



# INFORMATIONAL INTERVIEWING GUIDE

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## ***INFORMATIONAL INTERVIEWS - STRATEGIC NETWORKING FOR SUCCESS***

Interviews are the most crucial aspect of job search success. As a job seeker, an interview is your biggest opportunity to interact with hiring managers or recruiters face-to-face and sell them on why you're the right candidate to hire. Though most people think of an interview as a discussion between an individual and an employer about a job to which the individual has already applied, there's another type of interview that may be even more powerful for job seekers: the informational interview. In this booklet, we'll discuss the benefits and goals of informational interviews and how they can help you become more proactive in your job search and set you up for success.

### **THE BENEFITS AND GOALS OF AN INFORMATIONAL INTERVIEW**

Informational interviews are one of your most effective job search tools. Although the goal is not to ask for a job, these informational discussions will help you propel your job search forward in several ways:

- Learn about the realities of working in a specific position, business, or industry from someone with the inside scoop.
- Expand your professional network with people in your target industry who may become resources and mentors for future job opportunities.
- Improve your interview skills, industry vocabulary, and confidence by speaking with people who already "walk the walk."
- Uncover new job opportunities that aren't accessible to you as an outsider, and learn what peers have done with traits and skills similar to yours.

Understand what's most important to employers and apply your new knowledge to create a better résumé or make a positive impression during a job interview. The value of an informational interview is in getting to know the other person and gaining insight from his or her career path and experiences. Be as professional when conducting informational interviews as you are when going through a job interview. Use this guide to learn how to properly set up, prepare, conduct, and follow up on informational interviews — and turn what you learn into stronger connections and long-term success.

### **CREATE MUTUALLY BENEFICIAL RELATIONSHIPS:**

- **Always think of how to give back to those who give you their time.** Though you may not be able to return the favor immediately, keep track of those who help you and remember them when you're in a position to help them later on.
- If you make a connection and would like to continue building the relationship, **ask how the person would prefer to stay in touch.** If there was no chemistry, move on.
- Never overstay your welcome. Whether it's lingering too long in person or on the phone or engaging in too much follow-up, it's important to **read signals and respond accordingly.**
- **Know the professional boundaries.** Sending a professional email request is fine — but never casually instant message or text someone you don't know well.
- After the meeting, **always follow up within 24 hours.** If you said you'd send an article, contact someone, or take another action, make sure you follow through right away. Keeping your word is

important not only for your own confidence level, but also to promote a positive image for how others perceive you.

## *4 STEPS TO SET UP AN INFORMATIONAL INTERVIEW*

1

### IDENTIFY POTENTIAL CONTACTS:

First, identify people who have jobs you find intriguing and inspiring. Be resourceful. Scour the Internet, filter through your social networks and read local newspapers and business publications. Tell your family, friends, neighbors, colleagues, former teachers, and classmates about your desire for informational meetings and ask them for the names of people with whom you should speak.

#### **Focus on targeting the following high-value connections for informational interviews:**

- **Job titles one, two and three levels above your target job title.** Individuals with these job title levels can introduce you to the decision maker — or they even may be in a position to make hiring decisions themselves.
- **Your job title and similar.** These people can give you the inside scoop on challenges within this position, so you can best understand how to market yourself.
- **One level beneath your job title.** This is a good way to learn about how the organization promotes and provides growth opportunities for employees.
- **Titles that interact with your job title.** Focusing on people with similar titles to yours can help you understand the goals of the departments that interact with your target job title, and this can show you how to promote your communication skills in a relevant way.
- **Staffing consultants/headhunters.**
- **Corporate recruiters.**

2

### REACH OUT APPROPRIATELY:

As you develop your list of potential contacts, give each person an introductory letter, email, or phone call explaining your background, career goals, interests, and what you hope to gain from the meeting.

