

Informational interviewing: Get the inside scoop on careers

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(updated
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Want to know what a career is really like? Ask someone with first-hand experience.

Many people wonder anxiously about which type of job they'll like or how they can break into the career of their dreams. Surprisingly, very few people ever take advantage of one of the best ways to answer their questions about careers: asking the workers already in them.

Talking to people about their jobs and asking them for advice is called informational interviewing, a term coined by career counselor and author Richard Bolles. And the technique usually works very well for people exploring careers. Stories abound of students who used informational interviewing to decide among occupations or to find a way to convert their interests to a paying job.

Some people who conduct informational interviews discover their dream job isn't so dreamy after all. By learning the truth in time, they can change course and find a career that suits them. Others have their career goals confirmed.

Informational interviewing can be as simple as striking up conversations with friends or others about their occupations. But taking

full advantage of this career exploration tool requires a more methodical approach.

Read on to learn the purpose of informational interviewing; whom to interview; how to set up, prepare for, and conduct an interview; and what to do afterward.

The what and why of informational interviews

An informational interview is a brief meeting between a person who wants to investigate a career and a person working in that career. The interviews usually last 20 to 30 minutes.

The purpose of an informational interview is not to get a job. Instead, the goal is to find out about jobs you might like—to see if they fit your interests, skills, and personality.

Specifically, interviews can help you:

- Learn more about the realities of working in a particular occupation
- Decide among different occupations or choose an occupational specialty
- Focus career goals
- Discover careers you never knew existed
- Uncover your professional strengths and weakness

- Find different ways to prepare for a particular career
- Gather ideas for volunteer, seasonal, part-time, and internship opportunities related to a specific field

Informational interviews also provide an inside look at an organization you may want to work for in the future. And these interviews aid in polishing communication skills, helping jobseekers gain confidence and poise before the high-pressure situation of a job interview.

Deciding whom to interview

Before selecting someone to interview, you'll need to decide which occupations you want to learn more about.

You may already have some ideas about the kinds of work you want to do. But, if you are stymied, consider visiting a career or guidance counselor. He or she can help you to clarify your interests and favorite skills and goals for earnings, work setting, and future education. Career guidance tests also can produce lists of careers that match one's temperament. Browsing occupational descriptions online, including those in the U.S. Department of Labor's *Occupational Outlook Handbook* and O*NET occupational database, is another good way to identify careers—as is reading books written by career experts.

Additional detailed information is available from professional associations and trade magazines. The more you research possible occupations, the better your questions will be when conducting informational interviews.

After identifying a few possible occupations, it is time to choose people to interview. Look for people actually working in the occupations you are considering. These people probably know more about what the work is like than human resources specialists or hiring managers do. It's also important to choose people with the same level of responsibility you would have if you entered the occupation. If you would be working in an entry-level job, interview workers who are at or close to entry level rather than interviewing supervisors.



How can you find these people? The easiest way to start is to ask people you already know. Family members, friends, teachers, or past coworkers may work in the occupation you want to explore, or they may know people who do.

Career centers and alumni offices of high schools or colleges are another good source of contacts. These offices usually keep track of graduates and their occupations. Many schools maintain lists of graduates who have agreed to give informational interviews. Schools also may have the names of other community members who have offered to provide career assistance.

In addition, professional associations maintain membership directories and often publish them. Many also produce trade magazines and newsletters describing the activities of specific members. These members might be potential interview subjects. Speaking to association administrators can be useful, as well. They often know a few members who are especially willing to talk with students and career changers.

Interviewees also can be found by contacting businesses and organizations that hire the types of workers you hope to consult. To find a person to interview, call an organization and ask to speak with the human resources department or another appropriate office. If a caller wanted to interview a graphic designer,

for instance, he or she could ask for the design department.

Making contact

After finding people to consult, you are ready to arrange interviews. Contact the people you hope to meet, and ask to speak with them briefly about their careers, making it clear that you want information—not a job.

For most people, this is the most difficult part of informational interviewing. Asking strangers for career help can be daunting, and some people wonder why anyone would agree to be interviewed.

But, in fact, many people are willing to help students and career changers explore occupations. People often like talking about themselves and their careers. Some are happy to advance their profession by encouraging others to enter it. And a few found their own careers as a result of informational interviews and are eager to pass on their good fortune. Even if some people are not willing or able to talk with you, chances are that others will be. Also, as standard practice, many employ-

ers recommend that their managers conduct a certain number of informational interviews every month.

There are three main ways to arrange for an informational interview: through an introduction from a mutual acquaintance, by letter or email, and by telephone.

Mutual acquaintance introduction.

Friends and family can be very helpful in setting up an informational interview. If someone you know knows someone you would like to interview, that person might be willing to make the initial request for you. After he or she makes the first request, you can call to arrange a date and time for the interview. Friends, family, and acquaintances also can become referrals—people whose names you can mention when writing or calling contacts yourself. People are usually more willing to talk to those with whom they have a connection. A mutual acquaintance can be that connection.

