



Information Interview

Information interviews should be part of your overall networking and job-hunting strategy. It involves interviewing people and contacts that are currently in a job, career field or organisation that interests you. It can help you make decisions about your future career by gaining focussed information and understanding about particular occupations or career fields. An information interview is not the same as a job interview.

If it's not a job interview why do it?

When considering career paths many students rely upon ideals gleaned from friends, family, TV, books etc, but these can be inaccurate and misleading. In order to make an informed career decision, it makes sense to ask the experts who are actually in the occupation or field that you are interested in. Because of its exploratory nature, the information interview can be particularly enlightening for university graduates and career changers.

What are the likely benefits?

Information Interviews can provide an avenue for you to:

- Begin building a network of contacts in your field of interest and provide referrals to additional contacts
- Obtain information about how to "break in" and "succeed" in a chosen field
- Learn about trends, growth potential or areas of expansion in the field
- Learn about important issues in your field
- Gain information about the hidden job market (unadvertised positions)
- Uncover areas and career paths not previously considered
- Highlight skills gaps and areas for improvement
- Identify your professional strengths
- Help you to "mentally sample" an occupation or company and test for personal "fit"
- Highlight negative factors that may need consideration
- Help you to realistically narrow your career options
- Enhance confidence because you are in control of the questions being asked
- Impress a person who may be able to recommend you for a job
- Make yourself a more impressive job candidate

How do I prepare for an information interview?

Identify industries and occupations to target

Prior to the interview you will need to obtain as much information about the industry or occupation as you can. For best results use the information interview to provide in depth information that is not readily accessible in the marketplace.

You can never have too many sources of information about the occupations that interest you. Here are some starting points for your investigation:

- Industry websites
- Industry Brochures
- Web resources such as Graduate Careers, My Future, Seek Campus, Degree to Career Converter
- Past employment advertisements containing job profiles and selection criteria
- Your University Careers Service: Useful Links, Graduate Destinations Survey
- Careers Advisory days and Careers Fairs

- Professional Organisations
- Occupational Handbooks (general occupational information from USA)
- Online job boards
- Newspapers and business publications or directories (eg. BRW Top 500 Companies)
- Yellow pages
- Australian Stock Exchange information

Identify people you wish to interview

You are only limited by your imagination. Try contacting anyone who may be able to help you in your information gathering experience. Remember you are trying to locate potential contacts to interview.

Use your network start with a list of:

- Your fellow students
- Co-workers
- Neighbours
- Friends
- Friend's parents who may work in business or industry
- Lecturers
- Professional organisations
- Your alumni association
- Attend Professional meetings
- Follow up on casual business invitations that you may have received

In short, speak to anyone who may have a contact or the name of someone in the field that you may approach for an information interview.

Once you have obtained a name or two, don't forget the social niceties. Send a thank-you note to your network buddy or to the person who gave you the contact.

Now you will need to learn as much about the contact person, their position and the company structure as you can. Company reports and websites are a good place to obtain this information. You may also wish to write to the company or phone them for information. The more prepared and confident you are, the more beneficial the interview is likely to be.

Know yourself

It's a good idea to take the time to assess your interests, work related beliefs, motivators, de-motivators, and job preferences before you embark on an information interview. This may help you to narrow down the companies or positions you wish to target.

Prepare yourself

Although an information interview is not a job interview, you still need to present yourself as if it were. Research suggests that approximately 70 percent of jobs are in the hidden job market, therefore dress to make a good impression for the employer. It is possible that you will uncover employment opportunities during the interview that will need to be followed up after the interview is over.

Here is a short checklist to help you prepare yourself:

- Dress well – Business attire is appropriate: decide what you are wearing ahead of the interview day.
- Prepare your questions – have them presented in a clean professional folder.
- Practice your questions on a friend or family member before the big day.
- Remember to be polite and professional when seeking information.
- Be prepared to take notes – (ask permission)- have a neat, clean notepad and pen prepared as you may need to take down the names and contact numbers of referrals.
- Prepare a copy of your latest resume – tailored to the company and position as you understand it but distribute

only upon request.

