



## Informational Interview

Informational interviews are just what they sound like: they are short conversations (20-30 minutes) where you interview a professional in a field, organization, or position you'd like to learn more about, to gain more information. They are key components to career exploration and job search.

Information interviewing is not about getting a job. You should never ask the target individual for a job or even a job interview. You are simply asking for the opportunity to learn from them (and perhaps they will learn from you, too.) This is the definition of networking.

Many people prefer to go online to do their research and apply for jobs. While the internet has a lot of useful tools, there are advantages you can get only through personal interaction with a professional in the field.

### Who Do I Interview?

While you can always reach out to professionals you don't know (see 'Warming the Cold Call' below), you don't have to start with strangers. Take a piece of paper and write down every person that you can think of that you know (this can include social media contacts, people you haven't talked to in years, or family friends). It's probably a much longer list than you thought.

- Are there any people on the list that work, or have worked, in your target industry, organization, or profession? Would they know anyone else?
- Ask your professors if they have contacts in the field
- Search LinkedIn (your connections, including 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> degree, the NEIU Alumni Group, and general searches)
- Ask the NEIU Alumni Association if there are any alumni you can speak with
- Attend job or career fairs
- Call local organizations
- Join professional associations
- Read professional journals

If you are getting a name through a mutual acquaintance, ask the acquaintance if they will introduce you, or if you may use their name when contacting the potential interviewee yourself.

## Warming the Cold Call

'Cold calling' or calling someone you don't know and making a request for information is difficult. You might find yourself thinking:

- "I don't want to say or do the wrong thing."
- "I don't want to impose."
- "I don't want to be rejected."

Manage any anxiety you feel. Remember that many professionals enjoy speaking with students, and feel flattered when asked for their expertise. Additionally, one of the more common reasons a professional does not respond to or declines your request is simply a lack of available time. It has nothing to do with you.

While you cannot control the target individual's response to your request, you can use the following ways to 'ramp up' to the task:

- Identify/research the individual and/or the company:
  - Use LinkedIn.com to learn their background, see what groups to which they belong, and review their achievements.
- Send them a introduction
  - Write an email or LinkedIn message
  - Mail a written letter to their businessState your purpose in learning about them and their occupation/career

*"Hello, my name is (NAME). I am a student/an alumni from Northeastern Illinois University, majoring in (MAJOR). I am currently exploring careers in your (field/company/profession) and would like the opportunity to speak more with you about your experiences. Would you be available sometime in the next two weeks for a 20 minute conversation with me?"*

- Try to earn a face-to-face meeting, away from their office. Without distractions, they will remember you better and answer your questions more thoughtfully. Be prepared to offer several options for 'when' and 'where' to meet. Be flexible about meeting them before or after their workday, or at lunch. Don't wait for them to identify where to meet. Locate a nearby McDonalds or Starbucks and offer to buy a coffee for them.
- DO YOUR RESEARCH FIRST – check out the company's website, or recent news stories, your interviewee's LinkedIn profile, and general information about the field. It is a waste of your time and theirs to be asking about things you could have learned ahead of time.

- Decide on the informational interview questions you will use (some examples are below). Choose 7-10 questions, and mark those that are most important to you to get answered, and start with them. Prepare for the chance that your conversation may be cut short, or go beyond the 20-30 minutes (but only at your interviewee's invitation)
- Visualize your interaction under different scenarios. Imagine how your first call or visit to them might go. Be prepared for a brief call. Imagine other ways your communication with them might proceed. Then you won't be surprised or discouraged.

Here are some of the questions that you might ask (also Google "*informational interview questions*" for additional ideas)

1. How long have you held your present position? How did you choose this particular field?
2. What other areas have you been in over the years? If you have changed, what led to the changes?
3. What type of formal training, if any, have you had? Has it been relevant to what you're doing? What type of training is now required for the field?
4. What other experiences have you had that were helpful to you?
5. What do you like best about your present position? What do you not like?
6. Could you briefly describe an average day's activities?
7. What are some challenges or surprises you've encountered in this position?
8. What advice would you have for someone just thinking of entering your field today?
9. What other things beyond your job are you involved with that are a source of satisfaction to you?
10. As you look back on your life, does it seem to make sense that you're doing what you're doing now?
11. How do you see your field/company/position changing and evolving?
12. Given what we've discussed, do you know of anyone else I should speak with? (Build your network, and set the groundwork for additional informational interviews).

At the end of the visit, these are strong concluding statements:

- “I’ll send an email (or a letter) to follow-up.” (Send it in order to say thank you.)
- “I plan to attend the upcoming (\_\_\_\_) conference. If you’re attending, I hope I see you there.”
- “May I send you a LinkedIn invite? What on-line groups or associations should I join?”

After the visit, be sure to follow up in the ways that you stated (an email, LinkedIn invite, etc.) and be sure to thank them for their time. Additionally, it can help you to set up a tracking system for your networking and informational interview contacts. Choose a system that works for you; and periodically follow up with an email or call to your contacts and let them know what you are doing. If they’ve given you another person to contact, this is a great opportunity to follow up with the original person and thank them again, and let them know how the second informational interview went.