

# MAKING CONNECTIONS

## A Step-by-Step Guide to Informational Interviews

### How to Ask for an Informational Interview

We all like to be appreciated for what we do well. When most professionals are asked a question about their career, they are happy to answer, or at least refer you to where you can get the answer. Knowing that someone appreciates their expertise strokes their ego, and gives them a break from their daily grind.

This is why we recommend that students conduct informational interviews. If you ask someone to offer their advice, showing respect for their success, they will likely want to share. Having a specific agenda with pointed questions will get you further in your networking efforts than the vague request of asking your connection out to coffee.

So, how do you set up an informational interview? It can be hard to ask for a favor. Many job seekers procrastinate on setting up informational interviews or networking meetings because they are afraid of being rejected. If you follow these guidelines, you'll be much more likely to get a positive response.

### STEP 1: IDENTIFY PEOPLE TO TALK WITH

Start with a list of people you already know who might be willing to serve as a contact or referral source. Consider friends, relatives, fellow students, faculty, job supervisors, neighbors, and people they know. Ask around! Also, try to recall speakers you have heard, people you have read about, etc. You can always call an organization and ask the name of the person who is in charge of a particular department. Collect business cards wherever you go, even when you're on vacation. Check out professional journals. Attend professional association meetings and talk to everyone you can while you are there. Utilize UIC's online database of alumni career mentors or LinkedIn.com.

### STEP 2: ARRANGE AN "INFORMATIONAL" INTERVIEW

The interview can be arranged by telephone, email, writing a letter and initiating a follow-up phone call, stopping by in person, or having someone who knows the contact make an appointment for you.

#### Consider the mode of communication

People often have different ways they prefer to be contacted. Some people are phone people; others are more likely to respond via email. Judge which mode of communication your contact might prefer, but try another if your request goes unanswered. You might try going through a contact's assistant if she is hard to reach.

#### Use this template

However you make contact, your message should contain the following:

- Give a polite salutation. "Dear Mr. Chuy" or "Hello Dr. Lazarus" are safe bets.
- Tell your contact where you know them from, or if you have a mutual connection.
- Inform them of your objective: to meet, talk via phone, or simply exchange emails.

- Be clear that you want a brief meeting to discuss a specific set of questions, and that you are not inquiring about a job or seeking feedback on your resume.
- Provide a hint of what the questions are about, i.e. you'd like to know more about the inner-workings of XYZ Company, you're interested in joining ABC association and would like to know about her experience, etc.
- Provide two or three options for your meeting so that it is easy for them to check their calendar and schedule the appointment in a return email.

Here's an example you can modify for your own use:

Dear Dr. Gonzalez:

A good friend of mine, Enrique Stefano, M.D., suggested that I contact you. I recently told him that I have always been intrigued by the work that your organization does. I am very impressed with the comprehensive approach you take with patient safety and satisfaction.

As a current student who is considering entering your field, I'd love to talk with you about courses I'm thinking of taking to make me a more desirable candidate. Your insights would be extremely helpful as I plan my future career path. Just to be clear, I'm not looking to ask you to hire me, or to have you look at my resume, but just to learn from your expertise.

Would it be possible to meet with you for 15 minutes to gain further insights into the industry, as well as career path advice you might have? I am available most weekdays before 10 a.m. and after 4 p.m.

Thank you for considering it,

Jorge Martinez

### **STEP 3: PREPARING FOR THE INTERVIEW**

Prior to the interview, you should develop a firm grasp of your interests, values and skills, so that your fit with the work environment can be discussed and assessed. Read all you can about the organization prior to conducting the interview.

### **STEP 4: CONDUCTING THE INTERVIEW**

Dress neatly, be on time and conduct yourself in a professional manner. Refer to your list of prepared questions, but allow for some spontaneity as well. At the end, ask your contact for names of others that might be helpful to you.

### **STEP 5: FOLLOW-UP**

Send a thank you note immediately following the interview. Be sure to record helpful information from your interview for further reference. This might include name, address and phone number of the person interviewed, the date of the interview, information gathered and suggested names. Organize you information: Keep all the information you gather together. Stay on their radar though monthly emails.

## SAMPLE QUESTIONS

1. Tell me about your career path to date.
2. How did you get involved in this type of work?
3. In the position you know hold, what do you do on a typical day?
4. What are the most interesting aspects of your job?
5. What part of your work do you consider dull and repetitious?
6. What were the jobs that you had that led up to this one?
7. How long does it usually take to move from one step to the next in this career?
8. What is the top job you can have in this career?
9. Are there other areas of this field to which people in it may be transferred? What are they?
10. What are the basic prerequisites for jobs in the field?
11. Are there are specific courses a student might take that would be beneficial in this field?
12. What entry-level jobs qualify a person for this field?
13. What types of training do companies give to persons entering this field?
14. What are the salary ranges for various levels in this field?
15. What aspects of a career in this field do you consider particularly positive? Negative?
16. What special advice would you give to a young person entering this field?
17. Do you view this field as a growing one?
18. How do you see the jobs in the field changing over the next ten years?
19. What is the best way to obtain a position, which will start me on a career in this field?
20. Do you know of any summer jobs or internship opportunities?
21. Who else in this field do you know that you could refer me to?