

Do you already know your perfect career but need information on how to reach your goal? Are you aware of professionals that utilize the knowledge and skills that interest you? Would you like to speak with them about their positions? Then consider conducting an informational interview.

Steps to Informational Interviewing

Identify sources of information. Two ways of identifying sources of information are through personal referrals and direct contacts. By using your network of friends, co-works, professors, family, etc..., you can gain the names of individual who are using the knowledge, skills, interests, and/or talents that you enjoy or are interested in developing. 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.

Make an initial contact with your source. This can be made by e-mail or phone. Be sure to identify who you are, the purpose of your contact, and what type of information you seek. Your source should have a clear understanding that your sole purpose is to gain information about the particular career field that you are considering. You might want to call it "career development research" instead of an informational interview. Your source should be assured that you want information, not a job. If your source is the result of a personal referral, mention the name of the person who referred you. Be certain to have that person's permission first.

Arrange the details of your interview. When speaking with your potential source, ask for 15 to 20 minutes of time to visit and learn more about his or her position and career area. If possible, arrange to meet at the workplace. Otherwise, scheduling a telephone interview may be necessary. If your potential information source is not able to assist you, ask for a referral of someone who might be able to provide the information you seek. Be sure to ask if your source would mind your using his or her name when contacting other contacts.

Prepare your interview questions. Before your meeting, develop a list of relevant questions to help you obtain the information you desire. When preparing for the interview, thoroughly research the company. Remember that an informational interview is designed to obtain a "real world" perspective and information not readily available from other sources. Ask questions that cannot be answered by common reference materials. Questions should be open ended, not yes or no questions.

Interview your source. On the day of your scheduled interview, respect your source's time by being punctual and staying only as long as you originally specified. Realize that conducting an effective informational interview involves more than simply asking questions. Active listening and observation are keys to gaining useful information your source has to provide. Allow the interview to progress on a natural course. Pay attention to your source's attitude and feelings about his or her job and organization. Take brief notes throughout the interview in order not to forget valuable information. If you would like to tape the conversation, ask for permission.

Ask for additional referrals. As part of the career area you are considering, your source undoubtedly knows other professionals in that same career field. Remember to ask for names of others who would be valuable to you in obtaining information about this career option.

Send a thank you note to your source. You should always follow up your contacts promptly with a thank you note to express your appreciation for the time and usefully information provided.

Possible Questions to Ask

- How did you get into this line of work?
- What types of skills, knowledge, and academic preparation does one need to perform this job?
- What are some advantages and disadvantages of this type of work?
- Can you describe a typical workday for me?
- What are the rewards of this type of work?
- 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 of this line of work?
- 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?
- How would you advise me to look for an entry-level job in this area?
- How did you go about finding this job?
- Would you recommend graduate or professional school 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?
- What might be the best way to approach prospective employers?