

# Informational Interview Guide

## What is an Informational Interview?

An informational interview is an opportunity to gather career and industry information from a professional by asking questions related to the aspects of the specific career or job and the professional's experience. An information interview is a learning experience and **NOT** a solicitation for a job or internship. It is a conversation with an objective to learn. The interview typically spans 30 minutes to one hour. The initiation, and corresponding conversation, may take place in-person, over email, or over the telephone. You can conduct an information interview with anyone – executives, alumni, supervisors, colleagues, friends, family, or family friends! Included in this guide are pointers for making the connection, sample emails and thank you notes, a checklist to help you prepare for your interview, and a list of example questions.

## Benefits

Informational Interviews can be very beneficial to students and professionals alike. Here are some insights and guidance commonly received by those who reach out to conduct them.

- Provides direction in choosing a career field or preparing for a career change with firsthand, up-to-date, insider information,
- Offers insight to guide future job searches,
- Prepares you for an upcoming interview,
- Revises your resume to better fit the specific industry or career field,
- Allows you to assess your compatibility with a particular career,
- Expands your professional network,
- Improves your interviewing skills.

## Your Responsibilities

By reaching out to a professional contact with the intent to conduct an informational interview, you are responsible for directing the interaction. This responsibility entails the following:

- Demonstrate desire to explore career options, personal skills and attributes,
- Generate your own list of questions addressing specific career-related aspects such as work environment, career preparation, salary, lifestyle, a typical day, problems, referrals, and advancement as well as questions about the contact's personal experiences,
- Provide the host with your polished and professional resume (upon request),
- Maintain professional presence and conduct during the entire interview,
- Coordinate the scheduling of the interview and related details.

## Making the Connection

Conversations with mentors can take place over email, on the phone, or in-person. Usually, conversations and informational interviews are initiated through an introductory email.

Attempting a "cold call" through email can be challenging, but there are a few techniques that can simplify the process.

- **DON'T SKIP THE SUBJECT LINE.** To ensure an email is not questioned or deleted as spam, make use of the subject line. Use this to address your specific need or intention, such as "Pepperdine Student Requests Informational Interview". An empty or awkward subject line from an unknown email address will be deleted.
- **INTRODUCE YOURSELF.** Take a sentence or two to explain who you are and how you came about getting your contact's email address. This is especially important for referrals or online directories.

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- **STATE YOUR REQUEST.** Ambiguous emails leave little room for response. Explain why you are reaching out for help and describe what you hope to gain from the connection. Include one or two specific questions that can be answered in a response.
- **KEEP IT SIMPLE.** Write a concise email without attachments. Consider your first email to be an invitation to connect. Once accepted, you can reply with the specifics and offer to send attachments as needed. Do not attach your resume to this introductory email, but have it available if it's requested. Our career counselors can help you prepare your resume.
- **CLOSE THE SALE.** Include your contact information and ask for an opportunity to connect again for a more in-depth conversation.
- **SPELLING AND GRAMMAR STILL COUNT.** Many of us have become accustomed to the shorthand used in texting and instant messages. However, emails, particularly in the business setting, still demand a higher level of professionalism. "Plz send info 2moro" is simply not appropriate. Ever. Spell words as they are spelled and use appropriate grammar, punctuation, and tone.
- **OTHER TIPS TO CONSIDER:** To maximize the effectiveness of your introduction, heed the following final tips:
  - Use an appropriate email address. If you wouldn't use it for a job application, don't use it here. Consider using your UNCA email address.
  - Think office memo. Save the smiley faces and jargon for Facebook.
  - Err on the side of formality. Use capitalization and abbreviations only as necessary.
  - Spell check. Spell check. Spell check.
  - Mind your manners. Remember that someone is setting aside time for you; don't forget to say please and thank you.

### Sample Introductory Emails

#### Sample Email: Initial Contact, General Purpose

Dear Ms. Smith

It was a pleasure to read your LinkedIn Profile as one of our leading alumni and I was impressed with your accomplishments as a Biologist at Lab Corporation.

I am a junior at the University of North Carolina Asheville majoring in Biology. I am interested in learning more about your laboratory research. I could also use your advice about how to enter the biology field. Would you be willing to talk with me? I would like to learn more about your career path and your recommendations for how to enter a laboratory research career.

Thank you for considering my request.

Sincerely,  
Joe Student

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Dear Mr. Stevenson,

I received your name from the University of North Carolina Asheville Career Center. I am completing my Management degree with a concentration in Marketing. It was impressive to see your accomplishments as a Brand Manager for Proctor and Gamble.

