

Careers and Employment

Information Interview Guide

Overview

Why conduct an informational interview?

An informational interview is a conversation with someone who has work experience in a job, field, or industry that you are considering. It is a rich source of information used to help inform career choices.

Potential benefits of informational interviews?

- Gain additional information to support or challenge your perception of the role
- Learn about the day-to-day operations and what activities or projects are commonly undertaken
- Learn about the skills and knowledge required and the pathway for their attainment
- Learn about market trends, growth potential, important issues, and areas of expansion in the field
- Begin to build networks of contacts in your field of interest who can provide valuable information
- Increase confidence in approaching and interacting with professionals
- Learn about hidden opportunities (unadvertised positions)
- Impress the interviewee sufficiently to be offered a job, internship or preferential treatment through the application process

Steps to prepare for and conduct an informational interview

Step 1: Plan your goals

- Know your purpose (e.g. to find out more about an industry/career/position, to build a network)
- Know yourself (e.g. interests, strengths, key selling points and how to articulate these)

Step 2: Do your research

Prior to the interview, obtain as much information as possible about the industry, occupation and/or role. You want to be asking questions that cannot be easily found online.

- Organisation's website, Seek, Graduate connect, Graduate Careers, My Job Outlook, LinkedIn

Step 3: Identify your contacts

Identify potential contacts to interview through asking your networks whether they know anyone to whom you could reach out. Your networks may include co-workers, friends, family and their friends, professional organisations, and professors/tutors. Another great approach is to utilise LinkedIn to find people and send a personalised message.

Once you identify an individual, learn as much as you can about their background, position, and the organisation.

Step 4: Make contact and schedule a meeting

Over the phone

You will need to contact the person you wish to interview by phone, email, or LinkedIn to ask them for advice and perhaps to schedule a meeting to further discuss.

Remember that they are generally busy people so you will need to be flexible with your time. When requesting an Information Interview by phone, ask to speak directly with the person of interest (from your research, you should know the name of the person you wish to see and the title of his/her position).

- If they are too busy to speak to you initially, enquire about the most convenient time for you to call back (don't expect them to call you)
- When you get through to your contact person, introduce yourself, state where you are from (e.g. a student at UNSW), explain that you are conducting personal research in their career field and would like to meet with them for 20-30 minutes to find out more about that field / occupation.
- Explain that you are trying to obtain first-hand information to aid in your career exploration and decision-making. Don't ask for or give the impression you are asking for a job from them.
- Ask for a time that would be convenient for them, and be prepared to fit in with their schedule.
- Sometimes the contact person will ask you to conduct the interview then and there. It is important that you have your questions ready in this event, because this may be the only chance you will have to obtain the information that you are seeking.
- If your contact is unable to grant you the time, ask whether they would suggest another contact for you. Take the names and numbers down and always be polite and professional. Remember to ask your contact if you can use their name.
- When contacting the referral, explain that the first contact gave you his/her name and suggested that you call them to request information.
- Be strategic in your choice of prospective interviewees. You may wish to include some people who have the power to hire you should a position become available.

By Email

When requesting an Information Interview by e-mail your request is less immediate than a phone request and possibly less effective as it does not require a response. You may need to follow-up with a polite phone call.

- Treat your written request as you would a cover letter- make it professional and impressive
- Use a great subject line (e.g. "Referral from Tom Smith at [Organisation])
- Make it short, succinct and relevant
- Explain who you are and why you are contacting them (ask for advice, not a job)
- Research them, the organisation, and the industry so that your questions are considered
- Request a 20-30-minute appointment to enable you to interview the person and gather information
- State your flexibility and ability to fit in with their schedule
- Close with a thank you and a pro-active statement that you will contact them the week beginning date (-----) to set up a mutually convenient time
- Follow-up on your commitment to set the time in the nominated week

Step 5: Prepare questions and rehearse interview behaviours

This is where your preparation pays off. Remember that your aim is to collect information about a possible career, and to become a more competitive job candidate.

