

The Informational Interview

Are you in the process of making career choices or beginning a job hunt but are unsure about what option is the right fit for you?

The informational interview is an important part of the career exploration process because it

- provides you with an insider's view of a specific line of work or academic program
- builds your network
- gives you the chance to practice your interviewing skills
- narrows your list of potential options

Simply put, the informational interview helps you decide what it is you want to do next.

Not a Job Interview

The informational interview is an appointment you schedule with a professional who can provide insightful information about a specific field or organization you're considering; as such, *it's neither a job interview nor a roundabout way of getting job leads*. As its name implies, the informational interview is quite simply a way of gathering information to help you make an informed decision about your next career move.

How do I identify potential contacts?

Begin by asking friends, colleagues, faculty, and your LinkedIn network (or other online networks) for referrals—to see who may know people in positions you're interested in. Ask them if they would be willing to make introductions for you. You can also check with your department, the Graduate Studies Professional Development Team, or the Nebraska Alumni Association personnel for recommendations about who you might contact to set up an interview. In short, be proactive in finding contacts.

How do I connect?

Once you've identified potential contacts, you can connect with them by phone, email, or letter; in each case, you'll need to (a) quickly summarize your background and why you'd like to schedule an informational interview with them; (b) request a short meeting by phone or in person; and (c) ask if they'd like to receive a copy of your resume before the meeting. If they ask, clearly tell them that you're not looking for a job at this point and that you want to interview them because you're simply researching various careers to make an informed decision. If you have a connection, be sure to mention that!

Updated Summer 2020

Follow the contact's lead: Does he or she prefer a phone conversation or a face-to-face meeting? And be respectful of each contact's time. Informational interviews vary in length but, in general, last 20-30 minutes, depending on how much contacts want to talk about their company or department and what it is they do.

Although a face-to-face interview is ideal, be prepared to conduct the interview over the phone, just in case the contact decides it would be best to do it now—when you first connect with him or her via telephone.

How do I prepare for the interview?

Before the interview, find out as much as possible about the contact's organization, company, or department through your network connections, print media, and online resources. Decide on the questions you'll want to ask during the interview. Type your own list and have it on hand, both during the face-to-face interview or the telephone interview. In the book, *The 2-Hour Job Search*, author Steve Dalton recommends utilizing the TIARA method when developing questions. This will help you maximize your time with your contact and help you conduct yourself in a professional manner. Although you'll develop many of your own, here are a few potential interview questions to get you started.

Trends

- What trends are most impacting your business right now?
- How has your business changed most since you first started?

Insights

- What are your responsibilities and what do you do on a daily basis?
- What skills/abilities are critical to your success?
- Without considering your salary, what do you find most rewarding about your job?

Advice

- What do you know now that you wish you would have known when you were in my position?
- What should I be doing right now to prepare myself for a career in this industry?

Resources

- Do you know other individuals who would provide helpful information about this field? Can I use your name when contacting them?
- What resources do you recommend?

Assignments

- What projects have you recently worked on that you feel have added value to your career/challenged you?
- Have you had interns or contractors in the past? If so, what kinds of projects have they worked on?

What happens during the interview?

Be professional, dress professionally. Arrive early. Be enthusiastic, and positive. Do contribute to the conversation when appropriate. The questions you formulate should serve as a guide, but the informational interview is more than just you asking questions; you need to view it as a relaxed, enjoyable conversation between two individuals. Remember this isn't a job interview, or the time to ask if they know of any job opportunities, but you should bring a copy of your resume just in case *they* ask *you* about it. You always want to know what's on your resume so that you can talk about your past experience and career aspirations during the conversation.

And remember, you are the interviewer, so you'll need to take the lead and ask open-ended questions. On the one hand, if the person you're interviewing is talkative, don't worry if the interview takes longer than 20-30 minutes. Many people enjoy talking about what it is they do, so attend to both verbal and nonverbal signals before ending the interview. On the other hand, never overstay your welcome.

What do I do when it's over?

Record notes of what you learned and what else you still need to know about the department or organization. List comments and new referrals for the future.

Send a personalized thank-you note to the contact person. Express your appreciation for his or her time and interest. Stay connected to your contact by finding them on LinkedIn. If you are able to foster a professional relationship with this person, it could lead to career opportunities in the future!