

Informational Interviews

An informational interview is a chance for you to meet with a contact (alumni, family, friend, former coworker etc.) to learn about their career and their firm. This will help you build your network and find what firms/positions you are a good fit for.

The goals of an informational interview are as follows:

- Build rapport
- Learn about the contact's personal career
- Learn about the general career path and possibly the firm

Remember the goal is not to get a job. This is an informational interview only – a time to gather information and make a connection. While the informational interview usually lasts 20-45 minutes, the complete process does take some time. This is the typical timeline:

Step 1: Two-to-four weeks out, request the informational interview by contacting via email or phone, depending on your comfort level. Be genuine, but you can use the following script as a guide:

Introduce Yourself:

My name is _____. I am a first year MBA student at the Foster School of Business at the University of Washington and I have a quick question for you.

Make the Request:

I saw on LinkedIn that you are an alum from the Foster MBA program and I'm interested in learning more about _____ (marketing, early state firms, banking etc.) and was hoping to set up a quick half hour meeting to learn about your career path and what you currently do.

Step 2: Prepare. In addition to formulating questions you should find out everything you can about the individual, the firm, and their team. Ideally, you should know all of the following BEFORE the informational interview:

- a) What is the company's basic history?
- b) What are the company's mission statement and business strategy?
- c) Is there any major news about the company and how it is important?
- d) Where are the company's operations located?
- e) What products/services does the company provide?
- f) How is the company differentiated from its three closest competitors?
- g) Who are the top executives?
- h) What were the company's revenues and net income for the past few years and what is the current stock price?

Step 3: The day before, confirm your meeting with an email.

Step 4: The day of, arrive 15 minutes early, dressed professionally, and prepared.

Step 5: The day after (or immediately after), follow up with a brief thank you note detailing a specific point you discussed of interest.

Step 6: Monthly or quarterly, maintain contact with a brief email as appropriate. Send an article that might be interesting to them. Introduce them to contacts that could be valuable for them. Find out how you can be helpful.

Sample Questions:

(Remember much of their background can be found online, feel free to say “I saw on LinkedIn that you interned at _____ while in b-school. How similar/different was that from your role now?)

1. How was your first role after b-school similar to or different than what you’d done before?
2. How did your career path lead you to this role?
3. Did you come to _____ directly after business school?
4. Tell me more about your role here? Who are your key stakeholders, clients, etc.?
5. What are some of the major challenges your business/team faces? What solutions have been tried?
6. Which skills are most important to acquire? (i.e. – which skills do employers look for?)
7. What are the main or most important personal characterizes for success in the field?
8. How is success judged (at this firm, in your role)?
9. What is most satisfying about your role here?
10. What trends do you see in your industry that most impact your business?

At some point in the conversation the interviewee may ask about your career goals, etc. That is a great window to discuss your own career path. Otherwise, stay focused on the interviewee.

Interviewees most appreciate it when their interviewer has clear objectives for the meeting and focused questions. They want to know how they can be of help (without having a job available for you.)

Remember that the most important piece is to build rapport. Questions should most importantly be those for which you are truly interested in hearing the answer. Treat this session not as a reporter might treat an interview, but as a dialogue between two colleagues who have met for the first time and may be working together. Remember that people like talking about themselves! Keep asking questions and show interest, but be respectful of the time limits you imposed.

“Networking is just asking for directions.” – *Designing Your Life*

It does mean:

- Talking to people – lots of them. You never know which contact will be “the one”.
- Graciously requesting useful information from those willing and able to give it, whether they have a job for you or not.
- Allowing people to get to know you, so that they can think of you when conditions are right.

What Informational Interviewing can and should do

When done with attention and follow-through, informational interviewing yields useful results.

- You learn more about the field you’re in, or the field you’re shifting to. Or, you learn more about the field in a given region.
- You develop a set of relationships, some of which will last through your entire career.
- You learn information that helps you make a decision about where you want to work.
- You find your way to a job or internship.

How to Prepare

- Draft your resume, so you’re clear about your accomplishments.
- Understand your criteria for a job or an internship
- Have your elevator pitch clear in your mind. Know who you are, what you’re good at, and where you’re headed.

- Have a starting list of who you want to talk to, and be clear about why you’ve picked them. Be prepared to add to this list.
- Send your outreach email or letter to the people you want to talk to, and follow up by phone or email a week after. Don’t expect a high response rate, but if you get no responses, check your email or letter for content and/or style. Or examine your industry or strategy to make sure your target companies make sense.

Tips for Success

- Your discussion isn’t an interview, but it is an interview situation. Dress as if it were an interview.
- The person you’re talking to knows you’re looking for a job without you saying anything about it. In your outreach email or letter, you will implicitly say you won’t talk about your job search. And, most of the time, the people you want to talk to are trying to avoid being asked for jobs. So honor that commitment –

don't ask for a job during your discussion.

- However, there are times when following this approach can come across as coy or otherwise inappropriate. If you can tell that someone is trying to sound you out about a job, it's okay to respond.
- Thoroughly research the company and come prepared with questions that will give shape and purpose to the discussion. Since the talk is happening at your request, your energy should drive it. As with a job interview these questions should be at a level that demonstrates your strategic thinking, your insight, and the initiative you've taken to do your homework and set up the discussion.
- At the end of the discussion, it makes sense to say something like this:

"This has been tremendously helpful- it's terrific of you to take the time to talk to me. You've probably gotten a pretty good sense of who I am and where I hope to be headed – who do you think I should talk to next?"

Let the person advise you. You're likely to get a lot of good suggestions (and contacts) this way.

- As you walk out of the door, it's okay to say something like this:

"Again thanks so much for seeing me. It was really helpful. Let me know if there's ever anything you think I could be helpful with- it would be great to work with you sometime. "

- Always send a thank you note, whether handwritten in letter mail form, or via email, within 24 hours. In your thank-you note, say something like, "I hope I may take the liberty of keeping you informed about my progress.
- Keep the person informed! Every couple of months, send them an email letting them know what's happening on your end. Occasionally, ask them to have a cup of coffee with you. Send them a holiday card. These things are all part of maintaining a business relationship that's less than a friendship, but more than an acquaintanceship.
- If you do a lot of informational interviewing to get a summer internship (highly recommended), maintain those relationships. Your search for a permanent job becomes much simpler if you do.
- Keep track of your contacts: who you've talked to, who you've followed up with, who has referred you to whom, and so on. As you talk to more people, your world will expand and will need attention.