

INFORMATIONAL INTERVIEWING

Here's a startling statistic: One out of every 200 resumes (some studies put the number as high as 1,500 resumes) results in a job offer. One out of every 12 informational interviews, however, results in a job offer.

What is an informational interview? It is a career research technique which enables you to expand your knowledge of an occupation beyond what you have already learned through reading, or browsing the Internet. In this type of interview, you are the person asking the questions – you are interviewing a person for information about their career. This gives you the opportunity to learn about the work environment, the rewards and frustrations of the job, as well as the personal qualities needed to succeed in the field.

It is important to remember that an informational interview is not a job interview. That means it is rarely appropriate to use the session to inquire about job openings with the organization. If you try to do this, you may actually hurt your chances for employment with the company and ruin things for those seeking informational interviews in the future.

Now that you know what an informational interview is, let's talk about how to get started!

Step 1: Identify professionals to contact

The best place to start is with people you know such as friends, relatives, and neighbors. Ask them if they know anyone who works in your field of interest that may be willing to speak with you. Also check with bankers, doctors, lawyers and others whose professions involve a great deal of people contact.

Next, start contacting with people you don't know. This may be a little uncomfortable at first; however, you may be surprised to find out how willing people are to help others who are interested in their careers. Here are some ideas for connecting with people you don't know:

- Target Stony Brook Alumni who will give you informative career advice. Utilize the *ZebraCAN – Career Advising Network* to begin your career networking process. http://www.career.sunysb.edu/Students/stu_ccan.asp
- Target organizations related to your field of interest and start making phone calls. A few resources you may find helpful in targeting organizations include: Career Center Resource Library & Vault Library - links found at www.stonybrook.edu/career.
- Target professional associations related to your area of interest, and attend a meeting. Many associations allow students to attend meetings as “non-members.” This will enable you to meet and talk informally with people working in your field of interest, and may possibly lead to establishing individual interviews. You can find professional associations by utilizing the professional association section on Jobweb, http://www.jobweb.com/Career_Development/prof_assoc.htm
- Take advantage of the student professional societies. For example, there are many paraprofessional societies such as the Society of Hispanic Professional Engineers (SHPE) that will give you the opportunity to be around people with like interests, and will allow you to start the networking process.

Lastly, be sure to access your professors and friends at the Career Center as resources. Both will have contacts with industry professionals.

Step 2: Preparing for the interview

It is important that you have a sense of the type of work performed, current issues of interest, and the jargon used in an occupation before asking someone to sit down and talk with you. Remember, these are people who are kindly setting aside time in their busy work schedules to provide you with information. Do not waste their time by asking questions which could easily be answered by doing a little homework

Research...research...research... You might be asking yourself, how do I research companies? What information do I gather?

Determine what information you want. Break down the information gathering piece. It's best to look for two kinds of information: *General Company Information* and *Career Trends*

General Company Information:

Company products and services, history and corporate culture, organizational mission and goals, key financial statistics, organizational structure (divisions, subsidiaries, etc.), and locations (main and branch).

Career Trends

Career paths and advancement opportunities, benefits, diversity initiatives, and other human resources functions.

A great career research includes: VAULT, Career Search and CareerINFONet – located on the Career Center website (www.stonybrook.edu/career) Stony Brook University absorbs these resource charges as we believe they will provide you with needed occupation information and excellent career research tools.

Step 3: How to Arrange the interview:

The best way is to call or write. Most interviews will last about 20 minutes. Keep in mind that any individual you connect with is a potential resource for a job. Be courteous and professional at all times!

Email Samples:

Date

Contact's Address

Dear Contact,

I am currently a Stony Brook University student, beginning my sophomore year. I came across your name through the Stony Brook Career Center Alumni Network. For the past few years I thought I might want to pursue the field of Psychology. I am sure your experiences being an Adolescent Psychologist will help me better decide if this is the right career direction for me.

I am interested in setting up a phone interview with you to learn more about your educational and career experiences. I believe you can be an excellent resource helping to better decide what career direction I'm headed in. I am a bright, dedicated and motivated student.

I will contact your office to schedule an interview. I look forward to hearing from you in the near future. Please feel free to contact me at 555-5555 or name@career.edu.

