

Informational Interviewing

A Career Research and Job Search Tool

What is Informational Interviewing?

Informational Interviewing is a method of conducting in-person research for the purpose of gathering accurate and up-to-date information about possible career options and/or potential employer organizations. Informational Interviews enable you to make face-to-face contact with people who may be in positions to provide you with relevant information, suggest potential job leads or even offer you a job. Conducting library and Internet research into careers and employer organizations can be very helpful, but the most valuable information comes from meeting people who are in a career field or organization.

How to begin

First you need to know what you are looking for and what careers you are interested in. Once you have identified your career options you are ready to begin this process. You should begin by identifying and then contacting individuals, organizations and associations who may have relevant information. Before you call, do some homework and have basic information about the career field and the organization. The Career Centre can assist you with your personal career planning and has a variety of resources you can access to assist you in your selection and research.

The Meeting

Picking up the telephone and calling a stranger to ask for a short **meeting** (not an interview) can be quite intimidating. However, if you are clear and specific about the kind of assistance or information you need, people generally want to be helpful. You are expressing interest in their chosen line of work and you are asking for their professional guidance to assist you in making important decisions in your life. You are not asking for a job, but the opportunity to learn from a professional.

During an informational interview you can gather valuable information on:

- the major advantages and disadvantages of the career field
- personal opinions and observations about day-to-day job activities
- inside 'tips' on how to get started in the field/occupation/organization
- the type of entry-level jobs available and where to find them
- accurate information regarding salaries, earning potential, career prospects
- volunteer, summer or internship opportunities related to a career field
- opportunities for advancement and/or lateral moves in the field

- the most up-to-date information/trends about a career field
- the 'tricks of the trade' on how to break into the field or organization

You also have the opportunity to:

- put yourself, your skills and personality in front of people in a position to help
- observe first-hand working environments, expectations and requirements
- demonstrate your interest and initiative to potential employers

Making the first contact

1. To begin, make a list of organizations, companies, agencies and people of interest that offer the type of work you are considering.
2. Prepare a telephone script and a list of questions you wish to ask during the meeting. See script suggestions and sample questions which follow.
3. Before you make the call, have in front of you the organization's name, the name of the person you are calling (if available), your script, your list of questions and paper and pencil. Do a little bit of homework on the organization before you call.
4. Make the call. You may be transferred from person to person. Be pleasant and patient with everyone, even if they are not.
5. Contact the people on your list. If you speak to the receptionist, identify who you are and to whom you wish to speak. If you are asked about the nature of your call, state that you are hoping he/she will assist you with some research you are conducting.

Navigating Voice Mail

6. If the target person is not available, or if you get voice mail, leave your name, phone number and briefly identify why you are calling (to set up a meeting, not to ask for a job).
7. Indicate that you will call back at a later time, and ensure you make that follow-up call. This will allow you to maintain some control over the call, as opposed to waiting for someone to call you back.
8. If you email your contact, ensure it is written in a professional manner. Introduce yourself and indicate your reason for connecting with them. Ask them if they prefer email or telephone contact. If they are unavailable, ask if they could suggest another person to contact.
9. You may find that you have to contact several people before you are granted a meeting, but persevering will pay off.

Speaking with the target person

10. Once connected to your target person, politely identify yourself and explain the purpose of your call. Ask if the person might have 15 minutes to meet with you (in person) to answer some of your questions (see the sample script to follow).
11. Always try to set up an in person appointment. You want to see the work environment and you want the person to meet you. If an on-site appointment is not possible you may request a telephone meeting.
12. If asked, provide a suggestion of a date and time for the meeting (think of this ahead of time). Be flexible; remember the contact is doing **you** a favour. Make yourself available and set up a mutually-convenient appointment time.
13. Before going to the meeting, review your list of questions and take them along so you do not forget any important points.

Meeting with a contact person

14. Be prepared to answer questions about yourself and reasons for your interest in this field/career/organization which demonstrate some of your research. Take notes for future reference.
15. Do not overstay your welcome. If you agreed to 15 minutes, track the time, indicate when 15 minutes have passed and be prepared to leave.
16. Thank the person for his/her time and ask if he/she can suggest anyone else in the field with whom you could meet to acquire other perspectives.
17. Building a network is important but maintaining it is **crucial**. Always ask the person if you may contact him/her again once you have made your career decision and begin an active job search. If the response is positive, be sure to reconnect every so often to give an update and seek additional information.