- Reconfirm your appointment the day before.
- Know your way to the office or building.
- Plan to arrive 10-15 minutes early.
- Plan to stick to the agreed time limit for the interview.
- Be confident and enthusiastic, after-all you are the interviewer.

How do I set up an information interview?

You will need to contact the person you wish to interview by phone or letter to schedule an interview. Remember that they are generally busy people; therefore you will need to be flexible with your time.

When requesting an Information Interview by phone, ask to speak directly with the person of interest (from your research, you should know the name of the person you wish to see and the title of his/her position).

- If they are too busy to speak to you initially, enquire about the most convenient time for you to call back (don't expect them to call you).
- When you get through to your contact person, introduce yourself, state where you are from (eg; a student at UNSW), explain that you are conducting personal research in their career field and would like to meet with them for 20-30 minutes to find out more about that field / occupation.
- Explain that you are trying to obtain first-hand information to aid in your career exploration and decision-making.
- Ask for a time that would be convenient for them, and be prepared to fit in with their schedule.
- Sometimes your contact person will ask you to conduct the interview then and there. It is important that you have your questions ready in this event, because this may be the only chance you will have to obtain the information that you are seeking.
- If your contact is unable to grant you the time, ask whether they would suggest another contact for you. Take the names and numbers down and always be polite and professional. Remember to ask your contact if you can use their name.
- When contacting the referral, explain that the first contact gave you his/her name and suggested that you call them to request information.
- Be strategic in your choice of prospective interviewees. You may wish to include some people who have the power to hire you should a position become available.

When requesting an Information Interview by letter or e-mail your request is less immediate than a phone request and possibly less effective as it does not require a response. You may need to follow-up with a polite phone call.

- Treat your written request as you would a cover letter- professional and impressive.
- Make it short, succinct and relevant (1 page maximum).
- Explain who you are, what your qualifications are and why you are writing to this person.
- Request a 20-30 minute appointment to enable you to interview the person and gather information.
- State your flexibility and ability to fit in with their schedule.
- Close with a thank you, and a pro-active statement that you will contact them the week beginning date (----) to set up a mutually convenient time.
- Follow-up on your commitment to set the time in the nominated week.

How do I conduct an Information Interview?

This is where your preparation pays off. Remember that you are in this position to collect information about a possible career, and to become a more competitive job candidate.

- Remain calm and stay focussed – you only have 20-30 minutes.
- Stick to your time limit! This will be viewed favourably.

During the interview

- At the beginning, introduce yourself and thank the contact for making his/her time available.
- Restate your purpose and be prepared to initiate conversation.
- Make natural eye-contact throughout the interview
- Be confident and speak clearly
- Be prepared to share a little information about yourself but do not dominate the conversation.
- Ask probing open-ended questions to draw out information (see sample questions below). Do not ask a lot of questions that can be answered with a simple yes/no.
- You will need to practice good listening skills in order to make the best of the information that you are given. If possible, practice on someone else before the real interview.
- Be receptive and responsive: show that the information is important to you.
- Seek clarification if something is not clear to you but do this carefully and politely.
- Although this may seem obvious: do not counter, argue or contradict. You can evaluate the information later.
- Ask for other referrals or contacts in the field or in other organisations. This is a valuable step toward building your network of professional contacts.
- Always be professional although this is not a job interview, there is always the possibility that it may lead to one.
- If you uncover a job opportunity, state your intention to follow up on that when the interview is over
- Close the interview well. Reiterate your appreciation and thank your contact for their time.
- If asked to let your contact know how you are doing- follow up on that. Do not drop off your contact's "radar screen".

What next?

- It is good practice to send a thank you letter or e-mail a few days after your interview.
- Evaluate the information you received. Does it relate to your plans?
- Evaluate your style of interviewing- what worked well and what needs amendment?
- Keep your contact person posted on your progress from time to time. They have invested time in you and will usually want to know how you are succeeding.

