Why an informational interview? Simple—to learn from an insider! Informational interviewing can offer an opportunity to gain insight that isn’t written anywhere or found via Google. Additionally, you can learn about almost anything—a particular job, company, issue, organization, cause, or something else that is of interests you.

The difference between a conversation and an interview is being prepared: who to talk to, what questions to ask, and how you follow up afterward. To help you get started, see the information outlined below for practical details about completing an effective informational interview.

Conducting an Informational Interview

1. **Identify sources of information.** Two ways of identifying sources of information are through personal referrals and direct contacts. Personal referrals are obtained by using your current network of friends, family, neighbors, co-workers, professors, etc., to obtain names of individuals they know who are using the knowledge, skills, interests, and/or talents that you enjoy or are interested in developing. A direct contact is a source you identify by reading newspapers, magazines, professional journals, and Web sites, or by researching professional associations related to your areas of interest.

   **HOT TIP:** Read blogs, magazines, industry publications from your field of interest, and contact a professional who was showcased for an informational interview. Mention that you read the article and what you gained from it; often this will increase the professional's willingness to help you, because it shows your interest and that you understand doing some background review.

   Each method of identifying sources has benefits. **Personal referrals** can save you time by eliminating some of the research required for seeking direct contacts. Obtaining a personal referral can increase the chance that your request for information will be warmly received. **Direct contacts**, however, are likely to have more rapid access to the type of information you are pursuing. Utilizing direct contacts also allows you to practice being assertive.

2. **Make an initial contact with your source.** Initial contact may be made either by e-mail, phone, or online connection (e.g., message within LinkedIn). Regardless of how you make contact with your source, be sure to identify who you are, the purpose of your contact, and what type of information you seek. Your source should have a clear understanding that your sole purpose is to gain information of the particular career field that you consider as a possibility for yourself. It is best not to call it an informational interview. Instead, you might want to say you are looking “to gain insight…” The reason not to use the word “interview” is that some folks will think you mean an interview for a job. **Your source needs to be assured that you want information about their industry, position, company, or the like … AND NOT A JOB!!**

   If your source is the result of a personal referral, mention the name of the person who referred you; however, be certain to have that person’s permission first. Finally, if you are writing, indicate when you will call your source to arrange for a meeting.

3. **Arrange the details of your interview.** When speaking with your potential source, ask for 20 to 30 minutes of time to visit and learn more about his or her position and career area. If possible, arrange to meet at the workplace. Otherwise, scheduling a telephone interview or Skype video call may be necessary. If your potential information source is not able to assist you, ask for a referral of someone who might be able...
to provide the information you seek. Be sure to ask if your source would mind your using his or her name when contacting other contacts.

4. **Prepare your interview questions.** Before your meeting, develop a list of relevant questions to help you obtain the information you desire. When preparing for the interview, become familiar with the company or organization (or other relevant pieces). Remember that an informational interview is designed to obtain a "real world" perspective and information not readily available from other sources; therefore, ask questions that can’t be answered by common reference materials.

   Questions should be open-ended. Avoid "yes/no" questions whenever possible because you are seeking information, details, insights, suggestions, etc. A list of possible questions is provided at the end of this Ready Reference.

5. **Interview your source.** On the day of your scheduled interview, respect your source's time by being punctual and staying only as long as you originally specified. Realize that conducting an effective informational interview involves more than simply asking questions. Active listening and observation are keys to gaining useful information your source has to provide. Allow the interview to progress on a natural course, and you will likely obtain more information than you were initially seeking. Pay attention to your source's attitude and feelings about his or her job and organization. Take brief notes throughout the interview in order not to forget valuable information. Some sources may also allow you to tape the conversation, but remember to ask permission in advance. **Remember, at no time during the interview do you ask for a job!** If you're talking about careers, your source will know you want a job and, if appropriate, he or she most likely will mention it without your asking.

6. **Ask for additional referrals.** As part of the career area you are considering, your source undoubtedly knows other professionals in that same career field. Don’t stop at talking to just this one individual. Ask for names of others who may offer additional insights and information about this organization or industry.

7. **Send a thank-you note to your source.** You should always follow up your contacts promptly with a brief thank-you note. Thank-you notes allow you to express your appreciation for the time and useful information provided. In addition, a note will leave a favorable impression and may contribute to a good future relationship.

**Possible Questions to Ask**

- How did you get into your field? How did you find this job?
- What type of skills, knowledge, and academic preparation does one need for this job?
- What are some specific advantages and disadvantages of this type of work?
- What might a typical workday include?
- What do you enjoy most about your work? What are a few of the frustrations?
- What’s next for you after your current position?
- What professional organizations do you recommend for your field? For someone just starting out?
- If you were starting out again in this field of work, what might you do differently?
- Looking back on your experience, what surprised you (about the job, the company, the industry, etc)?
- What is the future outlook for your field? What areas do you feel promise the most growth?
- What are some typical job titles in this field?
- How would I best acquire the necessary skills to perform this job?
- Would you recommend graduate or professional school?
- What do you think are the most critical factors in hiring someone for this field?
- What advice do you have for getting experience in this field?