

Informational Interviews

Point of the Assignment: To recognize the value of using informational interviews for the purpose of gathering information.

There are many different ways of collecting information:

Reading: Newspapers, books, magazines, journals, company literature.

Internet: Company websites, professional associations, media, educational information, online reference books.

Interviews: informational, employment, and investigational interviews.

Informational interviews are like job interviews – they are an opportunity ask questions and to learn more about the person you are interviewing. The difference is that when you are conducting an informational interview, you are the one who is in control – you are directing the conversation.

If this is a career exploration interview, then the purpose of this interview is to get some real-world information from someone who has in-depth knowledge of the career you are considering.

Understand that in general, most people are quite happy to talk to individuals who are considering working in their field. And for them, answering these questions can sometimes be a regular part of their job. Some people will be flattered that you want to want to learn about their jobs. Others are very eager to share with people lessons they had to learn the hard way. So don't be afraid to do this assignment. You should find your interviewee to be very friendly and helpful.

1. **Identify your potential interviewee:** *(There are several ways to find someone to interview.)*
 - a. Use your network (family, friends, teachers, graduates of the educational programs, work, supervisors, social networking contacts, etc.) for possible resources.
 - b. Research an organization that is in the business of what you want to know about. Find someone who is in a position that is similar to what you are looking for. Use the Internet to look at the organization's website. It will likely have a staff directory, which may include job titles.
 - c. Phone and ask, "Can you please tell me who is responsible for...?"
 - d. **Remember to always treat anyone you encounter at the organization with dignity, respect, and good manners.** – That person could very well have the power to shut you out of talking to the person you want to talk to. – In other words don't ever assume "Well, 'you're *just* a secretary,' therefore I don't have to be nice to you because you don't have anything of value to offer me." – That "just a secretary" may very well be the person who will put you through to the person to whom you wish to speak and/or schedule your appointment. In addition, staff members often know more about the day-to-day operations of an organization than anyone else. – In themselves, they can be a valuable source of information. You could also find that when you assume you are speaking to "just a secretary" in fact you are speaking to the actual person you actually wanted to contact.

2. Prepare for your interview

- a. Do background research. – Learn all you can about the company and the person:
- b. Look at the organization’s website and see what you can learn about the company and the individual. **At a minimum, be sure you know what the company does, and what the individual does.**
 - i. When looking at their website, look for their mission statement (their purpose), values statement (their guiding principles), and vision statement (the future they are trying to make for themselves). Take the time to try to understand what these statements are saying. If you are investigating a religious organization, also read their statement of faith (their spiritual beliefs).
- c. If you were referred to this person by someone else, ask them to tell you what they know about the individual. Use the information you receive to encourage your creativity. Write down some additional questions you want to know. – Ask open-ended questions (can’t be answered with Yes or No).
- d. Call or email to set an appointment. Introduce yourself by saying something like, “My name is _____ and I am a student at _____ College. I have been assigned the task of interviewing someone who works in the type of careers I am considering pursuing. Would you have 20 – 30 minutes to spare to talk to me about your career? Some people will set their own appointments whereas others have staff members who do that for them. Have a general idea in mind of what will work for you; **but be sure to meet them at their convenience more than at your own.** – Remember they are doing you a favor by meeting with you.

3. Generate your interview questions.

- a. Never go into such an interview unprepared. Respect that person’s time by knowing what you want to get out of the interview.
- b. Have a general idea of what you want to find out.
 - i. Remember to ask open-ended questions. You want to encourage them to talk as much as you can. – The more they talk, the more you will learn.
 - ii. Following are some possible questions to ask. However there won’t be time to get answers to all these questions, so prioritize which ones are most important.
- c. **Ask about the business/industry:**
 - i. What trends have you seen occur since you have been in this business?
 - ii. What kind of trends do you anticipate for this business in the next few years?
 - iii. How are advances in technology affecting the industry?
 - iv. How is your business/industry affected during economic downturns?
 1. Is this industry generally very quick or slow to be impacted by the economy?
 2. In general what kind of things are likely to cause this industry to suffer economic hardship?
 - v. What do you consider to be the outlook for future employment in this business/field?
 - vi. What challenges is your organization is facing right now?
 - vii. Do people tend to switch from job to job within the industry or stay at one company?

