

# Conducting Informational Interviews

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The best sources of information about career opportunities are professionals in those specific careers or in related career areas. How do you take advantage of their personal experiences and knowledge? The following seven steps will help you plan effective informational interviews to maximize your intake of real-life career information.

## 1. Identify sources of information.

Two ways of identifying sources of information are through personal referrals and through direct contacts. Personal referrals are obtained by using your current network of friends, family, neighbors, co-workers, professors, etc. to obtain names of individuals they know who are using the knowledge, skills, interests and/or talents that you enjoy using and that you are interested in using in your career. A direct contact is a source you identify by reading newspapers, magazines, professional journals and Web sites, or by researching professional associations related to your areas of interest.

✓ **HOT TIP:** Read magazines from your field of interest and contact a professional who was profiled for an informational interview. Mention that you read the article and were very interested and impressed. This is nice flattery and will likely increase the professional's willingness to help you.

Each method of identifying sources has benefits. Personal referrals can save you time by eliminating some of the research required for seeking out direct contacts. Direct contacts, however, are more likely to have the ability to provide the type of information you are pursuing rather than to be an in-between person. Obtaining a personal referral can increase the chance that your request for information will be warmly received. Utilizing direct contacts allow you to practice being assertive. In summary, use personal referrals when

possible and direct contacts when personal referrals are not an option.

## 2. Make an initial contact with your source.

Initial contacts can be made either by phone, mail or e-mail. Regardless of how you are making the initial contact with your source, be sure to identify who you are, why you are contacting them and what type of information you are seeking. Your source should have a clear understanding that you are contacting them only for information because you are considering their career field as a career possibility for yourself. Your source should be assured that you simply want information, not a job.

If your source is the result of a personal referral, mention the name of the person who referred you, but be sure you have that person's permission first.

Lastly, if you are writing, indicate when you will call your source to arrange for an informational interview.

## 3. Arrange the details of your interview.

When personally speaking with your potential source, ask your source for 15 to 20 minutes of their time to visit with them and to learn more about their position and career area. If possible, arrange to meet with your source at their workplace. Otherwise, scheduling a telephone interview may be necessary.

If your potential information source is not able to assist you, ask if he/she knows anyone who might be able to provide the information you are seeking and if your source would mind you using his/her name when contacting that person.

#### **4. Prepare interview questions.**

Before you interview your informational source, you should develop a list of good questions to help you obtain the information you want about that career area. Remember that an informational interview allows you to obtain a "real world" perspective and information not readily available from other sources, therefore ask questions that can't be answered by common reference materials. Questions should be open-ended and not "Yes/No" questions because open-ended questions provoke a more detailed response. A list of possible questions to ask is provided at the end of this Ready Reference.

#### **5. Interview your source.**

On the day of your scheduled interview, be sure that you respect your source's time by being punctual and by only staying as long as you are welcome. Some sources will be happy to allow you more time than you initially requested, however others don't have the additional time to spare.

Realize that conducting an effective informational interview involves more than simply asking questions; active listening and observing is the key to gaining all of the information your source has to provide. Allow the interview to progress on a natural course and you will likely obtain more information than you were initially seeking. Pay attention to your source's attitude and feelings about their job and organization, and take brief notes throughout the interview so you don't forget the valuable information. Some sources may also allow you to tape your conversation, but remember to ask for permission beforehand if you want to use this option.

#### **6. Ask for additional referrals.**

As a member of the career area you are considering, your source undoubtedly knows other professionals in that same career field. Remember to ask your source for the names of others who he or she believes would be valuable to you in obtaining information about this career option.

#### **7. Send a thank you note to your source.**

You should always follow up your contacts promptly with brief thank you note. Thank you notes allow you to express your appreciation for the time and useful information your source granted you, and notes leave a favorable impression with your source in case you need more assistance in the future.

#### **Possible Questions to Ask**

- How did you get into this line of work?
- What type of skills/knowledge/academic preparation does one need to perform this job?
- What are some of the particular advantages and disadvantages of this type of work?
- Can you describe a typical work day for me?
- What do you like or what are the rewards of this type of work?
- What do you dislike or what are the frustrations of this type of work?
- How much flexibility do you have regarding dress, hours of work, vacation schedules or place of residence?
- What types of advancement opportunities are available?
- To what professional organizations do you belong? Should I join now?
- If you were starting out again in this field of work, what might you do differently?
- What is the future outlook like in this line of work and/or what areas do you feel promise the most growth?
- What are some typical job titles in this field?
- Who hires individuals to do this type of work?
- How would I best acquire the necessary skills to perform this job?
- Would you recommend graduate or professional school training directly after completing undergraduate work, sometime in the future or not at all?
- What do you think are the most critical factors in hiring someone into this line of work?
- How would you advise me to look for an entry-level job in this area?
- What might be the best way to approach prospective employers?
- How did you go about finding this job?
- If you were to leave your current position and line of work, what other kind of work would attract you and why?