- Remain calm and stay focussed – you only have 20-30 minutes
- Stick to your time limit! This will be viewed favourably

Although an information interview is not a job interview, you still need to present yourself as if it were. It is possible that you will uncover employment opportunities during the interview that will need to be followed up after the interview is over. For sample interview questions see the list at the end of this information sheet

Here is a short checklist to help you prepare:

- Dress well – Business attire is appropriate: decide what you are wearing ahead of the interview day

- Prepare your questions – have them presented in a clean professional folder
- Practice your questions on a friend or family member before the day
- Remember to be polite and professional when seeking information
- Be prepared to take notes (ask permission) have a neat, clean notepad and pen prepared as you may need to take down the names and contact numbers of referrals
- Prepare a copy of your latest resume – tailored to the company and position as you understand it – but distribute it only upon request
- Re-confirm your appointment the day before
- Know your way to the office or building and plan to arrive 10-15 minutes early
- Plan to stick to the agreed time limit for the interview
- Be confident and enthusiastic, after all you are the interviewer

During the interview:

- At the beginning, introduce yourself and thank the contact for making his/her time available.
- Restate your purpose and be prepared to initiate conversation
- Make natural eye-contact throughout the interview
- Be confident and speak clearly
- Be prepared to share a little information about yourself but do not dominate the conversation.
- Ask probing open-ended questions to draw out information (see sample questions below). Do not ask a lot of questions that can be answered with a simple yes/no.
- You will need to practice good listening skills to make the best of the information you are given. Try to practice on someone else before the real interview.
- Be receptive and responsive: show that the information is important to you.
- Seek clarification if something is not clear to you but do this carefully and politely
- Do not counter, argue or contradict. You can evaluate the information later
- Ask for other referrals or contacts in the field or in other organisations. This is a valuable step toward building your network of professional contacts
- Always be professional – despite not being a job interview, it could lead to an opportunity
- If you uncover a job opportunity, state your intention to follow up on that when the interview is over
- Close the interview well. Reiterate your appreciation and thank your contact for their time

Step 6: Send thank you note, follow up & stay in touch

- Send an email expressing gratitude shortly after the interview to maintain the positive rapport
- Politely request to stay in touch and, if agreed, from time-to-time, update them on your progress
- Ask them to keep you in mind if they come across any information that may be of use to you

STEP 7: Record, analyse and evaluate

- Evaluate the information you received. Keep a spreadsheet to record all the details
 - names contact numbers/who referred you/date contacted/what you learnt etc
- What did you learn from the interviewee and the process?
- How does what you learnt fit in with your own interests, goals, values and abilities?
- What do you still need to know? What are your next steps?
- Evaluate your style of interviewing - what worked well and what needs amendment?

Sample Questions for Information Interviews

Given the purpose of information interviews and that they are generally less intense than formal job interviews, questions can be asked that may not seem strategic in an employment interview. You can explore the typical daily routines of the profession or field, ask questions about benefits, salary, the provision of training opportunities, pitfalls and skills gaps that may need addressing.

You will usually find your contact a helpful resource if you have made the purpose of your interview clear, in advance. For your own purposes, it is a good idea to group your questions under headings.

Some heading suggestions are provided but you should customise the interview to suit your individual purposes. Grouping suggestions include:

- Position Related
- Education & Training
- Organisation Related
- Occupational Outlook
- Suggestions/Referrals

You will create a better impression if you show that you have prepared for the interview by researching as much as possible. You should know quite a bit about the interviewee and their organisation from their online profiles so make sure your questions reflect your knowledge.

