

# Informational Interviewing

## What Is an Informational Interview?

An informational interview is one of the best ways to obtain information about an occupation. Ideally, it is a 30- to 60-minute meeting at the workplace of an individual whose job you are interested in learning about. During this meeting, you have the opportunity to ask questions about work tasks, work environment, the person's background, and how he or she obtained that job. If you are unable to meet in person due to geographic limitations, you can conduct the interview by phone.

## What You Will Gain:

- A more in-depth understanding of a career field which may help you decide what type of work and setting you prefer.
- More confidence regarding your career goals and an easier time tailoring your resume to your career objective.
- Career knowledge that will make you better prepared for future job interviews.
- One professional contact who may help you within your current or future job search.

## Locating a Person to Interview

Ask family, friends, neighbors, professors, employers, and anyone else you can think of: "Do you know a (computer programmer, journalist, accountant...) I could talk to about his/her job?" OR "Do you know anyone who works at (specific place) whom I could contact to discuss the (computer programming, journalism, accounting...) field?" Take advantage of as many opportunities as you can to interact with professionals in your field of interest.

**Consult the Networking article on page 14 for ideas on how to connect with professionals in your field!**

## Setting Up the Interview

Once you have identified someone to contact, it is time to make the call to set up an appointment. Once the person on the other end

of the line says "Hello" you need to be ready to communicate who you are; why you are calling; and convince them to take the time to talk to you—all in the span of approximately one minute.

It is best to plan what you are going to say in advance and practice saying what you want before you make the call. To assist you in planning your one-minute introduction, use the following as a guideline:

*Hello [insert person's name], my name is [your name here] and I was given your name by [insert person's name] who encouraged me to call you. I'm a student at Penn State and have been discussing my plans for after graduation and one of the career fields I am considering is [insert career field].*

*Given your success in [insert career field] at [insert company name], I was wondering if you would be able to meet with me to provide some advice and guidance. I have been researching the field and learned that [insert some key facts to demonstrate your knowledge]. I would appreciate a chance to ask you some questions as I am interested in learning from your personal perspective.*

*I will be in town during break and was hoping we could get together. Would it be possible to set a meeting at this time? OR Is there a time convenient for you that we can set aside up to 30 minutes to talk by phone?*

Of course your individual situation will be unique—simply adjust the outline above to fit and you will be ready to make the call. But first, remember it may be helpful to practice—so make the first call to a friend and ask for feedback on how your "one-minute" introduction sounded.

**Since people expect students to be looking for employment, they may assume you are calling to ask about a job. They may indicate that there are no openings at their company or that they are not in charge of hiring. Make sure to stress that you are not asking for a job interview and reiterate your interest in gaining occupational information.**



## Tips on How to Conduct a Successful Interview

- Prepare ahead of time.
- Write out questions and don't be afraid to refer to them. Keep the yes/no questions to a minimum; you want to stimulate discussion rather than a series of short answers.
- Start the interview centered on the person you're interviewing, with questions such as "How did you become interested in this line of work?" and "What has been your career path in getting to where you are today?"
- Never start with "Tell me about your job." That is such a broad question that the person usually doesn't know where to begin. A more focused question, such as "What do you do during a typical workday?" helps focus the answer.
- Follow up general responses, such as "I handle personnel disputes," with requests for examples so you get more specific information and aren't later left guessing what the person meant.
- Take notes. You'll be surprised how much you will forget!
- Ask for a tour of the building and examples of the person's work. Take note of the work environment—the dress, ways people communicate, etc.
- If you have a resume, take it with you as it can be an effective method of showing the person your background. You can get advice on how to improve your resume and what you need to enhance your skills and experiences. Don't bring it with the intention of getting a job with it.
- Be yourself—conversational and amiable—to make this an enjoyable experience.

## After the Interview

Take some time to think about what you learned, your positive and negative impressions, the requirements of the job, and your interests. Remember, work environments and jobs differ tremendously from one place to another so you need to avoid forming an opinion about the entire field based on only one person's opinion and job description. Continue to seek out people in the field to meet with to expand on what you have gained from this interaction and how the knowledge fits with your career goals.

Remember to send or email a thank-you note. The person will appreciate hearing from you, and you will leave a much better impression of yourself and Penn State. You may want to call them again for more information, so keep the lines of communication open!

## Some Suggested Questions

### About the person:

- What is your educational background?
- How did you get started in this field?
- How did you get to where you are today? What are your future career plans?
- What jobs did you have previous to this?
- What best prepared you for this job?

### About the job itself:

- What do you do during a typical workday?
- What do you like most/find most interesting about your work? What do you like least about your job?
- What kinds of problems do you face? What do you find most difficult?
- What skills/abilities do you find are most important in your work?
- What other career areas do you feel are related to your work?

### About the career field:

- What are the basic prerequisites for jobs in the field? May I read job descriptions and specifications for some of the positions in this field?
- What is the typical work environment like for a person in this career area?
- What entry-level jobs qualify one for this field?
- What does the step or position above the one you hold now involve? How long does it usually take to move from one step to the next in this career path?
- Are there other areas of this field to which people in it may be transferred? What are they?



## **About your career planning and/or job search:**

- How suited is my background for this field (education, interests, experiences, personality)?
- Would you recommend any further courses or extracurricular activities to help prepare me for this field or make me more marketable? Are there professional organizations you would suggest I join?
- Can you name a relevant trade journal or magazine you would recommend I review to learn more about the field?
- Where would I find position announcements in this field? In the newspaper, journals, or websites (which ones)? By word-of-mouth (who spreads the word)? By the personnel office (how and where)?
- Do you have any suggestions of other people doing this kind of work with whom I could talk? May I please mention that you referred me?
- Do you have any other advice or suggestions?

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