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How to Make a Career Decision Through Informational Interviewing

What is an Informational Interview?

An Informational Interview is a personal or phone contact, usually 15-30 minutes, with a person who has knowledge of a field in which you are interested. **Informational interviews help you make your career decision based on data, not guesses.**

Most people have only an informal understanding of what jobs are available and make their career decisions on scant information. You have an opportunity to improve your chances of success in finding a job by a simple technique: ask people in the field in which you are interested. The Informational Interview is a method to gather information you need for vocational decision making.

It is easier to get an informational interview than a job interview because people always have opinions and advice, even if they don't have job openings. People love to talk about their jobs and their experiences. They enjoy giving advice and are flattered to be asked. Most people will be glad to help you.

In addition to basic facts about a field, informational interviewing can also give you:

Don't pretend to ask for advice or information if you are actually job hunting. Your contact will figure out that you have used deception to get into the interview and will never trust you. In informational interviews, you may reveal insecurities, worries or problems in your work history that you would never tell to a prospective employer. An informational contact may eventually result in a job offer, but don't pose as an advice-seeker when what you want is a job.

- A network of contacts in the field
- Skills in interviewing and confidence in your choice
- A sense of the atmosphere in which you would be working
- Ideas about opportunities you had never imagined

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The answers to *Oh, Betty, I could never do an informational interview!*

I'd be too scared.

It's not like job hunting. Almost everyone will try to be helpful.

I'll look like a fool, not knowing anything.

No one minds an honest question - it's people who pretend to know who are disliked. Most people are pleased to be asked their opinions.

No one will talk to me

If you ask honestly, most people will help. Few people turn down the opportunity to discuss their lives, offer opinions, information and advice. They will often be flattered you asked.

I won't know what to say.

Read the questions and take the checklist on pages 7-9 with you to start the conversation rolling.

I have nothing to wear.

Neat, pressed and clean is most important. If in doubt, wear a white shirt and black pants or skirt. Then observe what people on the job are wearing.

I don't have a resume ready.

You won't need one right away. You're just doing research. Ask for 10 Steps to a Perfect Resume to prepare a resume to leave at an interview.

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Does Informational Interviewing Really Work?

A True Story

I was counseling with [let's call her] Sue, 36, who was working as a well-paid administrative assistant in a professional organization. She kept busy, had developed valuable skills, received good benefits, liked her colleagues and was bored. With college-level art studies but no degree, she was a gifted amateur weaver, doll-maker and fabric artist, but had never made any money at it and had no experience to put on a resume. She had always dreamed about working in art conservation, especially in the preservation and restoration of fabrics. Is there a market for this? Could she enter the field without an advanced art degree? She was uncertain about how to start, where to go and whether she could hope to enter this rare field and make a living.

I taught Sue how to do informational interviewing and we listed the places she could begin her search: her old professor at college, a friend at a weaving school and one museum that had a collection of tapestries. I urged her to spend about four hours a week for one month, making about 8-12 calls per week, and to ask for referrals to other people in the field. I thought it might take her about 35-50 calls to develop the information she would need to make her decision.

Two weeks later Sue called, all excited. She had made about 8 or 10 calls, and had lined up two interviews, found the foremost authorities in the field, who were in Texas and Arizona, learned the schedule of the next professional conference, and discovered an opportunity to go to Peru to work on restoration of ancient Incan and Mayan fabrics, as well as seeing Machu Pichu.

I talked to Sue when she got back from Peru. She had arranged to work four days a week and was using the fifth day to pursue an internship in fabric restoration at the museum, had gone to the convention and made contacts there, had spoken by phone and at the conference to several working professionals and had been given some commissions to work on the restoration of two antique rugs - for pay!

I asked Sue how she had managed all this, so she listed the calls she had made. **She changed her entire vocational future with only 14 informational interview contacts - just 14 calls!** She found a way to learn the profession part-time, hands-on, without needing to return to college she started to make money and establish a reputation in this obscure field in **just 14 calls!**

It works!

Betty Kohlenberg, M.S., CRC
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3] Decide what you will say to introduce yourself. One approach is, *"I'm working now as a secretary [or have been] and I'm exploring a career change. I wonder if you could give me a few minutes of your time to tell me about _____ (your field). I've always been interested in banking/ working with children. Could I talk to you? When would be convenient for you?"*

Decide what questions you will ask. See the checklist of questions below or add questions of your own.

