Information Interviews

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Definition

The best way of finding information about a particular business, field or occupation is to talk to somebody who is working in the industry. By conducting information interviews you gain valuable knowledge on careers, establish contacts in your fields of interest and get the inside scoop on the career or organization that you have a particular interest in.

As defined, an information interview is a research interview, initiated by you, with an employer or someone in an occupational field that you are interested in.

Purpose

Information interviews are one of the most important tools you will use in your job search. Use them to learn more about the type of job you may be interested in (and suited for), and to obtain advice about what types of companies you should target for job leads.

Your information interview should be with an individual who is directly involved in the career area you are interested in. Often human resource departments rarely know the answers to your specific occupational related questions, so the most effective contact would be the head of the department that you are interested in working for.

Remember: the purpose of information interviewing is to increase your knowledge by building up your network; it is NOT to ask for a job the minute after you walk in the door! If you put someone on the spot by asking them about a job during your information interview, you will lose their goodwill and influence. Eventually you will talk about your career path which may naturally lead to a conversation about careers with that contact's company (if that company is of interest to you).

The Interview

How long should your information interview take? Approximately 15-20 minutes is about right. The person you are interviewing is giving up their valuable work time to help you, so show that you respect their time and limit yourself to five to eight questions. Prioritize your questions for the interview so you can get all the information you need in the first ten minutes; you never know when the person with whom you are talking will be interrupted and your interview will come to an end. Some suggest that once you've organized the meeting, email the questions you'd like to cover so that the employer's time is used more efficiently during the meeting. If you follow this approach, send it the day before; if you send it too early, they may reply to all your questions via email and then you will lose the opportunity to meet face-to-face.
Identify Your Targets

Take some time to identify who it is that you are going to target. Below are some suggestions on how to get started.

Occupation

- Investigate the occupations or jobs that interest you. Read as much as you can about the career field, then identify what questions you need to have answered. Check out the “Careers in Business” career management guide, available online, for information and resources on various business-related careers and occupations.

Company

- You've identified that you are interested in brand management, or real estate appraisal, or transportation analysis. Who are some of the companies that hire for these positions? Find out as much as you can about these companies from their websites and from other sources. Refer to the “Job Search Strategies” career management guide for assistance.

Individuals

- Start close to home to identify individuals who work in the career areas or companies that interest you; ask your family, friends, professors, or co-workers. Identify the key managers or executives through your company research. Check with the Career Centre or Alumni Services.

The more you know about the career field, company and individuals, the easier it will be to create your list of questions. You will also display a more confident presence in your approach and during your meetings.

Requesting an Information Interview

By Telephone

Many people are willing to spend 15-20 minutes with a student looking for advice and information on which to base their career decisions, especially if you are respectful of their time and are well-prepared in your approach. The following is a sample script:

Remember, information interviews are for RESEARCH only – do not ask for a job while on an information interview.
Telephone Script Example

Student:

“Hello Mr. Smith, my name is Sue Brown. I am taking my BBA at SFU in the Faculty of Business Administration and focusing in the area of Marketing. At the present time, I am exploring various careers within the marketing industry to grow my knowledge so that I can make an informed career choice upon graduation. As your firm is a leader in market research, I would greatly appreciate meeting with you to discuss career trends within the industry. Would you have a few minutes to meet with me this week or next?

If the contact states:

"Our company's not hiring."

Student reply:

“Well actually, I wasn’t looking for a job interview. I was hoping more for an information interview to help me decide about my career path. I am very interested in the marketing field and advice from someone like you about how to get started would be invaluable.”

If they say they don’t have time, student replies:

"I understand. Might you know of someone else I could contact that might be able to help me?"

Be Prepared for the Telephone Information Interview

Sometimes companies refuse to meet with you face-to-face, but offer to answer your question on the spot while on the phone. Before making the call, have your list of questions ready and be sure you have enough time to hold an interview. Remember that you can also ask if the person is willing to answer your questions via e-mail. In this case, limit your correspondence to eight questions or less.

By Email / Letter

An introductory letter/email is a great way to break the ice, particularly if you are a little shy. The components of this letter should include:

- A brief introduction of who you are and why you are writing
- A short statement about why you are interested in this field or this company
- Why you would like to speak with this person. Be honest – tell them you are seeking advice or information
- Finish with a short paragraph about when you will contact them to arrange a time to meet

Make sure you proofread carefully and save a copy for your files. Always follow-up when you say you are going to. Do not expect your contact to call you.

Remember, information interviews are for RESEARCH only – do not ask for a job while on an information interview.
Sample Email

**From:** Michael Mitchell [mmitch@email.com]
**Sent:** May – 15 – 09  9:00 AM
**To:** Brian Wong [bwong@email.com]
**Subject:** Meeting Request

Dear Mr. Wong:

I am a third year BCom student at Simon Fraser, majoring in Finance. One area that has been of interest to me is Insurance, and ING has an outstanding reputation as a leading innovator in this field.

