

Informational Interviewing

Informational interviewing is an excellent method to gather information about career options and employers. The advantage in informational interviewing is that you can practice your interviewing skills, build your confidence, gather resources, learn the industry jargon, and identify possible job leads. Often the biggest obstacles for people are fear of rejection and difficulty finding contacts to speak with within a specific industry. Here are a few recommendations for finding professionals in your chosen field.

- Begin with individuals that you know and target a list of people to contact. Seek out social groups, family, associations, previous supervisors, present co-workers, alumni, faculty, acquaintances, and friends. Let them know what type of information you're interested in and see if they know people who you can contact. Building these types of contacts will help you generate contacts and obtain further information.
- Become familiar with newsletters, journals, and specific newspapers that are aimed at the industry or field that you are pursuing.
- Contact department heads and other administrators who may have additional suggestions of people to contact, and information on companies that are hiring. Explore company websites for further information.
- Join student organizations, professional associations, attend seminars, conferences, and workshops that can expose you to others in your field.
- Attend job fairs, ask questions, and obtain literature regarding the companies participating in the fair. Remember to pick up business cards.
- Local librarians and area chambers of commerce often collect company information.
- Volunteering your time is an excellent way of identifying resources and contacts.

There are several approaches to contacting professionals in your area of interest. This can be done by cold calling, writing a cover letter, or by sending an email. Depending on your own personal style, choose a method that is comfortable for you. If you're contacting someone by a cover letter or email, be sure to follow-up with a phone call within the time frame you stated within your letter. Proofread your letter to ensure that it's grammatically correct and well organized.

If you decide to use the cold calling method, it is helpful to develop a brief script of what you are going to say and practice. This will build your confidence and provide you with a solid phone presentation. One suggestion is to use a tape recorder to practice your script and evaluate your presentation. The employer will be assessing you by your enthusiasm, phone manner and professionalism.

Interview Preparation

The goal of an informational interview is to gather information only. It is not a job interview. During your interview remember to initially restate why you requested the meeting, review your academic background, and other pertinent information. In general most people enjoy sharing their expertise and experiences. It is your responsibility to be aware of the time, stay longer only if you're invited, and don't forget to ask for a business card before you leave. After you've finished interviewing send that person a thank-you note indicating an appreciation for their time and assistance.

In preparation for the informational interview, it is helpful to develop a list of questions, practice your interviewing skills and research your field. Here is a list of possible questions.

Occupational

- How did you become interested in your field?
- What does your typical workday encompass?
- How did you get this job?
- What personality traits are needed for this type of position?
- What are the educational requirements for your position?
- What is your advice for someone interested in this field?
- What kind of prior experience is essential in this field?
- What do you find the most challenging for you in your job?
- What are the entry-level positions in this field?
- What is the entry-level salary range in this industry?
- What Strategies can you suggest to enter into this industry?

Company/Profession

- What are the challenges confronting this industry?
- What are the major challenges in your company?
- Where do you see your company heading in the next five years?
- What are the expectations of a new employee?
- Describe the types of projects a new employee would be assigned?
- What is the typical path of promotion in your company?
- Do you offer professional development opportunities?
- What professional associations do you suggest I join?
- What professional newspapers or magazines should I subscribe to?
- Who are the most prominent people in this industry?
- Can you recommend someone I can speak with for further information in this industry?

Evaluation

As with any interview it is important to assess the information that you have gathered. Review your experience and gauge the progress you've made by asking yourself a few questions. What did you learn in the interview? What would you do differently the next time? Do you have enough information to take any further steps? Did you collect any resources from the interviewer? Take the time to consider your next steps and review the information you've collected. Remember that the goal of informational interviewing is to get a balanced view of an industry. Here are a few recommendations to consider as next steps.

- Creating a network is a process. Update your networking system by reviewing the information you've gathered, continue to set up informational interviews, join a club or an organization, and volunteer in your area of interest.
- Review the skills required in preparation to enter your chosen field. Participate in internships to continue to build your skills and test the reality of whether you would enjoy working in your chosen field.
- Obtain a part-time job in your target industry. Another option is to request the opportunity to observe and interact with a professional for a day to gain further insight into the industry.
- Target and attend classes, workshops, and seminars that will enhance your knowledge about the field, industry jargon, and other pertinent information.
- Join a professional association and participate in their committees, projects, and future conferences.

* For more information on informational interviewing, visit the Career Services Office and/or check out our website: www.salemst.edu/careersvs for additional resources.