

Informational Interviews

Want to know what a career is really like? Ask someone with first-hand experience. Successful career planners know that information is fundamental to making a career decision. One of the best ways to get information is to ask people who are already in the field.

An informational interview is a meeting between a person who wants to investigate a career and a person working in that career. It is usually brief (20 to 40 minutes) and held at the work place of an individual whose position, career field, or employer interests you. The purpose of the informational interview is to obtain information, not a job interview.

Reasons for Conducting an Informational Interview

Informational interviews can help you:

- Get a realistic picture of working in a particular career field, including job responsibilities.
- Confirm a career choice or determine a specialty area of the field.
- Discover other career options that you never knew existed.
- Obtain insight into the qualifications required for a career field or job specialty.
- Decide if your skills are as polished as they should be for the career or position.
- Learn if your career choice is really compatible with your work values.

- Gain self-confidence and poise, and become better prepared for an actual job interview. You will learn what the position requires and can discuss your qualifications for the position with an employer.
- Get an inside look at an organization you may want to work for in the future.
- Learn about the methods for getting a job in the field.
- Make some professional contacts who may be able to help you when you are job hunting.

Deciding Whom to Interview

Prior to deciding whom to interview, you need to decide which occupations you want to learn more about. The more you research possible occupations, the better your questions will be when conducting informational interviews. Use campus resources, professional magazines and journals, and the Internet for your occupational research.

In selecting someone to interview, don't pick a human resources specialist, a hiring manager, or a supervisor. They may be too far removed from the job in which you are interested to give you detailed information. Instead, choose:

- Someone who is actually doing or has recently done the type of job in which you are interested.
- A person with the same level of responsibility you would expect to have, so you get an accurate, detailed impression of what you would be doing in the first few years.

Locating a Person to Interview

The easiest way is to ask people you already know. Find out if family, friends, faculty, neighbors, or former co-workers know people who work in the career field you want to explore. Your goal is to make contact with someone who can give you the name of (or refer you to) a person to interview. Ask them:

- Do you know a [journalist, accountant, web specialist, etc.] who would be willing to talk with me about his/her job?
- Do you know anyone who works at [specify the organization] that I could contact to discuss [specify the occupation/career field]?

Attend meetings of campus professional organizations, and ask the guest speakers if they can give you a lead. Many of them are Clarion alumni or employers who hire Clarion graduates. Check with the Alumni Relations office and see if they are able to provide you with a list of graduates in the field.

Professional associations maintain membership directories and often publish them. They also produce professional magazines and newsletters describing the activities of members. These members may be potential interview subjects.

Making Contact

After finding people to interview, you are ready to arrange a meeting. This involves contacting an individual to ask if they will talk with you or refer you to someone else in the organization. There are three methods of contact:

Referral. If someone you know has a connection to someone you would like to interview, that person may be willing to make the initial request for you. After he

or she makes the first request, you call to arrange a meeting time and location.

Letter or e-mail. Another way to ask for an interview is to send a letter or e-mail message. This gives the person time to check his or her schedule before responding. When writing a letter, explain who you are, how you found the person's name, why you want to meet, and how long you expect the meeting to last.

Phone. Give the type of information that you would in a letter. Be prepared to meet resistance. Some people may think that you are calling for a job. If they have no time to talk, ask if there is a better time to call.

Most students have a degree of uncertainty or anxiety about asking strangers for career information. The following tips may help you:

- Start with people with whom you feel at ease: family, friends, or a professor.
- Practice interviewing someone about a hobby, sport, or an area of interest where you have less to lose.
- Make it clear that you want information, not a job. If you are told that no jobs are available, reiterate your need for career information. Since people expect students to be looking for employment, they may misunderstand your intentions. Make your intent clear, and you will be surprised at how many people will be willing to meet with you and be interviewed.
- Don't automatically expect a reply to your letter. Remember that people are busy, and call about two weeks after you send the letter to ask for an appointment. You should refer to the letter, but not defensively. Never say things such as, "Since you didn't answer my letter, I am calling..."
- Expect to wait for an appointment, and be gracious if last-minute delays

or postponements occur. Often the person may be willing to see you, but finding the time to do so is quite another proposition.