My particular interest lies in the risk management area and I would like to find out more about the work, trends and opportunities in this field as I move toward launching my career upon graduation. I would like to research and gather as much information as I can so that I can make an informed career choice upon graduation. Any insight and experience you can share would be greatly appreciated.

I will contact your office the week of October 25th to check on your availability for a 20 minute information interview at a time convenient to you.

Yours sincerely,

Michael Mitchell

Michael Mitchell
BCom Candidate, Class of 20XX
Simon Fraser University

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Before the Interview

- Conduct your company research!
- Create your list of questions. Ask your contact if they would like to receive them ahead of time.
- Confirm your appointment time the day before. Ask for directions if necessary.
- Take your list of questions, note pad, pen and business cards (if you have them). You may also want to take your resume, but only give it out if requested or if asking for feedback on its competitiveness in the industry.
- Dress professionally!
During the Interview

- Stay focused. Stick with your list of questions but also allow for spontaneous discussion.
- Take notes and pay careful attention to what is being said. Ask questions if something is not clear.
- Show interest and enthusiasm.
- Share some of your background, but don’t dominate the conversation. This time is about gathering information about the job, industry or occupation.
- Ask for referrals. Your contact may have suggestions of other people to speak with in other organizations or even in other industries.

  “Thank you so much for your time and all the information that you provided; it has been very helpful. Is there anyone else that you know that I may be able to speak to?”

- Don’t overstay your welcome! Finish the interview within the agreed time frame. If your contact wants to continue the discussion, it should be his/her choice.

After the Interview

- ALWAYS send a short thank you note or email within 24-48 hours of your meeting. Thank the person for their time and willingness to help you with your career exploration.
- ALWAYS follow up on referrals from your contact.
- Keep in touch with your contact. Update them on your progress every month or so.
- If you learned of projects or areas where you saw potential for you to help through an internship or contract position, follow up by submitting a proposal (see the “Effective Job Search Letters/Correspondence” career management guide).

  Dear Mr. Blake,

  Thank you again for the time that you spent with me a few days ago. Since then I have thought a bit more about some of the challenges you mentioned that your company is facing. I believe there may be some areas where I can help. I have put together a proposal on how I can help and how the project could progress as an internship. Please have a look. I will follow up with you next week for some feedback.”
Once submitted, follow up in a week or two with a phone call.

Hello Mr. Blake. I am just following up with you to see what your thoughts were around my proposal and to see if there is any possibility of proceeding with my ideas or some form of it.”

Thank everyone who assists you

Within 24 hours of the interview write a short thank-you note and get it in the mail that same evening. Alternatively, you can write a short e-mail and thank the person for their time and willingness to help you with your career exploration.

Sample Questions

1. What are the typical duties of a person in this type of position?

2. How do most people get into this kind of work? How did you get started?

3. What are the ideal qualifications for someone in this field?

4. What competencies, knowledge, skills, or experience are necessary for this work?

5. What type of training or experience would be helpful to a person entering your field now?

6. Are there any specific courses a student might take that would be particularly beneficial in this career area?

7. Is there more training or experience I should gain? If yes, what and where?

8. Given my skills and background, is it realistic to consider moving into this career area?

9. What is the outlook in this industry for economic growth and employment opportunities?

10. What do you view as the major issues, concerns or changes in the industry over the next five years?

11. If you were in my situation, where would you look for a career?

12. Can you give me some idea as to the career paths available within this industry?

13. What would be the time frame, opportunities for advancement, financial range?

14. Where are the windows of opportunity within the profession?
15. What do you know about similar types of jobs or related fields?

16. What advice would you give someone who wants to get into this field?

17. What are some of the problems you encounter in trying to accomplish your goals?

18. Which professional journals and organizations should I know about in this field?

19. To further explore this career area is there anyone else you would recommend speaking to?

Student Testimonials

- Tell everyone you know you are looking for a job. Spreading the word is important because you never know who they may know. You should explain clearly your skills and what you are looking for to give other people a chance to make connections for you.

- No one owes you a job; you have to create your own opportunities. Initiate conversations in order to help cultivate those opportunities.

- Research the company and the person you are going to meet with beforehand to better prepare for the meeting.

- Be sensitive to other people’s time, remember to be polite and most importantly, one never gets a second chance to make a first impression.

- If you’re an international student, you will have to make more of an effort compared to other students to achieve your goals.

- Know who the decision-maker; try to contact he/she directly, either by phone or email. It may sound intimidating to contact senior managers directly, but the fact is, it’s often easier to deal with a decision maker than with lower level managers.

- Treat the person to coffee or whatever drink he/she prefers.

- The informational interview is usually 20 minutes. Check the time and let him/her know when time is up. Extend the conversation only if the person you meet offers.

- “I have found that the location can affect the results or outcomes of a meeting. From my informational interview experience, I prefer coffee shops. People are usually more relaxed and friendly outside their office. It is much easier to conduct a conversation without being interrupted by emails and the telephone. I always make sure I arrive 10 minutes before the appointment time so I have time to calm down. Punctuality is key to illustrating professionalism.”