- Request 20 to 30 minutes of the person's time at their convenience.
- Be clear that you are seeking information only — not a job.
- If the person is receptive to your request, ask for a face-to-face meeting at her workplace. While getting together for lunch or talking on the phone is fine, visiting the person's office will give you a better feel for the job, company, or industry.
- Because it is often difficult to get the attention of someone you've never met, a referral from a mutual friend can help in setting up an informational meeting.



3

### DEFINE YOUR EXPECTATIONS AND GOALS FOR THE MEETING:

Because you are the one responsible for setting the meeting agenda, it's important to determine what you wish to gain from it and craft relevant questions beforehand. This preparation will help you elicit the best information to help inform your career direction and job search.

4

### PREPARE FOR YOUR INTERVIEW:

How much you take away from an informational interview depends largely on how thoroughly you prepare for the meeting. Make sure you have researched your interviewee and are familiar with her background and major accomplishments. Next, explore the company's website. Pay particular attention to the "About" section, staff biographies, and the company's latest press releases to prepare relevant questions. Reviewing company literature such as brochures and annual reports will also provide a treasure trove of helpful data. Finally, set up Google news alerts for both your industry and target companies to ensure you don't miss big developments.

## *HOW TO CONDUCT AN INFORMATIONAL INTERVIEW*

1

### CONDUCT YOUR INFORMATIONAL INTERVIEW AS YOU WOULD ANY IMPORTANT BUSINESS MEETING:

- Dress professionally and arrive early.
- When asking questions, listen closely to the person's responses, make eye contact, and smile. Show an interest in what your interviewee has to say and be sincere. If the person feels you are invested in the conversation, she is likely to offer more in-depth advice.
- Consider documenting your conversation; taking notes helps to demonstrate your interest and refresh your memory of the conversation later. **Pro tip:** Ask your interviewee first if she minds you taking notes or voice recording the conversation.

2

### BE PREPARED TO GO "OFF SCRIPT":

As you develop your list of potential contacts, give each person an introductory letter, email, or phone call explaining your background, career goals, interests, and what you hope to gain from the meeting.

- While you want to be mindful of her time, if the interviewee begins to follow an interesting tangent, go with the flow. This will help you establish a more natural rapport.
- An interviewee may want to deviate from your prepared list of questions and ask you more formal job questions. Let her do so, and be prepared to speak about your qualifications and interest in the position, company, or industry.
- Before ending the conversation, ask the interviewee for suggestions of other professionals who would be beneficial to interview.

3

### DON'T ASK FOR A JOB:



- While your ultimate objective may be to find a new job, you should never ask for one at an informational interview. The goal of the meeting is to build your knowledge about a particular position, company, or industry. The person will feel deceived if you don't follow through with the original intent of the discussion.
- Your enthusiasm, intelligent questions, and ability to connect and follow through will make a positive impression, and may encourage your interview subject to consider you for an available opening or refer you to a manager.

## ***QUESTIONS TO ASK***

Start your informational interview by briefly summarizing (in 90 seconds or less) your background and explaining why you are interested in the particular field.

**Then ask open-ended questions (questions that require more than a “yes” or “no” answer) such as the following:**

### **ABOUT THE INDIVIDUAL:**

- Can you tell me how you got to this position? How did you get started in the field?
- What have been your greatest professional moments and biggest challenges?
- What's a typical day like for you?
- How has accomplishing XYZ (e.g., writing a book, starting a blog, running a company) differed from your expectations?
- What are the types of jobs that exist where you work and in the industry in general?
- What would you say is the best path to this career? What does a typical career path look like in your industry?
- What attracted you to this industry, your company, and your job?
- What do you enjoy most about this industry, your company, and your job?
- What aspects of your career have you found most and least rewarding and why? Any regrets?
- What is your educational and career background like? What would you do differently if you were starting over?
- What do you see as possible next steps for you? What career expectations do you have in the short- and long-term?
- What are you most excited or concerned about for this industry, your company, or your career path in the future?
- What emerging trends do you see affecting your job or industry in the next five years?
- How do people break into this field? If you were in the job market tomorrow, what would you do?
- How do you value and measure your results and effectiveness?

