

Informational Interviews: The Basics

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Whether you're making a career switch or choosing a major for college, be sure to pencil in an appointment for "reality check."

It can be difficult to separate the realities of a profession with your hopes and dreams for it. But luckily, speaking with someone who actually lives it every day can set you straight on what to expect, and how to prepare for success.

Informational interviews are 15 to 30 minute appointments dedicated to just that—learning about a job you might like in real life and how others have made it there. They're also great practice for your interview skills, and a series of them can help you build contacts in your new field.

But with all these benefits, you'll need to have a tactful approach to finding (and keeping) gracious mentors. Read on for our tips for a smooth, successful ride to career wisdom.

1. Find an appropriate target

While it's best to work through people you know (since mentioning a mutual contact is a great way in), it's more important to speak to someone at a company or with a job title you're interested in. Thus, if your network is drawing a blank, start brainstorming: scour trade publications, alumni newsletters, or local yellow pages for places and people you're interested in.

For an internet search, try job title or company key words paired with your school name, previous or current employers, even your hometown—that will pull up contacts with a common link. Check with your social network too: LinkedIn, Facebook, or even just a few emails can turn up a friend of a friend of a friend who can help.

2. Request the meeting

When requesting an informational interview, load your first paragraph with the most essential info: who you are, how you got their name, what you want. And the more specific, the better: the person you're writing may be unwilling to talk if your boundaries are unclear. Nobody wants to be ambushed with demands for an interview or job.

So as for this: 20 to 30 minutes of time (even 15 is not unheard of) for the singular purpose of receiving real world perspective on the career. Suggest a quick appointment at the office or coffee nearby, but be receptive to a phone call too. Remember, any time they can make for you is a favor—take it!

3. Come prepared

Just as a job interview requires careful preparation, so does an informational one. You'll simply ask better questions when you know the basics—and better questions means more interesting answers. Read the company website, the bio of the person you're interviewing and his LinkedIn page, and any press releases you can get your hands on.

The info you'll glean (such as the fact your subject majored in Elizabethan poetry but now works in accounting) will make excellent spring board for juicy questions. How *did* she make that transition? Know your common ground too, because a shared alma mater or work background may get you tailored advice.

4. Don't make it about you

You're here to learn, so don't waste precious time self-promoting. Instead, take the focus off of your performance and place it firmly on your subject by asking smart questions, listening carefully, and taking notes.

Even if you are looking for a job, "innocently" alluding to your impressive resume won't likely improve your odds of getting hired. Your subject certainly won't appreciate a "bait and switch" on the purpose of the interview. They may, however, be impressed by your attentiveness and sincere interest in learning about the business. Go that route.

Finally: Listen to your gut, too

If you're in an informational interview, you're not asking for a job yet, so the focus is off of you. Use this pressure-free opportunity to really absorb what you're experiencing during your visit to the offices. What do you think of the culture? Do employees look happy? How do you feel about the hours your subject is describing?

Remember, your goal is to learn. So do that—and take the same care listening to your gut as you have listening to your interviewee. You may be new at this profession, but you know yourself better than anyone. Pay attention to your reactions to what you're learning, and you may find all you need to know.