



Informational Interviewing: How to Research Your Career Interests

Choosing an interesting and rewarding career involves identifying your skills, interests, and values and plenty of career exploration. The first step, self-assessment, can help define your needs and abilities, what kind of work you want to do, and the type of setting in which you might be happy. Reading about careers in books, recruiting literature, professional journals, and websites is another important step. However, the best way to gain real insight into the possibilities available to you is the informational interview.

What Can I Accomplish with an Informational Interview?

- An informational interview is a tool to learn about jobs, professions, and specific companies that interest you. An experienced professional can provide insight into the pros and cons of a career and help you determine whether this is an area to pursue.
- Informational interviews allow you to improve your interviewing skills without the pressure of the real thing. These skills include: the manner in which you present yourself and your goals, your ability to ask questions and listen for answers, and your ease in meeting new and influential people.
- ***It is not appropriate to ask for a job during an informational interview;*** you are there seeking advice only. However, informational interviews can put you in touch with the “hidden job market”: people who are not advertising a position but may nevertheless have a job available, who may know of jobs elsewhere, or who will keep you in mind for future openings.

What Can I Learn During an Informational Interview?

- One goal of an informational interview is to learn what activities and responsibilities define a specific job. The interview can help you understand how the duties of this position fit into the structure of a company or an entire industry. This becomes valuable information you can use to your advantage in a “real” interview.
- You also can explore the appropriate way to pursue employment in a particular field or company. Ask about required credentials, such as advanced degrees, professional licenses, and work experience.
- Finally, informational interviewing allows you to investigate the work environment of industries and individual organizations. Consider whether the hours, location, work atmosphere, and level of competition appeal to you.

You Are the Interviewer

Determine your agenda before you go, then guide the conversation according to your goals.

- The purpose of the interview is to gain concrete information. This is not always easy. Ask for clarification of unclear references and encourage the interviewee to expand on relevant points. (This is a good time to begin learning terminology and jargon specific to the industry.) Afterward, compare his or her opinions with those expressed by other contacts and by what you have read.



- If you meet with your interviewee at his or her office, you can learn about the company or profession by carefully observing your surroundings. Do people work together or independently? Are they absorbed in their work? Is the work environment casual or formal?
- If your interviewee does not offer names of resources, you may ask for one or two: "Thank you very much for your help. Do you know another person whom I might talk to about X or Y?" May I say you referred me to him/her?" Such questions can extend your network of contacts, expose you to a variety of individual outlooks, and increase your visibility in an industry.

How Do I Arrange an Informational Interview?

- Identify several individuals who currently work or have worked in a field you wish to explore. Consider friends of your family, Clark University alumni (who can be found through Clark's LinkedIn page: www.clarku.edu/linkedin), and leaders in the field (ask professors about their colleagues in industry).
- Write a letter or email introducing yourself and requesting an informational interview. Include a one-paragraph description of your skills and background. Request an opportunity to speak with the contact in person or by phone.
- When you call to schedule the interview, have a few dates and times in mind. Be as flexible as possible.

Guidelines

- Research beforehand. You can prepare useful questions with knowledge gained from the company website, annual reports, trade magazines, and internet searches. Use this information to determine which questions to ask.
- Arrive promptly, dress professionally, and bring a resume. Plan to talk for only 20-30 minutes. If you don't overstay your welcome, you will leave a positive impression.
- **Do not ask for a job** during the informational interview. You are investigating the nature of the work, and it is not appropriate to ask this person for a job or internship.
- Be open to suggestions.
- Bring a small notepad to the interview to record important information: names, addresses, etc. Don't take extensive notes as you could make your interviewee nervous and distract yourself from the subtleties of the conversations and environment.
- Immediately after the interview, write down the pertinent information you gathered. This data will form the core of your research. Keep track of correspondence and phone calls with dates.
- Promptly write a brief thank-you letter. The amount of time lapsed negatively reflects your appreciation of the interviewee's time, but better late than never.
- Talk to a variety of people and compare their insights. This is where your notes of previous interviews will be useful.

Suggested Questions

To learn the most during an informational interview, formulate a general outline of questions beforehand. The type of information you want to acquire should determine the questions you ask.

Use a series of questions to elicit information. For example: *What is your role here? What previous jobs have you held? How did they lead to your current position? Why did you choose this kind of work? What attracts others to this company? From what you know of my background and experiences, how could I fit into this industry? What kind of preparation would I need if I want to enter this career field?*

Additional Questions:

- How would you describe a typical day? Week?
- What elements of your job are most interesting? Least interesting? What percentage of your time do you devote to these?
- How much time do you spend collaborating? Working independently?
- When you were in school, did you expect to be doing this? What were your career plans?
- How is this organization structured? Is it similar to others in the industry?
- What are the major satisfactions and/or benefits of working here?
- How did you choose this profession? This company?
- What kinds of people work here? What is their training and professional background?
- What is the typical route of entry into your kind of work? What is the application process? What qualifications are expected: degrees, licenses, work experience?
- How does my resume look for a position in this field? In this organization? Could you make some suggestions for improvement?
- Can you suggest anyone else that I might contact for an informational interview? May I use your name?

Questions? For further assistance, please contact Career Services at cservices@clarku.edu.