### **ABOUT SKILLS:**

- Which skill sets and abilities does one need to be successful in this line of work?
- What skills are most critical to your success?
- What weaknesses in a person's skill set would make him ineffective in this business?
- What are the most valuable skills in your job? Which experiences enabled you to develop these skills?
- How do you keep skills current? What do you read? Do you belong to any professional associations?
- What seminars or types of continuing education do you consider useful?

### **ABOUT THE COMPANY:**

- What's unique about your company?
- What would you do differently if you ran this company?
- What are the common misconceptions about working in this company?
- What do you see as the biggest competitive challenge for your company?
- What are some of the defining characteristics of the candidates who have been hired by your company for this position in the past?
- How many new hires does your company typically hire each year? Can you describe the process? How many have worked as seasonal interns?

### **ABOUT THE INDUSTRY:**

- What are some of the biggest challenges facing your company and your industry today?
- Are there any professional or trade associations with which I should connect?
- What industry publications do you read to keep up with developments in your field?
- How do you see your industry changing in the next 10 years?
- What have been your biggest surprises in this field?
- What are the common misconceptions about working in this field?
- What motivates you to continue in this business? What do you like most? What are the vulnerabilities of this business? What worries you?
- What are this business's biases or barriers to entry in terms of hiring practices?
- What do you expect of people starting out in this field? What educational and personal qualities in candidates attract you? How do you determine a candidate's compatibility for the field, including education, personality, and cultural considerations?
- What are some of the ways I can become familiar with the industry lexicon?
- Can you recommend others in this field with whom I can speak?

### **ABOUT YOU:**

- What strengths and weaknesses do you see in my current background?

- Is there anything else you think would be helpful as I consider this field?
- Looking at my résumé, what advice would you have for me as far as next steps if I were interested in this industry, company, or career?

### ***HOW TO BUILD THE RELATIONSHIP***

Immediately after the informational meeting, send an email thanking the person for his or her time. Next, follow up with a handwritten note that goes into greater detail about the information or advice you gained from the meeting.

As time goes on, continue to strengthen the relationship by keeping your interviewee apprised of developments in your career. You never know how and when he or she may be able to help you again (e.g., alert you of — or recommend you for — future job openings), and you may also be able to assist your new contact down the line.

### **TEMPLATES & SAMPLES - EMAILS, LETTERS AND THANK-YOU NOTES**

Now that you have identified your target contacts and know how to effectively conduct an informational interview, here are some templates for you to use to start setting up your own informational interviews:

#### **INFORMATIONAL INTERVIEW REQUEST EMAIL**

Dear Mr. Connection,

I heard from Sally Smith you would be an excellent person to contact regarding my research into the technology industry. Information technology has been an interest of mine since I began accepting more project leadership responsibilities in my previous job. I am reaching out to you directly because I am very interested in learning more about your career path at ABC Company. ABC Company has an outstanding reputation, and I'd love to listen to your experiences and advice on how to get my foot in the door.

I would appreciate the opportunity to meet with you briefly or, if it is easier, via phone for a 15 minute conversation. Let me know what works best and thank you in advance for your consideration.

Thanks again, and I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

Jonathan Jones

## REQUESTING AN INFORMATIONAL INTERVIEW FROM AN INTRODUCTION

YOUR NAME

Address | City, State Zip | (xxx) xxx-xxxx | email@email.com | social media URL

[YOUR INDUSTRY OR JOB TITLE] PROFESSIONAL

[DATE]

Decision Maker, Title

Company Name

Address

City, State, Zip

Dear [Name of Decision-Maker],

A mutual friend, [Mutual Friend's Name], recommended you as an excellent person to contact regarding my research into the [Insert target industry here] industry. I am reaching out to you directly because I am very interested in learning more about your career path and the company where you work. Would you be willing to speak with me for a short, 20 to 30-minute informational interview? [Company Name] has an outstanding reputation, and I'd love to listen to your experiences and advice in order to further my research.