Letter or email. A more common way to ask for an interview is to send a letter or email. Some employers prefer to receive

From: Megan Brown [mbrown@emailaddress.com]
To: Kenneth Smith [Kenneth.smith@abc.org]
Subject: University of North Carolina student seeking career advice

Dear Mr. Smith:

As someone with experience in finance, you have insight into finance occupations. I am hoping you can share some of that insight with me as I research financial management careers.

Currently, I am a full-time student at the University of North Carolina. I am not seeking an employment interview; rather, I am interested in gathering information about finance careers.

I will call next week to request an appointment. I would appreciate if we could meet for about 20 minutes.

Thank you for your time as I explore potential careers.

Sincerely,

Megan Brown
mbrown@emailaddress.com
(555) 123-4546

written correspondence before you call to set up interviews. In part, this is because letters give them time to check their schedules before responding. When writing, explain who you are, why you want to meet, and how long you expect the meeting to take.

You also might mention how you found the person's name. Did someone suggest that you write? Did you find the name through

your school? Did you read about him or her in a newsletter or industry publication? This kind of information adds credibility to your request.

In the last part of the letter or email, state that you will telephone for a response on a particular day. Be sure to make this followup call. (See the sample letter below and the sample email on the facing page.)

Jane Ryan
15 Spring Road
Hamlet, LS 41112
(555) 302-8585
jryan@emailaddress.com

August 25, 2010

Ms. Susan Carson
Director
Hamlet Child Development Center
Hamlet, LS 4112

Dear Ms. Carson:

I am a student at Hamlet Community College. Currently, I am investigating careers to learn which would be best for me. I am very interested in the childcare profession and would appreciate the opportunity to talk to you about your work.

I found your article in the *Hamlet Gazette* about teaching phonics to preschoolers. After reading the article and learning about the Child Development Center, I am confident that your insight could help me.

I will call on Friday to request an appointment. Ideally, we can meet for about 20 minutes.

Thank you for considering my request.

Sincerely,

Jane Ryan

Jane Ryan

Telephone. Calling people directly is a faster—but often more stressful—way to arrange an interview. Callers give the same type of information they would give in a letter. They say hello, ask if it is a good time to talk, mention who they are and how they got the person’s name, and explain that they would like to meet to learn more about the person’s career. To help this introduction go smoothly, experts advise practicing once or twice before making calls.

Be prepared to meet resistance. Some people might think you are calling for a job. You should reassure them that you are only exploring careers. Other people might say they have no time to talk. Being careful not to be too forceful, you might ask if there is a better time to call. Suggesting a telephone interview instead of an in-person meeting is another option. With a phone interview, you lose the chance to see the work environment but gain speed and convenience.

If people still cannot speak with you, some career counselors suggest asking them if they know of anyone else who might be able to help. Also, a good rule of thumb is three attempts at making contact with someone you are interested in interviewing. After a failed third attempt, it’s best to move to the next name on your list.

Preparing to interview

With appointments in place, the next step is to get ready for the interviews by researching the occupation and the organization, creating a resume, and developing questions.

Research. Learning about the organization where the interview will take place is an important part of interview preparation. Although you probably do not need as much research for an informational interview as you would for a job interview, knowing something about the organization will make your questions better—and will demonstrate enthusiasm and create good will. Company literature and Web sites are good sources of background information, as are a company’s annual reports and an industry’s trade magazines.

Creating a resume. You also may want to write a resume to bring to the interview. A well-written resume demonstrates seriousness and professionalism. The people you interview might ask to review this resume to learn about your experience and education. This allows them to provide more relevant advice. Some interviewees might be willing to review the resume and suggest improvements. (For guidelines on writing a resume, see “Resumes, applications, and cover letters” in the summer 2009 issue of the *OOQ*, available online at www.bls.gov/ooq/2009/Summer/art03.pdf.)

A few counselors recommend against bringing a resume, saying that informational interviewers should use the results of the interview to decide what type of resume to write. If you do bring a resume to the interview, these counselors suggest sending those you interview a final “replacement” resume after deciding which career to pursue.

Developing questions. The most critical part of preparing for an informational interview is to compose—and perhaps jot down—the questions you want to ask. Although informational interviews are relaxed, with opportunities for spontaneous discussion, they also need to be focused and organized so that interviewers gather the information they need.

Before preparing a set of questions, think about what you want in a job. The questions should help you learn if the interviewee’s occupation has those characteristics. In addition, think about any preconceived ideas you have about the occupation. You might believe that all teachers have the summer off, for instance, or that most scientists spend nearly every day in a laboratory. Asking about these assumptions helps determine whether your ideas are accurate.

Remember that the purpose of the interview is to get a feeling for what a particular type of job is actually like. You want to be able to imagine yourself in the job and to see whether you would enjoy it. You also need specific information about job tasks, working conditions, and career preparation.

Try to choose open-ended questions instead of questions that can be answered with a “yes” or “no.” Informational interviewers learn the most if they can make the interview conversational.

The following are examples of possible questions. There would not be time to ask all of these in a single meeting. A good guideline is to choose about 10 questions that most interest you.