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- viii. What are some tips you can give me for breaking into the industry?
- ix. Are most hires through networking or should I go through the company websites?
- d. **Ask about the individual's background:**
 - i. What is your typical day like?
 - ii. What do you like the most about your job?
 - iii. What do you like the least?
 - iv. How did you get into this position/field/line of work?
 - v. Can you tell me about some decisions you have made that have turned out to be good for your career?
 - vi. Can you tell me about some decisions you have made that, in looking back, you would have done differently?
- e. **Ask how you can best prepare yourself for such a career:**
 - i. Tell them what you currently have in mind as a career goal. Then, ask:
 - ii. How much education and experience do you think I will need for most positions in this field/business/position?
 - iii. How will advances in technology impact how I should prepare for this career?
 - iv. What are some skills, talents, abilities, and experiences that will be most beneficial to prepare me for this field/business/position?
 - v. Do you know of any professional organizations where I can get more information?
 - vi. What are some tips you can give me for breaking into the industry?
 - vii. Do you have any advice for a college student pursuing this line of work?
 - viii. Do you know of someone else who may be good for me to contact? (*The purpose of this question is to generate additional contacts for further informational interviews – and to build your network of professional contacts.*)
- f. Additional Suggestions:
 - i. You may add to or change this list based on your own needs.
 - ii. Do not ask a question that the person has already answered.

4. Go to your interview

- a. Dress professional: You will be going to their place of work. Dress as if you actually work there. Remember first impressions are important.
- b. Address the person how they introduce themselves. (Dr. Jones, Professor Jones, Mr. Jones, James, Jim, Jimmy, etc. If they introduce themselves as “Jim Jones,” then play it safe by addressing him as Mr. Jones until he tells you otherwise.) ***Don't ever assume that a James will want to be called Jim – that is very offensive and insensitive.***
- c. Be prepared to take a tour. Often times, the person (or an associate will show you around.) If they don't automatically give you a tour, but later offer to show you around – accept the offer.
- d. If they give you any literature, promotional information or promotional products, gracefully accept it and thank them. **Be sure to get his/her business card** (you will need it for addressing the thank you note).

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- e. Be sure they give you an overview about the organization. Don't be surprised if they start off by telling you something about the business. – If so, allow them to volunteer whatever information they choose to give.
- f. They will likely take you to their workstation or a conference room to talk with you. Wait for them to indicate to you they are ready to answer your questions.
- g. Take Notes: Take in your list of questions, and a note pad so that you can take notes from the conversation.
- h. Be sensitive to the person needing to end the visit. They are often very busy, and willing to meet with you – *but only for a limited amount of time*. If you sense that they are trying to draw the meeting to a close, then allow them to do so. Be sure to thank them for their time.
- i. Send a thank you note, letter, or an email. Remember, they took time out of their busy day to meet with you. Be sure so show them the same courtesy. **Do this within 48 hours.**
 - i. Follow this general format when generating a thank-you correspondence:
Dear _____:
“Thank you for taking the time out of your busy day to answer my questions about your career on _____(date). I found the information you provided to be very helpful and informative as I continue to pursue my educational and career goals.” (*Specify if you can*).
I also wanted to take the time to let you know..... (*Use this opportunity to compliment something that you liked about the person, job or company*).
Close by restating something significant that came out of the conversation. “Thank you again for meeting with me, and I will be sure to follow up on your suggestion that I contact”

Informational Interview Reflection

Person Interviewed _____ Person's Title _____

Organization Name _____

Date of Interview _____ Nature of business _____

(*food industry, medical, education, law, police., etc*)

What type of organization is this? For profit or non-profit business, government, education, or other?

What does the organization do?

What does the individual do within the organization?

List what you learned about the organization/industry

Summarize (*don't give a word-for-word account*) **what kind of questions you asked**

Summarize (*don't give a word-for-word account*) **what this person said**

List what you learned from this exercise about the person's position

List what you learned about how to prepare for such a career from this exercise

What did you think of the person's working environment? (*too big/small, fast/slow-paced*)

What is your overall reaction to the experience?

How does this experience make you feel about going to work for such in such a field?

Test your understanding:

What is the main point of this assignment?

Why were you expected to do this exercise?

What type of person would need to do this exercise?

How well do you fit the profile of the person for whom this assignment was created?

Reflection: (*Write down your response after completing this assignment.*)
