

TIP SHEET

INFORMATIONAL INTERVIEWS

Informational interviewing is a key part of your networking and job-seeking toolkit. An informational interview is an opportunity to meet and talk with contacts who are currently working in your desired field, and to learn about an occupation, company, or industry you would like to know more about. It is vitally important to verify that a chosen employment goal is a good fit for you by talking to the people who already do the job you seek.

The term "informational interviewing" was first used by Richard Nelson Bolles, author of What Color Is Your Parachute? Bolles explains the concept as "trying on jobs to see if they fit you." He points out that most people don't screen jobs and companies well enough before they accept and start a job. Informational interviewing allows you to screen the job or company in advance.

Making this effort early in your job seeking can help you avoid detours, such as the one that happened to a person who spent valuable time and money to become a phlebotomist, only to discover in the middle of training that she didn't like dealing with bodily fluids.

It is also a way to build a network of contacts who can help you in your job search. It is well known that most open positions are never advertised publicly, and are usually filled through networking. Informational interviewing can help you crack this hidden job market. Here are the rules of the road for Informational Interviews:

1. Be very clear that Informational Interviews are *different* than job interviews in several important ways. First of all, you are doing the interviewing, and you are in charge of the agenda and the outcome. And it is important that you have an outcome in mind before you start.
2. Ask yourself (and write down) what you want to learn from this person? What information do they have that I need? It may be their experience doing the job you want to know about, or it may be that you want to tap into their rich network of contacts.
3. Since it is not a job interview, do not ask directly if there is a job for you. You might ask generally if it is a growing occupation/industry/company in your region. But don't put them on the spot by asking for a job. This will distance them from you and put them in an uncomfortable role. The reality is that if there is a potential job, they will be considering whether you are a good fit. But the Informational Interview is not the place to bring this up.
4. You can schedule the Informational interview by letter, email, or by phone. If you schedule by letter or email, it should be well written and proofread. The letter or email should include:
 - A brief introduction about you, how you were referred to them, and why you are writing
 - A brief summary of your interests or experiences in the person's field, company, or industry
 - A statement about what kinds of information you are seeking
 - A closing statement of how you plan to follow up with the person
5. Requesting an Informational Interview by Phone:
 - Respect their time by only asking for 20 or 30 minutes
 - If it makes you feel more comfortable, prepare a brief phone script such as: "Hello, my name is _____. I'm researching a career in your field, and I would appreciate a chance to meet you and talk with you about your field."

- Most of the time, your contact will be more than willing to take 20-30 minutes to answer your questions. The person may want to answer your questions over the phone, but usually they will invite you to their workplace. This is preferable because it is more convenient for them, and you'll learn more and develop a better connection with the person.
6. Prepare well for an Informational Interview. Call the day before the interview to confirm your appointment. If you have questions regarding the location or parking, you can clear these up at this time. Plan to arrive 10 minutes early for your interview.
 7. Carry a notebook and pen. Be friendly, but polite and professional. Refer to your list of prepared questions; stay focused, but open to spontaneous discussion.
 8. Dress for an Informational Interview as you would for a regular job interview. The rule of thumb is that it is better to be a little overdressed than underdressed. Because 90 percent of all jobs are never advertised, you may uncover job openings that never make it to the newspaper or Internet. So, you want to make a good impression and to be remembered favorably by the interviewee. They may be in a position some time to hire you directly, or recommend you to someone with hiring authority.
 9. Be enthusiastic and show interest and energy during the interview. Take notes, but don't let them interfere with communication.
 10. Bring along a copy of your resume. Try to learn about specific keywords and qualifications employers look for in candidates.
 11. Select a few of the following questions that target the information you need. Ask good questions, but not too many.
 - What is your job like? What's a typical day like?
 - What are the duties/functions/responsibilities of your job?
 - What kinds of problems do you deal with? What kinds of decisions do you make?
 - What interested you about this type of work, and how did you get started?
 - What part of this job do you personally find most satisfying? Most challenging?
 - How does your company differ from its competitors? Why do customers choose your company?
 - What sorts of changes are occurring in your industry/occupation?
 - How does a person progress in your field? What is a typical career path in this field or organization?
 - What is the best way to enter this occupation? What are the advancement opportunities?
 - What knowledge/skills are most important for a position in this field?
 - With the information you have about my education, skills, and experience, do you think this occupation would be a good fit?
 - What are the educational, requirements for this job? What other types of credentials or licenses are required?
 - Do you have any advice for someone interested in this field/job? Are there any written materials you suggest I read?
 - [If there's time and it seems appropriate:] Do you have any suggestions for my resume?
 12. Be sure to share some things about yourself, but don't dominate the conversation. You are there to learn from them. Be a good listener.
 13. Ask for their business card, and share your own with them, if you have one.
 14. Follow up within three days with a thank you note or card. If possible quote something they told you that was particularly helpful or informative.
 15. Afterward, evaluate what you learned and how it can help your job search. Be careful not to generalize too much about an entire occupation/industry/company based on information from one source.