

How Does an Informational Interview Work?

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If you're a recent college graduate or a professional looking to change careers, you've likely read mounds of material about the job or field you're interested in pursuing. While books, trade publications and Web sites are great resources, there's nothing quite as effective as gathering information firsthand. That's why you should consider conducting informational interviews, or meetings that you schedule with practicing professionals for the purpose of learning more about their jobs. This type of interview provides a rare opportunity to gain invaluable, up-to-date knowledge about a specific business or industry from an "insider."

While it's an underutilized approach, arranging informational interviews with successful professionals can benefit your career in many ways. In addition to quickly validating or dispelling what you've heard or assumed about a particular line of work or organization, these appointments will enable you to expand your network of contacts and gain additional interview experience. Following are tips on how to arrange, prepare and conduct an informational interview.

Setting Up an Informational Interview

The first step is to identify people who have jobs that you find intriguing and inspiring. Be resourceful. Scour the Internet and read local newspapers and business publications. Tell your family, friends, neighbors, colleagues, former teachers and classmates about your interviewing endeavor and ask them for names of people with whom you should speak.

As you develop your list of potential contacts, send each person an introductory letter explaining your background, career goals, interests and what you hope to gain from the interview. Request 20 to 30 minutes of the person's time at their convenience. Be clear that you are seeking information only -- not a job. If the person is receptive to your request, ask for a face-to-face meeting at his or her workplace. While getting together for lunch or talking on the phone is fine, visiting the person's office will give you a better feel for the job.

Preparing for an Informational Interview

How much you take away from an informational interview depends largely on how thoroughly you prepare for the meeting. Make sure you have read up on your interviewee and his or her organization. If you have not done so already, visit the company's Web site, paying particular attention to the "About" section, staff biographies and the company's latest press releases.

Reviewing company literature such as brochures and annual reports also will provide a treasure trove of helpful data. Formulate a list of open-ended questions that you intend to ask. A few examples might include:

- * How did you get started in the field?
- * What do you like most/least about your job?
- * What is your typical day like?
- * What emerging trends do you see affecting your job or industry in the next five years?
- * What skill sets and abilities will I need to be successful in this line of work? Also show the person that you've done your homework by preparing questions that specifically relate to his or her career path. Here's an example: "I read in a trade magazine article that you started this business when you were just 24. How did you do it? What lessons did you learn?"

Conducting an Informational Interview

Conduct your informational interview as you would any important business meeting. Dress professionally and arrive early. If you would like to document your conversation, ask your interviewee if he or she minds if you take notes or use a tape recorder. When asking questions, listen closely to the person's responses and make eye contact.

Also, be willing to go "off script." While you want to be mindful of his or her time, if the interviewee begins to follow an interesting tangent, go with the flow. This will help you establish a more natural rapport. Before ending the conversation,

you may want to ask the person for suggestions of other professionals who would be beneficial to interview.

Building the Relationship

After the interview, immediately send an e-mail thanking the person for his or her time. Follow up with a handwritten note that goes into greater detail about the information or advice you gained from the meeting. As time goes on, continue to strengthen the relationship by keeping your interviewee apprised of developments in your career. You never know how and when he or she might be able to help you again, or you might be able to assist your new contact down the line.

An informational interview can be a key component in your career toolbox, providing you with insight, guidance and professional connections that cannot be gained through other means. The next time you are searching for a job or find yourself considering a career switch, think about what you may gain from arranging a few of these short but valuable meetings.

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