[In this section, state a little about yourself and why you are interested in learning more about this industry. For example:] I am a senior financial and operations professional with more than 15 years' experience in the manufacturing and services industries. My strengths include analysis, problem-solving, communication, and innovation. I have specific expertise in financial analysis and reporting, cash and risk management, and productivity analysis. I am seeking a leadership position with a focus on financial reporting. At this point in my job search, I am researching potential target companies to learn how I can contribute my value to meet their specific needs.

I am hoping for the opportunity to meet with you briefly or, if it is easier, via phone for a 15-minute conversation. Let me know what works best and thank you in advance for your consideration. I truly appreciate the opportunity to expand my professional network to gain further insight and advice.

Thanks again and I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

[Your Name]



## REQUESTING AN INFORMATIONAL INTERVIEW TO A NEW CONTACT

### YOUR NAME

Address | City, State Zip | (xxx) xxx-xxxx | email@email.com | social media URL

[YOUR INDUSTRY OR JOB TITLE] PROFESSIONAL

[DATE]

Decision Maker, Title

Company Name

Address

City, State, Zip

Dear [Name of Decision-Maker],

[In this section, state your desired goal or position.] I am currently seeking a more permanent and diverse management role than my current consulting position provides. As I seek to determine a new direction for my future, I would love to get some insight from a professional such as yourself. Would you be willing to meet for a brief, 20 to 30-minute informational interview? I am confident that our shared backgrounds in [name of target industry] will provide a mutually interesting and informative meeting.

[In this section, provide two or three sentences talking about your professional background.] I offer a unique combination of leadership in operations as well as marketing and business development. My Ph.D. in education, emphasizing curriculum and instruction, along with my 10 years of executive-level experience, have prepared me to develop, launch, and distribute instructionally sound and targeted market products.

Again, I would love the opportunity to meet at your convenience and glean any insight and advice you may be able to provide. [In this section, give a time frame for when you will follow up with the decision-maker.] I will call your office in a few days to introduce myself and set up a brief meeting.

I look forward to speaking with you in the near future and thank you in advance for your time and kind consideration.

Sincerely,

[Your Name]

## INFORMATIONAL INTERVIEW REQUEST TO A GROUP CONNECTION

**Subject:** Request for Meeting

Hello John Smith,

I came across your profile on the LinkedIn resumé group and saw that we are both actively looking for jobs in financial services. I'd like to set up a brief meeting with you this week or next to discuss networking strategies, developing contacts, and ways we might otherwise help each other.

To give you a brief background about myself, I am a recent MBA graduate with an emphasis in finance from XYZ University. Prior to pursuing my MBA, I worked at ABC Company as a public accountant for four years. Recently, I worked at the Alpha Company as a fixed income analyst and currently work as an associate at a private investment firm.

I want to make a career in financial services (equity research) and recently took my CFA Level II examination. I would appreciate if we could talk for a few minutes to share any ideas or insight that could prove helpful to both of us. Thank you for your time.

Sincerely,

Adam  
MacDonald

(555) 555-1234

[amac@email.com](mailto:amac@email.com)

## THANK-YOU NOTE AFTER YOUR INFORMATIONAL INTERVIEW

Margaret May  
123 Anywhere Lane  
Anchorage, AK 99501  
555-555-5555  
mmay@fakeyahoo.com

July 17, 2015

Ms. Glad  
Senior Production Manager  
XYZ Corporation  
456 Normal Avenue  
Portland, OR 97034

Dear Ms. Glad,

Thank you for speaking with me today. Your insights were truly helpful, and have confirmed my decision to gain additional work experience in the field before applying to graduate school.

I will regularly check the websites you suggested for job leads, and I have already contacted the ABC professional association regarding membership.

I will follow up in the near future to let you know about my progress. Attached is an article I enjoyed this quarter that reminds me of your interesting perspective on leadership.

Thank you again for your time and helpful assistance.

Sincerely,

Margaret May