I would like to learn about your work experiences and any advice you have about how to enter the marketing profession and work for top tier consumer goods and products organization like Proctor and Gamble. If you can accommodate my request, then when would you be available to meet by phone or in person. I have attached my resume for additional information about my background.

Thank you,  
Sarah Student

Dear Mr. Swanson,

I am completing my Masters of Liberal Arts and preparing for my job search. My background is in medical devices sales and I would like to transition that experience into healthcare consulting. Dean Keith Krumpke recommended that I meet with you to get your advice. When would you have time to meet with me either by phone or in person?

Thank you,  
Job Student

## **Preparing for the Interview**

When appearing for an interview or meeting, you always want to put your best foot forward. Presenting yourself in a professional manner will help you to show that you mean business. If you are not certain about the specific workplace expectations, ask your contact when you schedule a meeting.

### **Dress**

When you meet in-person to conduct a professional informational interview, present yourself in a way that puts your contact at ease. This means, dress appropriately. If you are meeting at a coffee shop, you may dress casually in comparison to meeting in a corporate conference room. To measure the degree of casual for your wardrobe, however, take a hint from your context and use sound judgment. For example, appropriate dress for a coffee shop in Venice, CA on a Sunday afternoon is very different than appropriate dress for a coffee shop in downtown Los Angeles on Monday morning.

### **Tips for dressing in a professional environment:**

- In general, dress more conservatively than not.
- Men should wear dark pants with a tie (with or without jacket).
- Women should wear dark skirt or slacks with a blouse, and closed-toe shoes.
- Keep your outfit simple. For a distinctive accent, accessorize with a tie or a scarf.
- No matter how carefully you select your wardrobe, the effect is spoiled if what you wear is anything less than fresh, clean and in impeccable repair. Starch and iron all clothing. Consider having cotton shirts laundered.
- Your personal grooming is also key. Come to your meeting freshly showered, with your hair well attended to.
- Dress a notch above what you think someone in the profession might wear.

## Presentation

Your personal presentation is like the cover of a book. It may not be the most accurate representation of its contents, but it's the source of a first impression. Do not neglect the importance of making the best first impression. Here are a few tips:

- Carry a professional portfolio that contains a notepad, pen and copies of your polished and professional resume. Use a professional looking pen and pad of paper
- Use a professional, conservative looking handbag or shoulder bag to carry your personal items. The bag should match your outfit. Preferred colors are black, dark blue, or brown.
- Use professional body language and mannerisms when interacting with the contact. Introduce yourself by shaking hands. Sit upright and attentively when meeting with the contact to demonstrate that you are listening.
- In a phone meeting make sure you remain attentive, do not have music or other loud distractions in the background. To be safe, make your call indoors in a controlled environment.
- In communicating through email please use professional language, refrain from using shortcuts in writing (i.e. btw, thanx).

## Informational Interview Checklist

### Before the Interview

Strategies	To-Do List
Prepare logistics for the interview	<input type="checkbox"/> If meeting in-person, develop a list of recommended locations. <input type="checkbox"/> Get information about directions and parking.
Research your contact's field	<input type="checkbox"/> Review current information about the industry and organization of the contact. <i>Sources include:</i> Company website, business journals
Research your career interests	<input type="checkbox"/> Develop your resume and identify your own interests, skills, and values that you seek in a career field.
Prepare topics of conversation	<input type="checkbox"/> Compose a list of questions to ask the contact, based on your interests, your research, and the attached "Sample Questions"
Research the contact	<input type="checkbox"/> Learn about the contact's background. What do you have in common? What interests you the most? <i>Sources:</i> LinkedIn & Google
Identify your goals	<input type="checkbox"/> Ask yourself, "What do I want to get out of this conversation?"
Dress to impress	<input type="checkbox"/> Bring a pen, a pad of paper, your resume, and your questions list. <input type="checkbox"/> If meeting the contact in his/her place of work, ask about appropriate clothing.
Carry Cash	<input type="checkbox"/> Always bring cash in case of parking, or if you offer to buy coffee or lunch. Never assume plastic will be accepted.