Professional Follow up

18. Always send a brief thank you letter (hard copy preferred) to the people with whom you have met for the time they spent and the information they were able to provide. Mention something you learned or found interesting about the meeting.

The option of bringing a resumé

Some experts say “Yes” because it shows you are prepared for any outcome. Others say “No” because you have told your contact that you are coming for information/research, not to apply for a job. If you are interested in working for the organization in the future, you could bring a resumé and request feedback. If you are asked for a resumé and do not have a targeted one with you, you could say that you do not have a targeted resumé with you but you would be pleased to drop one off. Going back may give you a second opportunity, however brief, to make another contact with a potential employer.

Difficult phone calls

Most of the time you will have no trouble. However, sometimes things do go wrong. You may get transferred from one person to another and never reach the person with the information. The person you reach may be unable to meet with you or may not have the answers you need. Always ask for a referral to someone else, e.g., “Do you know of anyone I could contact who might be able to help me with this research/my inquiries?” If you continue to get no co-operation or information, your best course is to remain polite but do not pursue that person/organization for now. Since you have prepared a list of several people/organizations to contact, simply go on to the next one on your list.

Don’t give up! This is a critical tool for making career decisions and conducting a successful job search. You **will** find people who are willing to help you.

Finding Potential Contacts

To assist you in researching specific occupations and organizations, the Career Centre has developed the **Alumni Sharing Knowledge (ASK) program**. ASK provides students and graduates with the names of alumni who are willing to share information on their careers and/or organizations. Alumni from a variety of disciplines and occupational areas participate in the program.

Other resources to consider

- Employer literature in the Career Centre
- Professional Associations
- Relevant magazines and industry journals
- Professors or other professionals you know
- Employer/industry directories
- Local newspapers
- Career Fair and Job Fair
- Networking events

Volunteering

Consider becoming actively involved in professional or community organizations. Demonstrate your

initiative by taking on roles in committees, boards or directors, special events planning and so on. Seek opportunities where you can develop your skills in decision making, planning, analytical thinking, team work, management and more.

Sample Telephone Script

NOTE: Prepare a script so that you have a clear idea of what you want to say when you make the telephone call. DO NOT memorize or read your script.

"Good morning/afternoon, Mr. or Ms. (person's name). My name is _____. I am a student at Wilfrid Laurier University and am currently conducting research on a variety of careers (or organizations) within the _____ field. One of the occupations (organizations) which is of interest to me is _____. I am interested in talking to people like you who are knowledgeable in this field (or about your organization) in order to learn more about my options. Would it be possible to set up an appointment to meet with you for 15 minutes so I could ask you a few questions about the _____ field (or your organization)?"

If no: Could you possibly give me the name of someone who might be able to help me with this research?

If you get the name of another contact, use the provider's name:

"Good morning, (person's name). My name is _____. I was recently speaking with (contact's name) of (organization) and he/she suggested that you might be able to help me with some research I am conducting (information I am seeking). I am a student at WLU..."

Email Contact: You should include similar information in your follow-up email. The email should always be formal and professional. Introduce yourself, indicate your interest in the organization, refer to your attempt to contact the person by phone and indicate they are welcome to follow-up by email or telephone, whichever is more convenient.

Sample Questions For Informational Interviewing

You should prepare your own relevant questions which address issues unique to the line of work you are considering. The following are merely suggestions to get you started.

- How did you decide to get into this field? What background do you have?
- What qualifications/education/training are required to get into this field?
- What would a typical day/week look like for you?
- What do you like best about this line of work/organization?
- What are some of the frustrations/difficulties you experience?
- What do you feel are the most important skills, interests and attitudes that would make a person happy/successful in this job?

- What type of personality is best suited for this work?
- What do you feel is the best training route leading to this position?
- Could you describe some other environments where a _____ might work?
- Are there similar or related occupations which require less/different training?
- What do you see as future trends for this occupation?
- What work/volunteer experience would benefit me in targeting this career area?
- Are there any professional associations I could join? Which would you recommend?
- What else should I be doing to increase my chances for success in this area?
- Are there many opportunities for advancement in this field? Into what kinds of positions
- What are the starting salary ranges and earning potential in this field? (Do not ask the person about their own salary, ask for entry level and potential salaries)
- Is there anyone else you would recommend to whom I could speak in a similar or related area who might give me another perspective?



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