking about the work they do, and curiosity (along with sociability) can open a lot of doors.
- Stay in touch – the person has invested time in you and most people like to see their investments pay off. Keeping the person informed on your progress will allow them to see that they helped you. You don’t need to provide weekly updates, but occasional communication is polite and could benefit you in the future. The interviewee may not ever have a job for you, but they might know someone who does.

In conclusion, informational interviewing is a technique to help you learn more about particular industries and/or specific occupations. It can also help you make professional connections and can assist you as you begin to build a professional network. Though this type of interview is usually considered to be relatively casual, take care to make the best impression possible – a job may become available in the future . . . or the employer may be willing to pass your name along to a colleague if you have made a favorable impression. Use informational interviewing at various stages in your education, job search, and even after you’re employed. It’s one way for you to take a proactive approach to your career development!

### Resources:

“Conducting Informational Interviews,” handout from Ohio State University Career Connections

“Informational Interviewing Tutorial,” [www.quintcareers.com](http://www.quintcareers.com)

“Interviewing for Information,” handout from Wichita State University Career Services

Reeves, Ellen. **Can I Wear My Nose Ring to the Interview?** New York: Workman Publishing, 2009