Position Related Questions

- What is your background? I notice from your LinkedIn profile that you also studied Science at UNSW, was that always your plan?
- What are the various jobs in this field / organisation?
- How did you become interested in this position?
- How did your background help you get started in this position / field?
- What are the duties and responsibilities of your job?
- How would you describe your job responsibilities on a typical day?
- What kinds of problems do you typically face?
- What is the pace of your workflow?
- What type of hours do you typically keep?
- Are you ever required to work additional hours, nights, weekends etc.?
- What type of personal characteristics, skills and talents are essential for this position?
- How did you learn these skills?
- What else does it take to be successful in this career?
- What is the typical work progression in your field?
- How does the economy affect job availability in this field?
- If you were made redundant, what type of other work do you feel competent to pursue?
- What are typical entry-level opportunities in this field?
- What type of entry-level position would you recommend for someone at my career stage and with my background?
- What type of work experience / volunteer work would you recommend for someone wishing to enter this field?
- What is the entry-level salary range in this field/ organisation?
- What salary range could be expected at senior levels of this occupation?
- What are the major highlights of this job?
- What advice would you give to someone wishing to enter this field/ occupation?
- What cautionary notes would you give to someone in my position?
- What are the major frustrations of this job?
- What are the biggest issues facing this field / organisation?
- Given my educational and work background, how would you rate my chances of obtaining an entry-level position in this field?
- Are there any additional skills that would enhance my chances of breaking into this field?

Education and Training

- What are the educational requirements for this position? (What degrees are seen as appropriate qualifications?) I have researched a few people in your organisation and notice many of them have postgrad qualifications, is this recommended?
- Are there any industry based training programs that you would recommend?
- Is ongoing training a pre-requisite for advancement in your field?

- What specific training / advancement programs are typically required by your company?
- How does your organisation provide for employee's professional development?
- Does your company provide study leave for courses other than those they run?

Organisation Related Questions

- What is the organisational structure of this company?
- Who do you supervise and to whom do you report?
- What is the management style of this company?
- Are employees included in any decision processes?
- I have read in the annual report some of the clients serviced. What is the breadth of clients and are you looking to expand?
- Who is your major competitor?
- How does this organisation differentiate itself from its competitors?
- How is this organisation similar to its competitors?
- What can you tell me about the corporate culture of this organisation?
- How flexible is the organisation in terms of dress, work hours, vacation schedule, family commitments, etc.?
- How does your organisation utilise communication technology (e.g. internet, intranet, etc.)?
- Is remote working a feasible possibility in this organisation?
- In your opinion what is the best way to get started in this field?
- If you were in my position, how would you approach an organisation like this for employment?
- Do you offer a formal graduate program and if so, how does that operate?
- Are there work opportunities for graduates other than those offered in the formal graduate programs?

Occupational Outlook

- Is there a demand for people in this field? I had a look at the Forbes list of jobs with the brightest future and ..., what do you think about the future for this field?
- How do you see jobs in this field changing over time?
- What opportunities for advancement are there for people in this field?
- How do you keep yourself marketable?
- Do your colleagues usually move organisations to secure advancement?
- What do you wish you had known about this field before you entered it?
- Given the opportunity again, would you choose the same career path?
- If not, what would you do differently and why?
- What is the outlook for women in this occupation/ organisation?
- How does this career affect your work/life balance?
- How can I learn more about this field and keep up with current issues?

Suggestions / Referrals

- Given the information that you have about my background, what other occupations would you suggest I investigate before making my final decision? I am also considering ... and ... but can you suggest any others you think I should investigate?
- Can you suggest other people that I might contact for further information about this or related occupations? May I say that you referred me?

Sample email

Dear / Hi Mary,

Given your success and experience in _____ (insert the person's company/field/industry), Dave Jackson at XYZ Company suggested I contact you.

Over the last _____ (insert the period of time), I have _____ (insert 1 relevant achievement or a BRIEF description of the work that you have performed). However, I'm very interested in learning more about _____ (insert the person's company/field/industry).

Would it be possible to have a brief conversation with you? It would be great to get some of your career advice and to learn more about your work.

I'm sure you are extremely busy, so I could [chat to you over the phone, meet you at your office, or a nearby coffee shop etc]. Let me know what is most convenient for you! Thank you for your time and consideration.

-John Smith