INFORMATIONAL INTERVIEWS

What are Informational Interviews?
Interviewing for information is a non-threatening process of gathering information about people, positions, and occupational activities related to a field you know little about but in which you are interested. You can use this process to get a better idea of where you might use your skills, the environments that suit you best, and what the corresponding jobs are called.

What are the Benefits of Informational Interviewing?
While a great deal of insight can be gained by researching careers and occupations through printed materials, informational interviews allow you to research careers by speaking directly with organization representatives. What better way of researching careers than to actually discuss your interests with those in the field or organization?

Informational interviewing also offers you an excellent opportunity to build contacts and referrals for your personal network. Building a personal network is particularly important to your job search because it is directly related to increasing your chances of getting a job.

Another benefit of informational interviewing is that it will increase your self-confidence and interviewing skills. It allows you to take control of an interview and to practice your presentation and communication skills. You can also learn the vocabulary that pertains to the particular company or field.

How is Informational Interviewing Different?
Informational interviewing is different from a job interview and should take only 20–30 minutes. The overall objective of the is to:

- Gather information from the interviewee that might assist you, the interviewer, in gaining a better understanding of the job/occupation.
- Obtain sources of referral/networking.
- Open a line of communication, through which a favorable impression is achieved.

Informational interviewing is not to be taken lightly. When you prepare for the interview, you should take into consideration your attire, mannerisms, resume, and agenda. Remember that you are in charge of the whole meeting. For example, you should prepare an agenda and questions and adhere to them throughout the meeting. The only exception to this rule is when the interviewee decides that he or she wants to elaborate further. One objective of the interview
is to get the interviewee to talk about him/herself and share his/her career progression, likes and dislikes, and best advice for you. You will find this process very effective.

Step 1: Whom Do You Contact?
To begin the informational interviewing process, you should contact members within your personal network. This may include your family, friends, roommates, relatives, past employers, and professors.

Ask these contacts for the names of people within occupations or organizations that interest you. Another way to establish contacts is to look for people who are interested in the same things you are. As you come across articles about interesting topics in newspapers and magazines, cut them out and put them in a file folder, desk drawer, etc. As you watch TV and listen to the radio, take notes and file them away too. The articles and notes will contain names of people who are doing what you are interested in and where you can find them.

If this does not bring the desired results, you can secure contact names by consulting the following:

- Online alumni directory – alumni can be particularly helpful
- Corporate literature
- Professional and trade association chapters
- Chamber of Commerce directories
- Yellow pages
- Career Center recruiter listings
- Directories of corporate names and addresses

Once you have identified people to contact, several options are available. The easiest and quickest way to schedule an appointment is by telephone. Explain to the person who you are and why you are calling. You should mention that you are not seeking a job at this time, but rather, that you are gathering information. In some situations you may have trouble getting past the secretary. If you encounter the infamous "gatekeeper," remain calm and stay in control of the situation. It is often helpful to ask when the individual whom you wish to speak with will be available, and then offer to call him/her later. If you leave your name and number, you may never hear from the person you wish to contact again. Therefore, be sure to follow-up with a subsequent telephone call.

How to set up an Informational Interview
Step 1: Make the call.
"Hello, I am ____________, a student at Occidental College. I am interested in learning more about ____________, and I would like to make an appointment to talk with you about what you do and about the field in general."

There may be a department that sounds like what you want, or a job title that is intriguing. Be a bit wary of job titles. They can mean quite different activities in different places, but they can provide clues.

Another way to set up an interview is by letter. In your letter, be sure to state clearly why you want to meet with the contact. Also, indicate that you will telephone the contact to arrange an interview time. When making the call, you should refer to your letter and restate your purpose.

After you schedule the interview, you might want to send a letter confirming the time and place and reiterate your interest in discussing the field. Your attention to detail and follow-through will convey genuine interest and professionalism. It will help you make a good impression.

One final way of establishing an interview is having a third party intervene for you. The third party is usually a mutual friend or acquaintance who arranges the time, date, and place of the interview. Frequently, professors, relatives, and friends are more than willing to assist you in arranging informational interviews. After the interview is arranged, you should send a brief thank you note to the third party who arranged it. Also, it is a good idea to send a confirmation letter to your new contact, but it is not mandatory that you do so.

**Step 2: Preparation**

Now that you have contacted the person and arranged a meeting time and place, there are a few things you should do to prepare yourself for the interview. First, conduct some preliminary research on the respective field or organization. It is important to gather some facts before your interview in order to formulate intelligent questions. You will not make a favorable impression by asking questions that could be easily answered in the organization's literature or through other readily-available resources.

Also, there are some aids that might prove helpful:
- **Notebook**– small enough to be carried with you at all times.
- **Card File**– to keep record of all the people you talk with on the interviews.
- **Stationary**– to write thank you notes.

**Step 3: Introductions**

During the introduction, there will probably be some small talk and casual conversation; this should not take longer than 2–5 minutes.

