Informational Interviews

What is an informational interview?

The purpose of an informational interview is to get information. It is never to ask for a job.
An informational interview is, quite simply, a conversation in which you learn about someone else’s line of work. It is a low-pressure but extremely effective way to research career options while giving you a chance to communicate your skills and fit to industry insiders. Most professionals are pleased to talk about their field or job, so don’t be shy about reaching out!

Informational interviews allow you to:
- Gather first-hand, current information about work roles, organizations, and sectors.
- Receive feedback, advice, and answers to questions that wouldn’t be appropriate in a job interview.
- Gain visibility with insiders who may be aware of job opportunities, both advertised and hidden. Let people know that you’re looking for opportunities.
- Practice articulating your interests and skills so you can envision how your identity fits into this field (and so you’ll be ready in an interview).
- Learn the professional language of a field, which can help you with future application materials and interviews.
- Begin building a professional network in your chosen career field.
- Craft effective job application materials that stand out in the screening process based on the insights you gain.

The Anatomy of an Informational Interview

1. Discover contacts. Ask friends, peers, colleagues, professors, mentors, and those in your professional network. Search online at LinkedIn, Facebook, and blogs. Connect in person at events and conferences.

2. Connect (via email, on the phone, in person). Be polite, concise, and friendly. Assume the person is busy but would enjoy giving you advice. Use the following checklist: (1) Introduce yourself, (2) Say how you got their contact information, (3) Explain that you are interested in their field and looking for advice about pursuing this kind of work after graduation, (4) Invite them for a 30-minute conversation over coffee or on the phone, (5) Assure them that you know how busy they are and that you value their time.

3. Have the conversation. Be on time, dress appropriately, and be sure to pay for their coffee. Have fun with the conversation! Let your curiosity shine through. Suggested questions are below.

4. Follow up! Always send a thank you email within a day of the meeting. This is a great opportunity to confirm contact information for anyone your interviewee is connecting you to. Connect with them on LinkedIn or ResearchGate.
Questions to ask in an Informational Interview

During an informational interview, you can ask questions about the person’s work and the role that they play, their path into their current position, the specific organization, or the field or industry.

**How They Got Here:**
1. What led you to this position?
2. How would you say that your PhD (or “studies in X” or “experience in Y”) prepared you for this job?
3. What kinds of backgrounds do people in this [role/organization/field] have?
4. How would you advise me to get started in building experience in this [role/field]?
5. Are there certain classes or training programs you would recommend?

**What They Do Now:**
1. What kinds of projects do you work on?
2. What do you like most about your work?
3. What are some of the biggest challenges of your job?
4. How would you describe a typical week in terms of the time you spend on the various parts of your job?
5. What are the most pressing needs and issues for your department within the overall organization? What are the major issues in the field right now?
6. What is the work environment like in terms of pressure, deadlines, new projects, teamwork vs. independent work, etc.?
7. How do employees balance career and personal life?

**The Bigger Picture:**
1. What personal qualities do you think are important to be successful in this [role/organization/field]?
2. What are typical career paths in this field?
3. In what other kinds of organizations do people with your role work?
4. Are there conferences which might be useful for newcomers to attend? A professional association I could join now?
5. How do you see the next few years in terms of job prospects in this field?

**Advice for Next Steps:**
1. Who else should I connect with to learn more about this [role/organization/field]?
2. I’ve built a list of organizations in this field that I’m really interested to learn about. Would you be willing to look at my list and give me any suggestions about what to add or whom to contact?
3. Would you review my resume to help me use the right language to describe my experiences and skills?

**Lastly:**
1. Who else should I talk with?
2. Would you be willing to connect us?

5. **Keep it alive.** This person took time to invest in your future. Let them know the outcome of your search and the results of their advice and connections.