Questions about the job

- What kinds of tasks do you do on a typical day or in a typical week?
- What types of tasks do you spend most of your time doing?
- What do you like best about this job?
- What excites you most about this job?
- What are some of the more difficult or frustrating parts of this career?
- I really like doing _____. Do you have an opportunity to do that type of work in this career?
- What characteristics does a person in this job need to have?
- Do you usually work independently or as part of a team?
- What types of decisions do you make?
- How does your work fit into the mission of the organization?
- What types of advancement opportunities are available for an entry-level worker in this career?
- I read that _____ is an issue in this occupation. Have you found that to be true?
- Is this career changing? How?

Questions about working conditions

- What kind of hours do you work?
- Is your schedule flexible or set?
- Are those hours typical for most jobs in this occupation, or do some types of jobs have different hours?
- Does this career include or require travel?
- Do you have any health concerns associated with your career? How does this career affect your lifestyle?



Questions about training

- How did you prepare for this career?
- How did you find this job?
- Do you have any advice on how people interested in this career should prepare?
- What type of entry-level job offers the most learning opportunities?
- Do you know anyone in this career who has my level of education or my type of experience? How did he or she get the job? (These questions are useful for people trying to enter a career when they don't have the typical credentials.)

Questions about other careers and contacts

- Do you know of any similar careers that also use _____ or involve _____?
- I know that people in this career specialize in _____ and _____. Do you know of any other specialties?
- I think I really like this career. But do you know of similar jobs that do not have this _____ characteristic?
- Can you suggest anyone else I could ask for information? May I tell them that you have referred me?

Interview day: What to wear, what to do

An informational interview is more casual than a job interview. This casualness is part of its charm. Informational interviews should still be professional, however. Making a positive first impression shows you care about your career. What's more, if you decide you like the occupation you are investigating, you could end up interviewing for a job with some of the people you meet. And they might remember you and the impression you made.

Dress well. On the day of the interview, dress neatly. A good guideline is to dress how the person you are interviewing would dress on an important workday. Wearing a suit of a conservative pattern and color is the safest choice. For women, skirts should be no more than an inch above the knee, say counselors, and shoes should be polished and have a closed toe. Hair should be pulled back or cut short, and jewelry should be unobtrusive. Be sure to bring a notepad and a pen or pencil, and consider bringing a resume and a few business cards.

Be professional. As in all business meetings, arrive on time, but no more than 15 minutes early. When greeting receptionists, other employees, and the person you will interview, be friendly. Smiling and shaking hands will set everyone at ease.

Standard politeness is essential when meeting for the first time. Don't use first names unless invited to do so. Don't sit before your host does. And avoid slang, smoking,

and chewing gum. The goal, say the experts, is to be comfortable without being sloppy.

You are leading this interview, so start by thanking your host for his or her time and briefly recounting why you have come. You might mention your goals and interests. Then, ask questions and listen carefully to the answers.

Listening is the foundation of a successful informational interview. If possible, the person you are interviewing should do most of the talking because you are trying to gather opinions and insights. As he or she talks, take notes to remind yourself of important facts and impressions. And be certain your interest shows.

Allow for casual conversation during the interview, but try to stay on track so that the most important questions are answered. You may need to guide your host gently back to the questions occasionally.

Because you are the interviewer, it is up to you to monitor time and end the interview when you said you would. As the ending point draws near, let your host know. Of course, it is fine to spend more time if your host wants to continue.

Always end the interview by thanking your host and asking two important final questions: Can you suggest other people I could speak to? And may I mention your name when I speak to them? The answers could be the starting point for your next informational interviews.

Say thank you. After the interview, show gratitude for your host's generosity by writing and sending a thank-you note within a few days. Counselors agree, the sooner, the better. This note can be quite brief, a paragraph or two expressing appreciation for the time spent and advice given and perhaps recalling a particularly helpful piece of information.

Drawing conclusions

Hopefully, you'll leave every informational interview with new insights about the career you want. By taking a moment to record your thoughts and feelings about the occupation and workplace of the person you interviewed,

you will be able to refer back to the interview when making career decisions. Try to answer questions like the following: What did you learn in the interview? What did you like? What didn't you like? Did you uncover any new concerns about or advantages to the occupation? What advice did you receive? Did you discover another occupation you might want to pursue? How was the work environment at this particular organization? And, finally, do you think you would be happy in this type of job or in this type of organization?

When evaluating an informational interview, counselors warn interviewers not to let impressions of a particular person or company cloud their judgment of an

occupation. It is important not to base decisions on the opinions of one individual. Informational interviewers should conduct at least a few interviews in an occupation and try to confirm the information they find with other sources. Information about earnings or education, for example, can be supplemented with data from Bureau of Labor Statistics surveys or from professional associations.

If you decide you like an occupation, the investigation of it doesn't have to end with interviews. You can test it further with additional applied exploration, such as job shadowing or other hands-on opportunities. Early career exploration usually means a better-fitting career for you later.

