

# Informational Interviews

All of us are familiar with the concept of a job interview. A hiring manager or human resources representative asks us a series of questions to determine if we're the right person for the job. In an informational interview, you are the one asking questions to obtain information.

Simply put, an informational interview is when you find someone who works in a career that interests you. You then ask them a series of questions to determine if the career would be right for you.

## **The Origins of Informational Interviewing**

Richard Nelson Bolles was the first person to introduce the concept of informational interviewing. His name may sound familiar to you. If it does, it's because he is the author of one of the most famous print resources in the field of career planning and development – *What Color Is Your Parachute*. He claims that informational interviewing can be like “trying on jobs to see if they fit you” before making a career decision and entering an active job search.

## **Those Who Can Benefit From Informational Interviewing**

Informational interviewing is effective for a college student looking to start their career. But it can be just as effective for mature adults who are in some form of career transition. Considering its major benefits (career exploration and networking), informational interviewing is designed for professionals at any career stage.

## **The Value of Informational Interviewing**

Informational interviewing has great value as you pursue your career goals. It allows you to:

- Explore careers with someone who is actually performing the work you may want to do, thus allowing you to clarify your career goals.
- Obtain valuable feedback on your resume (and qualifications in general), and help you determine what you need to do to make yourself more marketable for the career in question.

- Interact with professionals in a “low stress” environment, thus helping you build and refine communication skills, interpersonal skills and confidence in the workplace.
- Use the opportunity to impress/grow your professional network in a field that may be of interest to you.
- Tap into the “hidden job market,” thus making your job search much more effective.

## **Informational Interviewing as a Networking Strategy**

Consider this astonishing statistic from Quintessential Careers – One out of every 200 resumes (some studies put the number as high as 1,500 resumes) results in a job offer. One out of every 12 informational interviews, however, results in a job offer. You may have noticed that nowhere in the definition of informational interviews did it mention “to get a job.” This is simply a wonderful side benefit to this career tool.

Think about it, you are putting yourself “face-to-face” with someone in a career field of interest to you. This person may have the power to hire you, or at least put you in touch with someone in the company with the power to hire you. Your ability to impress them with your interest, qualifications and professionalism may go a long way in eventually leading to a job offer.

## **Identifying People to Interview**

Some tips for locating professionals with whom to conduct informational interviews are as follows:

- Start with your current network – people you know personally and professionally. Maybe one of them works in a career of interest to you, or knows someone who does.
- Search for professionals on LinkedIn. It’s probably the largest database of professionals in the world. LinkedIn has over 200 million members in more than 200 countries and territories. Find professionals you’re connected to and ask for an introduction.
- Tap into professional and industry associations in your field of interest. They are great sources of career information – and contacts.
- Contact the alumni development office at Clarkson University, and other colleges you have graduated from. They may be able to connect you with alumni working in your field of interest.
- Identify the target companies you’d like to work for. Call them and ask for the names of individuals who occupy the careers of interest to you, or find their names on the company website. Then contact that person to request an informational interview. Maybe you’re even connected to them on LinkedIn, and can use these connections to leverage an introduction!

Make sure to interview multiple professionals for each career you're exploring. Don't simply rely on one professional's perspective. You may run into someone who dislikes what they do (because they're not a good match for the career), or maybe is just having a bad day. Multiple perspectives will help provide you with balanced information.

## **Scheduling the Informational Interview**

Informational interviews can be scheduled by email, letter or a phone call. They may also be scheduled in person, when the opportunity presents itself. When contacting a professional about an informational interview, you should be concise and professional. The following can serve as a guide in making the contact:

- Briefly introduce yourself.
  - My name is (insert name). I'm an MBA candidate at Clarkson University, and I've been conducting a great deal of research about marketing careers. You're working in a career that, based on my research, I've chosen to explore further.
  
- State why you are contacting this individual.
  - A professor of mine, (insert name), thought you'd be a great person to talk to and he/she strongly encouraged I reach out to you.
  
- Touch briefly upon your interest in this field.
  - I've done some serious research and reflection on the things I like to do, and those things that I do well. Based on this, as well as on some initial career exploration, this career intrigues me. But I could really benefit from information, advice and suggestions from somebody like you to help clarify my career goals.
  
- Ask for action.
  - I would welcome the opportunity to conduct an informational interview to find out more about what you do. I would only need about 20 to 30 minutes of your time, and am willing to schedule this at your convenience. When would be a good time for you?
  
- Close the conversation.
  - So we'll be meeting on (insert day and time) at (insert location). Thanks so much for your time and consideration.

Remember to exchange contact information, just in case you need to reach one another in an emergency.

## Types of Informational Interviews

Your goal is to schedule a “face-to-face” interview at the professional’s organization. There are multiple benefits to conducting an onsite interview. If that’s not possible, consider these alternatives (in priority order):

- An interview over Skype, or through the use of similar technology,
- A phone interview, or
- Emailing the professional a list of questions that they can respond to.