An effective way of starting the conversation can be:
"I appreciate your letting me come and interview you. Let me tell you why I'm so interested in talking to you...."

**Step 4: Setting the Agenda and Giving a Review of Your Background and Interests**

It is important to be perceived as a professional. At the beginning of the interview, establish an "agenda" or direction for the discussion. The following are two different approaches, depending on whether you are a current student or already a working professional.

**Student Statement**

"I'm excited about coming to see you and having the opportunity to discuss career options in a field in which you have expertise. In the field of..., I understand that experience will help you advance faster in a growing economy. I don't possess a great deal of experience, but the experience I have is specific to the field. Let me take a minute and explain."

Discuss the career options you are considering.

"Presently, I'm considering going into (the career) and, since you have been so successful in this field, I would appreciate the opportunity to ask you a few questions. I hope that you don't mind if I take some notes."

Take a few moments to discuss your education, skills, and experiences.

Relate a few of your accomplishments so the interviewee can gain a better picture of you.

**Working Professional Statement**

"As I promised in my letter and call, I will make this meeting brief. I would like to begin with an overview of my background and several professional options that I am considering for my future."

(It is important to pause and get the interviewee to agree to the agenda that you put together. This section should include a positive statement about you. Use reverse chronological order to discuss your experience/skills; have power stories to share and mention career options you are exploring.)

Briefly discuss your work and career interests. This is the time to explain your experiences. You should take this opportunity to discuss your education and skills. Do not go into lengthy detail.

Include accomplishments. Relate a few of your accomplishments so the interviewee can gain a better picture of you. Use one or two accomplishment stories that have successful results. Make sure to use action words to describe yourself, and do not let the accomplishment stories last more than fifty words. For example, there should be a problem, action taken, and result. This lets the interviewee understand that you have the ability to problem-solve. One way of
leading into an accomplishment statement is to say something like: "to give you a better understanding of my experience/skills, let me share a few of my accomplishments...."

**Step 5: Asking Your Questions**
You should have no less than 10 questions you are prepared to ask. These questions should start off with a general, open-ended response. As the questions continue, they should become more specific. The following are some suggestions (the first 5 are strongly recommended):

1. How did you get into this field?
2. What educational or experiential preparation is typical to get into this field? Of that which is typical, what, if any, is required?
3. What was different from what you expected? What was the biggest surprise when you went into this field? Any myths you want to shatter for me?
4. What advice do you have for someone like me?
5. Who else does this? What other companies? Who else should I be talking to?
6. What do you like most about your position?
7. What do you like least?
8. What is your typical day like?
9. What is the responsibility of your position?
10. Are these duties the same for everyone with this title?
11. What kind of individual (in terms of talent and personality) would be best-suited for this kind of job?
12. What are the prospects for someone entering your field today?
13. What advice would you give me on how to go about applying for and finding a position in this field?
14. Are there any other sources of information you might suggest?
15. What advice could you give me about where I might go to find someone who could use my skills?
16. What types of programs/activities does your office do?
17. What is a recurring problem for people in this field or in your office?
18. What kind of salary could I expect to make in the field?

Oftentimes, a response will lead you into another question. Be flexible while interviewing, but make sure you are in control of the interview.

**Step 6: Ask For Referrals and Other Networking Sources**
An important part of gathering information is asking for referrals and names of other professionals with whom you can network. This should come naturally. Get used to doing this!

**Step 7: Resist Sharing a Resume**
If the professional asks for a resume and you have one in your portfolio, do not give them a copy at this time. You arranged the meeting for information only. You can send them a
resume the next day as an email attachment with a note of thanks. If they are willing to give you feedback, this is a nice bonus.

**Step 8: Closing the Interview**
This is your last opportunity to thank the person and make a final appeal to the generosity of the individual. When closing the interview, make a statement like *"I've had a wonderful time discussing the field of…. It was very informative. I hope you won't mind if I keep in touch with you."*

It is unlikely the interviewee will turn down your request.

**Step 9: Thank You Letter – This Must Follow**
Take a little time when you get to your car to write down the highlights of the meeting. When you write your thank you letter, it is very important to incorporate the major themes of the meeting. The letter should be mailed within **24 hours**.

**Step 10: Evaluating the Information**
After each interview, ask yourself:

1. Does the person I just talked with use the skills I want to use?
2. Would I be qualified for his/her position?
3. Do I understand what the position entails?
4. Would I enjoy working in this capacity?
5. Did I get additional ideas for an alternative?
6. Do I have an idea about what my salary might be?
7. What positive impression do I now have about this area of work (in terms of myself – interests, skills, values, etc.)?
8. Would I enjoy working for this company?
9. What are the goals (needs, concerns, problems, issues) of this area of work/company? How can I help meet those needs and accomplish those goals?
10. Which of my personal assets could I offer?

If you can answer most of these questions, you have gathered some good information. You will also be able to make a better decision about what you want to do with your career.