Building and Sustaining Connections: The Process and Pitfalls of Informational Interviewing

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Informational Interviews

• What are they?
• Why would you want to do one--and when?
• Who do you talk to?
• Why would people want to talk to you?
• How do you request one?
• What should you do if you don’t get a response?
• How do you conduct an effective informational interview?
• How do you follow up?
What is Informational Interviewing?

The process of conducting conversations with people for information and advice.

• A strategy to use when exploring career fields
• An effective way to build a professional network
• A way to evaluate an organization’s overall fit for you
• A way to develop an effective job search strategy
What’s the Difference?

**Informational Interview**
- Conducted to gather information and advice
- **YOU** ask the questions
- **YOU** guide conversation
- Focus is on information; not a specific job

**Job Interview**
- Conducted to evaluate suitability for a job opening
- **Employer** asks the questions
- **Employer** guides conversation
- Focus is on a specific job opening and determining fit
Let’s Hear From You

• What has been your experience with informational interviewing?
• What has worked particularly well?
• What strategies have you incorporated to become more effective at informational interviewing?
Why Would You Do an Informational Interview—and When?

At the end of your degree program

- Establish contacts for having resume forwarded
- Learn about upcoming job opportunities
- Gain insider information
- Clarify what jobs are really like before committing to the application process
- Ask questions that may not be strategic or appropriate during a job interview (i.e. opportunities for advancement, salary ranges, benefits, vacation, etc.)
- Develop a job search strategy
Why Would You Do an Informational Interview—and When?

In the middle of your degree program

• Explore potential organizations to work for
• Identify additional skills to develop
• Identify internship or research opportunities
• Build support and expand your network
• Build confidence and poise for later job interviews
Why Would You Do an Informational Interview—and When?

*Early in your degree program*

- Clarify your area of study or thesis topic
- Learn about potential career paths
Who Would You Talk To?

Step 1: Identify keywords

- Job title
- Organization
- Career path
- Degree type
- Industry type
Who Would You Talk To?

Step 2: Identify individuals

- People you know
  - friends, family, professors, TA’s, classmates, recent graduates
- People you don’t know—but your other contacts know
- People you don’t know at all:
  - LinkedIn (Group members, connections, Google searches)
  - Alumni databases
Why Would Someone Want to Talk to You?

- People enjoy talking about themselves and giving advice
- People like helping others (especially those with common interests/backgrounds)
- They might have conducted info interviews themselves
- They might learn something new from you (and perhaps they might be interested in finding an intern or full-time hire)
How Do You Craft an Effective Informational Interview Request?

The Goal:

Establish contact with a succinct, yet purposeful, professional email.
Subject line: Student seeking help

Hello,

I'm a student at Cornell University, and was referred to you by Barbara Smith from XYZ Company in Boston. She recommended you as an excellent source of information on the communications industry.

My goal is to secure an entry-level position in communications upon my graduation from Cornell. I would appreciate any advice you have.

I truly appreciate your time and consideration. I look forward to hearing from you soon!

Sincerely,

Karen Jones '13
607-555-1212
Crafting an Effective Informational Interview Request: Potential Pitfalls

- Using a vague or generic subject line
- Being too informal
- Failing to provide information about yourself
- Being vague about what you are seeking
- Relying on the other person to initiate the step
Subject line: Current Cornell student seeking informational interview

Dear Ms. Gable:

In a recent conversation with my Cornell master’s degree advisor, Professor Eden suggested you might be willing to speak with me regarding my interests in the science policy arena. Through participation in Cornell-in-Washington as an undergraduate, and an internship at The Institute for Science, Engineering, and Public Policy I have discovered an interest in communicating science policy to the general public.
As I am graduating in May, I’m in the early stages of my job search and hoping to speak with professionals in the science policy field for some guidance. I’m very interested in learning about your career path along with how you approached your job search upon completion of your graduate degree. Additionally, I would be interested in your thoughts on the types of positions I might be suited for based on my educational background and interests.
I will contact your office next week to discuss the possibility of scheduling a twenty-to thirty-minute telephone informational interview. Thank you for your consideration. I look forward to speaking with you.

Sincerely,

Kira Jones '13
607-555-1212
Crafting an Effective Informational Interview Request: Corrected Pitfalls

- Using a specific subject line
- Being formal and professional
- Providing some background information about yourself
- Being specific about what you are seeking
- Being proactive about initiating the next step
Scheduling the Conversation

- **1st Call** ➔ Make sure to follow up as your email stated

“Ms. Gable, this is Kira Jones calling to follow up on the email I sent last week. I was hoping you might be willing to spend 20 minutes speaking with me. My number is (607)555-1212. Thank you.”
What Should You Do If You Don’t Get a Response?

• 2\textsuperscript{nd} Call → Polite persistence

“Ms. Gable, this is Kira Jones again. I’m sorry to have missed you. I will call again on Tuesday at 9:30am. If that time is not good for you, please do let me know when you would prefer to speak. My number is (607)555-1212. Thank you.”
What Should You Do If You *Still* Don’t Get a Response?

• 3rd (and final) Attempt → Persistence versus Stalking

New Strategy: Seek assistance from someone!

• Ask a receptionist for a convenient time to phone again or to arrange a meeting time.

• Ask for advice on the best way to proceed.

You may need to move on.....
How Do I Conduct an Effective Informational Interview?
Tips for Effective Informational Interviewing:

• Be professional
• Be prepared to answer questions about yourself
  Career interests
  Educational background
  Why you chose to speak with them
• Be prepared with a list of questions
• Demonstrate flexibility in the conversation
• Respect the interviewee’s time
• Express thanks, both during and after the interview
Informational Interviewing: Potential Pitfalls

• Asking for a job
• Having high expectations of the interview
• Having a lack of understanding of who you’re talking to
• Spending most of the time talking about yourself
The Follow-Up

- Send a thank-you note/email within 24 hours of the interview
- Thanking people in your network is an on-going process
- Staying in touch does not equal reaching out when you need something
- Create a database of people you’ve done an informational interview with and include notes from your conversation

How can your thank-you note set up a framework for further contact?
The Thank-You Note

Thank them for resources and suggestions

Highlight interesting aspects of the conversation

Share your own resources (articles, events, contacts)

Occasionally send articles related to topics you discussed

Let them know what your next steps are

Let them know what you found after following their advice

Let them know how this interview affected your knowledge of the field, career choice, job search, skill development
The Thank-You Note

Ask if they can recommend any colleagues that you can talk to you as you gather information.

Tell them that you talked to these individuals and mention how it was helpful.

Invite them to events where they could meet new contacts.
Additional Methods Of Maintaining Contact

• Send an occasional note on meaningful days
  – holidays, Cornell reunion time
• Reconnect via email after an internship or attending a conference
• Use social media
  – Request LinkedIn connection
  – Follow on Twitter
• Share information:
  – articles, conference information, Cornell news*

*Alumni are typically curious about campus happenings
What Are Your Questions?