

Asking for -- and maximizing -- the informational interview

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Do all the employees at your dream company have an MBA? What is a typical day like in a big-city newsroom? What types of questions might someone be asked when interviewing for a position in the health-care industry?

If you've got questions about a career, an informational interview might be your ticket to answers.

"An informational interview can help you better understand a career, industry, company, organization or specific position you are potentially interested in by finding out what really goes on behind the scenes versus what you've heard or what you imagine," says Debra Condren, author of "Ambition Is Not a Dirty Word," a career guide for women.

"Having a more accurate picture will help you decide if this career target really matches your talents, passion, interests, strengths and weaknesses. It will also inform your choice of education and training."

How to ask

For many people, the prospect of making a blind call to a place of interest can be daunting. It also might not be very fruitful. A better idea is to network your way into an informational interview.

"The best approach is to brainstorm about someone you know who may work in the industry or company you're targeting," Condren states. "Does your parent, brother, best friend, roommate or someone you went to college with know someone who knows someone who would send an e-mail on your behalf asking if it's OK for you to contact them?"

Alumni offices and college career centers also can be good places to turn. James Greeley, director of career services and cooperative education at Merrimack College in North Andover, Massachusetts, notes that his institution routinely provides informational interview services for students and graduates.

"The programs are staffed by human resource personnel and hiring managers from a variety of corporations as well as Merrimack College alumni who volunteer to offer their expertise and assistance."

When picking up the phone or writing to someone to set up an informational interview, Condren recommends the following to help things run smoothly:

-- Mention your mutual connection.

-- Ask for a precise amount of time. (As in, "I was wondering if I could have fifteen minutes of your time.")

-- Approach the person with two or three very specific questions. (As in "I'm interested in your opinion on which majors train you best for this field.") It gives the interviewer a preview of what you want to discuss and shows that you have taken the initiative to define what you're trying to accomplish.

Treat it like a job interview

If you are interested enough in a field or a company to set up an informational interview, there is a chance that down the line you might want to use this

connection when seeking employment. Make a good first impression by:

-- Dressing professionally

-- Treating everyone you encounter politely

-- Arriving early

-- Doing your homework; you should be asking for insight, not basic information available on a Web site

-- Preparing a list of questions that gets at exactly what you want to know

While it may seem that you are the one with everything to gain from an informational interview, remember that companies also can benefit.

"We're always looking for top talent, and an informational interview is another chance to meet a potential candidate," says Holly Paul, national recruiting leader for PricewaterhouseCoopers, one of the world's largest professional services firms. "It provides an opportunity for us to share what we do and learn how the candidate might fit into our organization."

Express gratitude

The person who granted the informational interview provided a valuable service and should be thanked accordingly for sharing her time and expertise. While a timely e-mail is considered acceptable by some experts, a mailed note may be better.

"Sending an old fashioned hand-written card will make you stand out," Condren states. "It saves the person who did the interview from having to open one more in his or her daily gazillion e-mails."

Finally, remember to keep the lines of communication open for future contact. How to do this without becoming a pest? Paul suggests that before the interview even ends that you ask how you should follow up, and then follow that advice.

Later, take a moment in your thank-you note to restate your interest in potential future opportunities. A small but genuine gesture now can be a building block for bigger things to come.