### Interview

Strategies	To-Do List
Getting there on-time	<input type="checkbox"/> Give yourself an extra 15-minutes to park, and another 15-minutes if you are in an unfamiliar area
Make introductions	<input type="checkbox"/> Introduce yourself, your goals for the interview, and your proposed structure for the interview <input type="checkbox"/> Offer your resume so he/she can review your experience <input type="checkbox"/> Ask the contact to share about him/herself
Begin the Interview	<input type="checkbox"/> Begin asking questions. A good place to start is with "Tell me about your career journey".

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During the Interview	<input type="checkbox"/> Take notes. Taking notes demonstrates you are listening <input type="checkbox"/> Remember to participate in conversation
Wrap up the interview	<input type="checkbox"/> Ask the contact for other contacts who may provide insight <input type="checkbox"/> Ask for other general career advice <input type="checkbox"/> Express gratitude for the contact's time and insight <input type="checkbox"/> Get a copy of the contact's business card

### Post-Interview

Strategies	To-Do List
Express gratitude	<input type="checkbox"/> Write and send a hand-written thank you note to the address on the contact's business card
Nurture your new relationship by maintaining contact	<input type="checkbox"/> Keep in touch through LinkedIn or quick emails, informing the contact of your progress <input type="checkbox"/> Keep them informed if you contact a referred contact

## Sample Informational Interview Questions

### What Work is Like

1. Tell me about your career path and those common in this field?
2. How would you describe a typical day/week?
3. What are the major responsibilities of your position?
4. What kinds of skills and education are required in your position?
5. What hours do you normally work? Is there much travel involved?
6. What do you find most and least satisfying about your job?
7. What are the positive and negative aspects of working in this career field?
8. I'd like to walk through and see your work environment and the organization. Would that be acceptable and, if so, how could we arrange it?

### Industry/Career Field

9. What trends and developments do you see affecting career opportunities?
10. What are the most significant changes you've seen in the industry over the past 5 years?
11. What recommendations can you give to someone looking to enter this field?
12. What traits, characteristics and skills do successful people in this field possess?
13. What are the salary ranges for entry-level professionals in this field?
14. What is the corporate culture of your company? Is it informal or formal? Do people work autonomously or in teams?
15. What are the most helpful or prestigious professional associations? Are students invited to attend? Are student memberships available?

### Skills and Experience

16. What skills and educations are needed to enter this field?
17. What qualifications do you seek in a new hire?
18. What are the entry level opportunities/job titles for this profession/industry?
19. What kinds of entry-level jobs or internships are good training for this industry?
20. Which of my skills and work experiences are strong compared to other job hunters in this field?
21. What do you think of my resume? How would you suggest I change it?
22. Can you recommend any courses or training I should have before proceeding further with my job search?
23. What organizations do you know that might be interested in hiring someone with my back ground?

### Money and Advancement

24. What would be my earning potential if I entered this field and was successful?
25. Is job changing or relocation necessary to get promotions?
26. If you could start all over again, would you change your career path in any way?
27. What is the background of the most senior level executives?

### **More Information**

28. Taking into account my skill, education, and experience, what other career paths would you suggest I explore before making a final decision?
29. If you were me, what would you recommend I do?
30. Who else would you recommend I speak with? When I call, may I use your name?

### **Thank You Notes**

Thank you notes are tools to express gratitude. If you ever think that you do not need to send a thank you note because you thanked them enough in-person, over email, or by buying coffee, think again. The thank you note is a tangible expression of your gratitude and leaves a long lasting impression on your contact. This should never be neglected. Here are a few tips:

- Write a thank you note to your contact within 24 hours of your meeting or interaction.
- The thank you note should be handwritten, neat and legible.
- Use professional stationery or note cards (avoid kittens, balloons, etc.).
- Write with black or blue ink.
- Write out a draft of what you want to say on scratch paper first.
- Be specific in your thank you note about what you got out of the experience or how the experience helped you. Try to point out specific examples instead of using vague, cliché remarks.
- Thank the contact for taking the time to meet with you.
- Send the thank you note to your host.

### **Sample Thank You Note**

Dear Ms. Johnson,

Thank you for taking the time to meet with me, answer my questions and for providing insight about your career field. Our informational interview was beneficial to be because I now have more in-depth information about the opportunities available to me and I know the steps I need to take in order to move forward. I also feel more confident about me career goals thanks to your direction. I appreciate all your help and look forward to speaking with you in the future.

Sincerely,

Shannon L. Blackwood

### **References**

Pepperdine University, Seaver College Career Center. "Ultimate Guide to Informational Interviews."

Wake Forest University School of Business, Career Management Center. "Informational Interview Guidelines."