What do I ask at an Information Interview?

Given the purpose of information interviews and that they are generally less intense than formal job interviews, questions can be asked that may not seem strategic in an employment interview. You can explore the typical daily routines of the profession or field, ask questions about benefits, salary, the provision of training opportunities, pitfalls and skills gaps that may need addressing.

You will usually find your contact a helpful resource if you have made the purpose of your interview clear, in advance. For your own purposes, it is a good idea to group your questions under headings. Some heading suggestions are provided but you should customise the interview to suit your individual purposes. Grouping suggestions include:

- Position related
- Education and training
- Organisation related
- Occupational outlook
- Suggestions / referrals

Sample questions

Position related questions

- What is your background?
- What are the various jobs in this field / organisation?
- How did you become interested in this position?
- How did your background help you get started in this position / field?
- What are the duties and responsibilities of your job?

- How would you describe your job responsibilities on a typical day?
- What kinds of problems do you typically face?
- What is the pace of your workflow?
- What type of hours do you typically keep?
- Are you ever required to work additional hours, nights, weekends etc.?
- What type of personal characteristics, skills and talents are essential for this position?
- How did you learn these skills?
- What else does it take to be successful in this career?
- What is the typical work progression in your field?
- How does the economy effect job availability in this field?
- If you were made redundant, what type of other work do you feel competent to pursue?
- What are typical entry-level opportunities in this field?
- What type of entry-level position would you recommend for someone at my stage of life and with my background?
- What type of work experience / volunteer work would you recommend for someone wishing to gain entry into this field?
- What is the entry-level salary range in this field/ organisation?
- What salary range could be expected at senior levels of this occupation?
- What are the major highlights of this job?
- What advice would you give to someone wishing to enter this field/ occupation?
- What cautionary notes would you give to someone in my position?
- What are the major frustrations of this job?
- What are the biggest issues facing this field / organisation?
- Given my educational and work background, how would you rate my chances of obtaining an entry-level position in this field?
- Are there any additional skills that would enhance my chances of breaking into this field?

Education and training

- What are the educational requirements for this position? (What degrees are seen as appropriate qualifications?)
- Are there any industry based training programs that you would recommend?
- Is ongoing training a pre-requisite for advancement in your field?
- What specific training / advancement programs are typically required by your company?
- How does your organisation provide for employee's professional development?
- Does your company provide study leave for courses other than those they run?

Organisation related questions

- What is the organisational structure of this company?
- Who do you supervise and to whom do you report?
- What is the management style of this company?
- Are employees included in any decision processes?
- What types of clients do you service?
- Who is your major competitor?
- How does this organisation differentiate itself from its competitors?
- How is this organisation similar to its competitors?
- What can you tell me about the corporate culture of this organisation?
- How flexible is the organisation in terms of dress, work hours, vacation schedule, family commitments, etc.?
- How does your organisation utilise communication technology (eg. internet, intranet, etc..)?
- Is tele-working a feasible possibility in this organisation?
- In your opinion what is the best way to get started in this field?
- If you were in my position, how would you approach an organisation like this for employment?
- Do you offer a formal graduate program and if so, how does that operate?
- Are there work opportunities for graduates other than those offered in the formal graduate programs?

Occupational outlook

- Is there a demand for people in this field?
- How do you see jobs in this field changing over time?
- What opportunities for advancement are there for people in this field?
- How do you keep yourself marketable?
- Do your colleagues usually move organisations to secure advancement?
- What do you wish you had known about this field before you entered it?
- Given the opportunity again, would you choose the same career path?
- If not, what would you do differently and why?
- What is the outlook for women in this occupation/ organisation?
- How does this career affect your work/life balance?
- How can I learn more about this field and keep up with current issues?

Suggestions / referrals

- Given the information that you have about my background, what other occupations would you suggest I investigate before making my final decision?
- Can you suggest other people that I might contact for further information about this or related occupations?
- May I use your name?

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