*Sincerely,
Your Name (Signature)*

Your Name (Print)

May 15, 2007

Mark Steppe, Esq.
VAVILOV, WEBB, WALSH & RIVER
1313 Avenue of the Harbors
Suite 4444
Silver City, CA 12345

Dear Mr. Steppe:

I am student a California Western School of Law, beginning my third trimester. Labor law has been of interest to me since I took a class in that subject as an undergraduate. Your firm has an outstanding reputation in that field of practice.

My area of concentration in law school will be labor law. I would appreciate the opportunity to meet with you briefly and discuss the practice of your specialty. I am especially interested in your views regarding public vs. private employment experience. Any further insights you have would be greatly appreciated.

I will contact your office the week of June 2 to set up a mutually convenient time for this informational meeting.

Sincerely,

Jeremy D. Muller

“What Do I Say?” Prepare a list of questions. Ask open-ended questions to encourage discussion. There are three types of questions that you will want to ask during an informational interview: questions about yourself, the interviewee, and the job or career itself.

Questions about yourself: Example: “I find that I usually work best in situations where I have a great deal of autonomy and do not have to constantly be accountable to someone else. How does one find a job like that in this field? How difficult/easy would it be?”

Questions about the interviewee: These are the types of questions which most naturally occur in an informational interview. They usually elicit personal or subjective perceptions on the part of the person you are speaking with, so be careful not to interpret such responses as though they are the “final word” on the subject. It is important for you to analyze answers for their relevance to your situation.

Example: “If you had the opportunity, what would you change about your job?”

Questions about the occupation: Example: “What skills are necessary to enter and do well in this field?”

A list of additional sample questions is attached to this handout.

If you are meeting someone in person, make sure to:

1. Dress appropriately. This doesn't mean that you have to buy a \$300 suit, but you should make an effort to look presentable.
2. Arrive early. If someone is blocking out part of his/her work schedule to see you, the least you can do is to arrive on time.
3. Encourage the interviewee to talk. You will learn more by asking questions, listening to what the other person has to say, and analyzing and synthesizing the information for your purposes.
4. Appear interested. You always want to make the interviewee feel that you are paying attention to what he/she is saying.
5. Relax. Remember, you are the one conducting the interview. Both you and the person you are speaking with will enjoy the conversation more if the atmosphere is relaxed and informal.
6. Take notes. Since this is not a job interview, you can feel free to write down any information you wish to review later. It would, however, be considerate to ask the permission of the interviewee before you begin.
7. Ask for references. Most people will be pleased to supply you with the names of others who can provide information on the career(s) you are researching.

Step 4: Follow Up

Always send a “Thank You” note. It is important to let someone know that you appreciate his/her assistance. Be sure to keep in touch with the professionals you meet. Based on your interviews, if you decide to pursue a career in this field, your informational interviewees have just become your first network of contacts! These professionals may be willing to help you down the road, so it is important for you to maintain contact with them to let them know how things are going and where you are in the career exploration process.

Sample Informational Interview Questions

What does your job involve on a day to day basis?

What do you like/dislike about your job?

What are some of the most difficult problems you encounter in your job?
What would you consider to be the greatest rewards associated with your position?
How did you become involved in this career?
Who is your immediate supervisor? How closely do you work with that person?
How much independence do you have in your job?
Are you required to work overtime?
Who are the people you need to work with in order to do your job effectively?
How would you describe the typical atmosphere at your place of work?
What kind of job security exists?
If you decided to change careers, what other types of work would you be qualified to do?
What are the new, emerging trends and/or issues affecting this field? How will this affect employment opportunities in the future?
What are the opportunities for advancement in this field?
Do people in this field change jobs often?
Who hires people for this kind of work?
What type of compensation can an entry-level worker in this field expect? Experienced?
What are the benefits like?
What type of training/education do you need for this career?
What personal qualities does one need for this career?
How can I best prepare myself for a career in this field?
How would I go about pursuing a related internship or volunteer experience?
What types of skills are needed to succeed in this career?
What job search strategy works best?
Does my background or training seem appropriate for this field of work?
How easy (or difficult) is it to find a job in this field? What is the employment outlook?

Additional Networking Resources

<http://www.fiveoclockclub.com/index2.html>

<http://www.careersuccessassociates.com/wind.html>