



Informational Interviewing:

Explore Careers and Build Your Professional Network

What is an informational interview?

An opportunity to “pick the brain” of a professional whose career or expertise you admire. Usually a short (20 minute) session in person or by phone/Skype/Google Hangouts/etc.

Why should I do them?

- Learn “insider information” about what it’s really like to work in a specific career field or a specific organization; determine if you really want to pursue that career.
- Learn how to prepare for - and land - a job in your career field.
- Broaden your professional network, which may help you get a job or internship.

(PRO TIP: It is NOT a job interview; you are not asking for a job in this type of meeting.)

How do I set one up?

1. **Identify what you want to know.** For example: How to break into a given field? What it’s really like to do X? What a given organization is really like? List all. Prioritize the top 2-4.
2. **Identify people who may be able to answer these questions.** *TIP: The easiest place to start is people you know in person, people you know in virtual communities online, and people referred to you by those you already know.*
3. **Confirm the contact information** of the people on your list.
4. **Request a meeting.** Send a brief email or phone call to someone, introducing yourself, your common area of interest, the person who referred you (if applicable), and your request for a brief informational interview. Be friendly but professional.

Tips for Getting Started

- ✓ Polish your LinkedIn profile before asking people you know less well
- ✓ Do not ask for advice in your initial email.
- ✓ Remember that this is your first contact with someone who may be a potential reference or employer. Double check for typos, avoid emoticons, and generally use a professional tone.
- ✓ It is okay to send a polite follow-up call or email a week later before giving up.

They've agreed! Now what?

1. **Arrange a time and place.** (If you are meeting in person, offer to buy them a coffee. If not, set up Skype, Zoom, Google Hangouts, FaceTime, or even a phone call.)
2. **Offer to send your resume to them in advance**, if they're interested, so they can get some quick context for your career path and interests. (This is optional.)
3. **Prepare yourself thoroughly.** Suggestions:
 - a. Learning anything about the individual that's readily available online: their website/company website; LinkedIn profile; scholarly work or blog articles; etc.
 - b. Preparing 4-6 questions that can't easily be answered by what is available online. (See below for examples.)
 - c. Making sure you have a suitable outfit (dress at least as formally as the person you are meeting, if you possibly can – remember, this person may become a reference).
4. **Confirm the meeting** a day or two before by email or phone call.
5. **Get excited!** This will be great.

How to absolutely ace the interview

1. **Be prepared** (see above).
2. **Be slightly early.**
3. **Open with a BRIEF introduction.** Try this: (1) thank the person for meeting with you (2) briefly summarize your background and interest in the contact's field and (3) express appreciation for your contact's career. Two minutes is a good length for this.
4. **Keep your questions focused** on a topic *this person* can help you with/is relevant to *this person's* career.
5. **Keep yourself in learning mode.** Like any interview, now is not the time to (1) focus on your own troubles or (2) speak negatively about jobs, bosses, or professors you've had.
6. Remain focused, but **conversational and relaxed.** Enjoy the experience.
7. **Keep any comments about yourself brief** – 2-3 minutes will do – and bring it back to the other person with another question.
8. **Wrap up by networking.** Ask the person you're interviewing if they know anyone else you could speak with, who may help you learn about your topic. If so, can they make an introduction, or let you use their name when you contact this next person?

9. **Respect the time frame previously agreed to.** Graciously end the interview when your time is up – even if you have not asked all your questions. (Say, *Thank you for speaking with me, I really appreciate your time and all that you've shared.*)
10. **Follow up** with a brief thank-you email or card.

FAQ

I've never done this before; is it hard?

Not at all! In fact, it's pretty fun once you get the hang of it. Just remember that...

- ...this is a common practice in the professional world. You won't be considered rude or unusual for asking.
- ...most people like talking about themselves – and people who are passionate about their work like it when somebody else cares about it, too.
- ...most successful leaders/professionals had some help along the way; many are happy to pay it forward.
- ...like most things, it gets easier with practice. If you're nervous, start with someone you already know.

How many informational interviews should I do?

For career exploration: Try to get at least one to answer each specific question you have (see above). Note: You may work on this project over a period of weeks or even months.

For job-search networking: keep doing them until you land a job! Gather ideas, tips about unposted job opportunities, advice, inside information about organizations, etc. as often as you can. Start with people you know, then widen your circle to people they recommend and people who share group membership (such as Clark alumni).

What if someone says no?

No problem. Most likely they are just too busy. You may also double-check your approach; ask us in the Center for Career and Professional Connections for feedback on your "pitch." Then try again – double back to people you know.

What should I ask about?

This depends on what your topic is, and what you already have already learned about your contact. However, here are some typical questions that will yield rich results. Remember, your time is limited, so pick 4-6 and prioritize.

Career exploration questions:

- Tell me about your career path – how did you end up where you are now?
- What's a typical day like for you?
- What do I need to do to be competitive in this field? (Credentials, skills, experiences)
- What graduate degrees or certificates are most useful in this field?
- What's the most likely entry point into this field? (Job description, type of organization)
- What kind of internship would best prepare me for this field?
- If you had to do it all over, what might you do differently in your career?
- (Any other questions/concerns you specifically have)
- Who else can you refer me to, who may have useful insights into (topic X)?

Job or internship search questions:

- I'm looking for an internship in XYZ field; what organizations do you suggest?
- What feedback can you give me on my resume, as someone who is already inside this field/organization?
- I'm interested in working at your organization; what advice do you have for getting an interview there or getting my foot in the door?
- What niche job boards do you suggest for your field/industry?
- I have an interview at your organization. What can you tell me about the culture there?
- Who else can you refer me to, who may have useful insights into (topic X)?

I'm pretty nervous; can't I just do this over email?

There are three benefits to actually talking with your contact: You will get much richer answers; you will have the opportunity to ask follow up questions; and, once someone gets to know you better, they are much more likely to feel comfortable referring you to another contact or even to a hiring manager.

If you're nervous, start with someone you know, and vow to get more comfortable with practice. Once you see how rewarding it is for both of you, you'll start looking forward to them.

The payoff? It's a skill you can use again and again, at every phase of your career.