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1. What is informational interviewing?

Informational interviewing is the process of having conversations with individuals (generally referred to here as career advisers) about their work as a method of career exploration and network building. It encompasses a range of interactions, from a face-to-face conversation at the career adviser's workplace to an in-depth telephone conversation or correspondence, to a brief exchange about a specific issue. Informational interviewing is NOT job seeking or job interviewing.

Career conversations provide opportunities to:

- *Gather career-related information and advice about an organization, job, and related professional concerns that are not available from written sources, and to*
- *Create contacts and build relationships with people in your career field.*

The personal and evaluative information you gain from talking to people on the job will enhance the factual knowledge available from other sources. With each informational interview, your understanding of the many ways that individuals develop their careers will increase.

By having talked with professionals in a career, you will be better informed and have the chance to learn the vocabulary of that field—knowledge that will help you to present yourself more effectively in job interviews. (A primary complaint of employment interviewers is that job candidates are not well informed about their field of interest.)

Optimal Outcomes...

1. You learn enough about the field to know that it is or is not for you.
2. You get *new ideas* for possible careers and/or jobs in this or a related field, or even in a different field.
3. If you visit your contact's workplace, you *gain* a *firsthand* impression of a specific work environment.
4. If you have already decided on a career field, you get *practical ideas* and *insider advice* about how to enter that field, i.e., job-hunting strategies, ways to research job openings, informed ideas about where the best jobs might be.
5. You get the *names* of other people in your field of interest who can give you more information.
6. You develop and maintain *friendly relationships* with *your contacts* over time and they may alert you to *future job opportunities*.

Explore Possibilities...

"You really get to know what you want to do, and people in an informational interview will really tell you the truth about what their job is like."

- Harvard student

11. Who are career advisers?

People agree to be interviewed for a variety of reasons: some truly enjoy getting to know other people who share their interests; some may make themselves available as a courtesy to a mutual contact or affiliation. Many people, if asked, enjoy sharing what they find rewarding, satisfying, and frustrating about their work, as well as more specific information about their profession and employer.

Make a List...

People you already know can help you in your career exploration!

Friends

Roommates

Family members

Classmates

Teachers

Advisers

Parents' friends

Current/past employers

To help you get started, OCS has listings of many alumni career advisers who have volunteered to meet with Harvard students and alumni. This is an excellent way to become familiar with the process of conversing with professionals in your field of interest. The file of alumni career advisers available at OCS, the "Professional Connection," is a growing on-line database maintained by the Harvard Alumni Association. You can access this database for free at OCS.

[http://www.ocs.fas.harvard.edu/
services/profconnection.htm](http://www.ocs.fas.harvard.edu/services/profconnection.htm)

III. Preparing for a career conversation?

Do your research.

Find out as much as possible about the individuals you plan to contact and their organizations and career fields. Read career literature, trade publications, and company information, and conduct research using the Internet.

Think carefully about what you hope to learn and the kinds of questions that will elicit that information.

Most people prefer to answer questions that require them to reflect on their work. Open-ended, evaluative questions are often an effective way to start the conversation. The order and phrasing of your questions will depend on your own style and the flow of the conversation.

Write down a list of possible questions or topics before you begin to contact advisers.

- *What the job/work is like:* the challenges, frustrations, rewards encountered; kinds of decisions required, problems solved, how time is spent, etc.
- *Desirable skills, education, and experience:* required training or preparation
- *Career paths and advancement*
- *Lifestyle implications of the work:* salary/benefits, family policy, travel, pressure, flexibility, security, etc.
- *Work environment:* physical setting, people (colleagues and clients), organizational structure and culture
- *Needs:* the greatest needs of the position/department/organization/industry
- *Current issues in the industry*
- *Ways to get more information:* journals, professional organizations, other contacts, possible internship opportunities

Start with your least intimidating contacts first.

IV. A Few Interviewing Guidelines

DO . . .

Be clear and direct about the goal of your interview (information, *not* jobs) and the time commitment (suggest 30-40 minutes) when writing or calling to request the interview. Always cite your referral/source when introducing yourself by phone or letter. Try to meet with them at their workplace at their convenience, but be prepared to settle graciously for a phone interview, even on the spot if necessary (...so have your list of questions ready).

Act professionally, as you would for any interview. Call to confirm a day or so ahead, dress appropriately, and arrive a little early so that you can experience the work environment and relax before your appointment.

Listen attentively and gear your questions to the flow of conversation, without losing track of the time and your specific goals.

Jot down any special points, clarify any terms you don't know or anything you don't understand, and keep track of any referrals or suggestions. Finish writing down what you have learned *immediately* after the interview.

Ask for additional referrals from your contact. Expand your network of contacts.

Stay within your time limit, unless the career adviser indicates otherwise. Be sensitive to nonverbal clues that it is time to end the interview.

Write a thank you note!! The adviser should be thanked for his or her time and thought, even if he or she tried to discourage you or does not seem to be in a position to help you in the future. (A handwritten note is fine, but treat it as a *professional* correspondence.)

Even after the thank-you note, *keep your contacts informed* of your career development progress. Not only do they really appreciate hearing about you, but you maintain your relationships with them. Ask permission to keep in periodic contact.

DON'T . . .

Ask them for a job—even indirectly.

Forget to send a thank-you note, even for a phone appointment.

Speak with only one or two people and assume their views are representative of the field.

V. Matters of Judgment

1. *Whether to write or call first.* Call first if they have indicated that they would like to be contacted by phone or to confirm information you need to write to them (such as address, title, or correct spelling of name). Write first if you think the contact would appreciate having a brief introduction by mail and a sense of what you are exploring or if you are not confident about presenting yourself over the phone. Remember, even when writing, you must follow up with a call. Experiment to see what works best for you.
2. *How and when to present a resume.* You should always bring copies of your resume to an appointment with an adviser. Make sure that you treat it as an efficient way to give your contact a sense of your background or as something that you seek advice on, rather than as a ploy to get a job. It is best to present your resume near the end of the meeting.
3. *To pay or not to pay* (for the lunch, drink, etc.). A good rule of thumb is “He who invites, offers to pay.” So be prepared to offer to pay, or to pay for your own meal.
4. *Self-presentation and your own expectations.* Remember, first of all, to be yourself, but also be sensitive to the impression you make (career advisers have noted in the past the extremes of arrogance and self-deprecation). Make sure that your expectations are realistic: know what you hope to learn about their career field, and don’t expect them to offer you a job or to provide you with general career counseling. (If you’re feeling vague and unfocused, see a counselor at OCS.)
5. *Going back to ask for job-hunting help.* If you feel you have established rapport with someone, it is reasonable to re-contact the person *later* when you have narrowed your focus and begun a job search. Write or call the adviser and remind him or her of your previous contact, explain your current situation and goals, and ask if he or she would mind passing along your resume or letting you know of job leads.

VI. A Final Note

Informational interviewing requires time, energy, and a positive and appreciative attitude. The investment repays itself many times over by generating invaluable information, skills, and contacts in a process you can use throughout your life. In the future be willing to be a career adviser for others who may be conducting informational interviews.

Further Information

The Office of Career Services offers research materials, mock interviews, resume writing and interview workshops, and individual career counseling. More information about OCS can be found online at:

<http://www.ocs.fas.harvard.edu>

and at the office:

Office of Career Services
Harvard University
54 Dunster Street
Cambridge, MA 02138
(617) 495-2595

Notes:

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