4] When you meet your contact,

- arrive punctually
- wear clothes suitable for an interview or slightly less formal
- bring a resume to leave at the end of the interview if you have one
- take notes if you are comfortable doing so
- don't put your purse or large notebook or briefcase on the person's desk
- don't smoke, chew gum or drink coffee during the interview
- don't drag the interview past its allotted time unless the other person clearly wants to continue
- thank the person who gave you his or her time and information
- ask for a business card, for the exact position title and spelling of the name
- Remember to send a thank-you note** and enclose a resume if asked or did not leave one.

5] Ask for a referral to other people who have knowledge of the field. *"Whom else should I talk to for more information? Can you suggest anyone else I should contact?"*

6] Keep good notes of your conversation. If you didn't write anything while you were talking, write down what was said immediately afterward, before you make another call or shortly after you leave the interview.

7] Follow up on referrals to unions, schools, training programs, professional organizations and other sources of information mentioned. Call the referrals given to you, saying, *"Ms. Jones told me you would be a good source of information about the field."*

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8] Contact more than one person. Don't rely on one person's opinion - s/he may be having a bad day, be unrealistic or out-of-date about the job requirements or otherwise not present information which will be accurate for you.

9] Think about what you have heard. Does the information change or confirm your ideas about entering this field? Did you learn what next step to take?

10] Make a decision. Yes – No - Maybe

YES--

I like this profession or career and I will pursue it by

- Going to school
- Looking for work right now
- Getting an internship or volunteer position to gain experience

NO--

I don't want to work in this field because _____

MAYBE--

I don't know enough about the field yet. I will get further information from:

- more interviews
- a school or training program
- library or Internet research
- Other _____

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Questions You Might Ask in an Informational Interview:

Check off those that apply to you. Take this list with you to the interview.

Qualifications Questions

"What qualifications do you look for in people who get hired into the entry level position?"

Required or desirable education

- degrees
- certificates
- licenses
- apprenticeships
- recommended schools or training programs, what schools to avoid
- on-the job training or other education

Required or desirable experience

- are particular past jobs a prerequisite for this field
- is specific knowledge or general knowledge of a field or industry required
- is experience required for particular period of time or level of responsibility
- other experience required for your specific job goal

Other qualifications required

- union affiliation, name of the local
- professional memberships, name of the organization, contact person
- language abilities
- driving record
- ability to be bonded
- Other _____

Skills Questions

"What skills or personal qualities do you look for in people you hire or are found in successful people in this field?" Write down other skills this job might require.

- good with people, ability to work alone or with others

- computer skills - what level, what programs

- good hand skills, mechanical skills

- creativity, design or art skills

- writing/spelling/editing

- other skills specific to your goal

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Job Duties and Working Conditions Questions

"What does the job involve?"

- phone work, cold calls, independent work or part of a team
- travel - how often and how far
- production deadlines, sales quotas, steady flow of work or projects
- special training to gain product knowledge
- evening or weekend work, shift changes, overtime
- other tasks you could be asked to do
- Other _____

Physical Demands Questions

"What are the physical aspects of this job?"

- lifting and carrying
- prolonged standing
- computer use or prolonged sitting
- other tasks for which you might need accommodation or assistance
- Other _____

Job Availability Questions

"Will I be able to find a job?"

- are they hiring now, anticipate future openings, hired in recent past
- is hiring seasonal
- business outlook for the field
- layoffs or expansion
- market competition. Number of applicants for each job opening

Pay Rates Questions

"What is the range of pay a person can expect to earn?"

- range of earnings for an entry level employee
- pay range for more experience
- maximum for the job title

Career Path Questions

"How does a person get into the field?"

- how did they enter they field? how did others they know?
- has the career path changed, eg. from informal training to more formal training?
- name of the entry level job
- other jobs related to this one
- promotion possibilities, other areas the entry job can prepare you for
- are jobs full time, part-time, freelance, or steady
- how do employers find workers in this field
- want ads
- employment agencies – which ones

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- schools – which ones
- word of mouth
- trade organizations

Other Questions

- how did you get started
- will that method of entry work in the current market
- what kind of people succeed
- what kind of people leave the field
- is there a career ladder
- what parts of the work do you enjoy
- what parts of your job do you dislike How do you handle those
- can a person with my background [describe yourself *briefly*] expect to do well or to be hired
- what do I need to do to be employable in this field
- am I too old/young to be hired in the entry level job? Is it difficult for women/people of color
- will volunteering or internships help me gain necessary skills
- what is the future of the industry
- how much control do you feel you have over your work
- what next steps do you recommend that I take