## Preparing for the Informational Interview

Like the job interview, preparation beforehand is absolutely essential. To adequately prepare, consider the following:

- Research the company or organization. At a minimum, go to their website and company profile on LinkedIn. Request a copy of their most recent annual report and any other relevant company literature. For more resources on business and employer research go to: [www.rileyguide.com/employer.html](http://www.rileyguide.com/employer.html).
- Research the professional. Bios on the company website and LinkedIn profiles can be great sources of information. Also, “Google” the professional’s name on the Internet to see what other information you can find out about them.
- Prepare a list of questions you’d like to ask during the interview. See a list of sample questions later in this handout.
- Plan your attire and “dress for success.” Dress for the informational interview as you would for a job interview. For more information on “dressing for success,” go to the following site: [http://www.quintcareers.com/dress\\_for\\_success.html](http://www.quintcareers.com/dress_for_success.html).
- Pack emergency-repair items – small sewing kit, extra pair of pantyhose, spot-remover wipes, tissues, comb and brush, hairspray, makeup for touchups, breath mints and an umbrella.
- Make sure you have the contact information of the person you’re interviewing – including name, title, phone number and email address. Know who you’re interviewing and how to contact them in case of an emergency.
- Print two or more copies of your professional and critiqued resume on a heavier stock resume paper. You want to have one for yourself and one for the person you’re interviewing. Although this is not a job interview, the informational interview is a great venue for a professional to provide feedback about your qualifications.

- Have a professional pad folio (with a fresh pad of paper) and several pens for taking notes. Remember, you are a “reporter” seeking relevant information and you want to capture it accurately.
- Take a practice run to the location of the interview. Know how to get there and how long it takes, and be familiar with alternate routes in case of accidents or detours.
- Get a good night’s sleep on the night before the interview. It will help you be at your best.
- Remember the power of your non-verbal cues, including eye contact, posture, and nervous habits. Go to <http://jobsearch.about.com/od/interviewsnetworking/a/nonverbalcomm.htm> for more information.

### **The Day of the Interview – Prior To and Upon Arrival**

- Remember – “dress for success.”
- Go easy on perfume, cologne, makeup and jewelry, and cover any tattoos.
- For women with long hair – put your hair back or up. Don’t let it be a distraction during the interview.
- Leave plenty of time to get there. It’s much better to arrive early than to be rushing because you’re late.
- If you smoke, don’t smoke in the car on the way to the interview – or at any point prior to the interview.
- Be prepared to enter the building 15 to 20 minutes early – not sooner or later.
- Leave your cell phone in the car. You don’t want this as a distraction during the interview.
- If you’re chewing gum dispense of it before entering the building.
- Greet the receptionist, and anyone you meet at the company, with courtesy and respect. Treat them as if they have the authority to offer you a job.
- Confirm the pronunciation of the name of the person you’re interviewing (if questionable) with the receptionist.
- Use the restroom. This is one last chance to check your general appearance.
- Use your time in the waiting area to do additional research on the organization. Check out marketing materials, company awards on the wall and anything else that provides a glimpse of the organization.
- Greet the person you’re interviewing with good eye contact, a firm handshake and a smile (remember – you’re happy to be there!).

## Questions to Ask at the Informational Interview

Your questions should be focused on the specific information you're looking to obtain about the career of interest to you. Develop 10 – 15 questions to ask, knowing that other questions will arise during the course of the interview. Remember, you've asked for 20 – 30 minutes of their time; be respectful of the agreed upon timeline. Listen carefully to their responses and take notes.

The following are sample questions only. Choose ones that are right for you, and/or make up your own questions. This is your interview.

- Can you tell me about the primary responsibilities of your position?
- What is your greatest joy in doing this work?
- What is your greatest challenge? What kinds of problems do you deal with?
- How did you get interested (and started) in this type of work?
- What career path did you take to get here? Is that a typical career path for this type of career?
- What qualifications/skills are most important to be successful in this career?
- What are the advancement opportunities in this field?
- If your career disappeared, what other kinds of work do you feel prepared to do?
- Can you tell me more about the employment outlook for this career?
- If you had to do it all over again, would you select this career? Why?
- What's the greatest piece of advice you would give to someone considering this field?
- Where can I get more information about this field?
- Would you be willing to give me some feedback on my resume? What do you like? What's missing that you'd like to see on it? (Note: Do not use your resume to ask for a job at an informational interview, but take the opportunity to use it to share information about you).
- Based on my interest in this position, is there anyone else you can think of that I should be talking to? May I use your name when contacting them (once given a name)?
- Can I have one of your business cards? Is it OK to contact you later if I have any additional questions?

For many more "sample" informational interviewing questions go to the following site:  
[www.quintcareers.com/informational\\_interview\\_questions.html](http://www.quintcareers.com/informational_interview_questions.html).

## After the Informational Interview

Immediately following your interview take some time to review your notes, and fill in details that you didn't record during the interview. Do this while it's fresh in your mind. Consider these questions:

- What did you learn (both positive and negative)?
- How does what you learned complement the research you've already done on this career?
- How does what you learned fit with your interests, values, personality characteristics and skills?
- What are your next steps regarding this career?

Write a thank you note – that day or the next day at the latest. A typewritten letter or handwritten card is the most effective. It seldom happens, so it will be noticed more and have a lasting impact on the person you're interviewing. Thank them for their time and information, and let them know how helpful they were. Mention something they said that really impacted you.

Invite them to be part of your LinkedIn network. Remember, they are now a part of your professional network. Customize your invitation for better results. Ask for introductions to their other connections (2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> level) to expand your network in the field.

Keep in touch with them on a periodic basis. Let them know the progress you're making, and how helpful they have been in launching (or re-launching) your career.