Preparing to Interview

- Do your homework! Read about the career and/or organization before your interview. Web sites and employer literature are good sources of information.
- Be prepared to talk about yourself: your classes, campus involvement, skills, interests, experiences, etc.
- Prepare a resume in case the person would like to see it. In some cases, you may ask for feedback on it. This should be done only if you have established a good level of rapport and sincerely want suggestions from the individual.
- Formulate some questions. This will focus your conversation on the areas where you want information.

Conducting a Successful Interview

- Dress how the person you are interviewing would dress for a work day.
- Be professional. Arrive on time, greet the receptionist, and be friendly. Smile and shake hands with your interviewee. Start by thanking the person for giving you some time. Re-count why you want to meet him or her.
- Be genuinely interested in the person with whom you are talking. Remember, you aren't talking to an organization, you are talking to a person. You will learn from their personal experiences.

- Before the interview, read everything you can that might provide background for your questions. Ask yourself, *"What information do I need about a particular position or career field to make some decisions?"* Write down questions and don't be afraid to refer to them. Don't bore your interviewee with trivial questions; make a good impression.
- Never start with, *"Tell me about your job."* That is such a broad question that the person usually doesn't know where to begin. A more focused question, such as *"What are your most routine activities?"* helps to focus the answer.
- Ask open-ended questions. Questions should start with words such as, *how, why, what, and in what way:*
 - What are your primary responsibilities?
 - What qualifications do successful people in this field have?
 - How did you get into this field?
 - Why did you choose this organization?

An open-ended question keeps conversation flowing and gets you additional information. Ask for an example so you get more specific information and do not have to guess what the person meant.

- Maintain eye contact. Look at the person with whom you are talking.
- Keep the conversation on track. Ask questions you feel are important; take charge of the conversation when you feel you must.
- Be prepared to talk about yourself, describe experiences that relate to the kind of work you hope to do, and tell about your abilities and personal qualities which support your intentions. It is okay to talk about yourself, as long as you don't overdo it or sub-

tract from your interest in the other person. An interview should always be one that involves two people, not just one.

- Ask for a building tour. Take note of the physical facility, dress code, and work environment or atmosphere.
- Send a thank-you letter to your interviewee within a few days. Express appreciation for the time spent and advice given. Mention some information that was valuable.
- Follow up with a thank-you note to the person who referred you. Keep him/her posted through an occasional note or e-mail as you progress. This allows the person to see the results of his or her time and feel some rewards of sponsorship.

Evaluating the Information

After each interview, take some time to think about what you learned, your positive and negative impressions, and the advice you received. Determine if you think you would be happy in this type of job or organization. Decide how you can apply the information to your career plans.

Remember, work environments and jobs differ tremendously from one place to another. Don't form an opinion about the entire career field based only on one person's perspective. Interview several individuals so you can confirm the information with other sources.

If you decide you like an occupation, test it further through job shadowing, internships, or volunteer work. Early career exploration usually leads to a more satisfying career "fit" later.

A Sample Telephone Conversation

Call the person you want to interview and introduce yourself:

"Hello, Ms. Smith. My name is Amanda Jones."

Say something friendly:

"How are you this morning?"

Get down to business:

"Ms. Smith, I'm interested in a career in public relations. Your name was given to me by Dr. Brown of Clarion University's Communication Department. She recommended you as someone I should talk with about the field."

Prepare for the unexpected:

"I understand that you have no jobs right now. I'm not asking for a job. I just want some information about a career in public relations and some advice about planning my remaining college years to prepare for a public relations career."

Ask for an appointment:

"Would it be possible for us to meet next Friday? I would be happy to drive to Pittsburgh to talk with you." [or "Would it be possible to call you when you have some time to talk?"]

Prepare for delays:

"Oh, you'll be out of town that day. I'll be happy to meet when it is convenient for you. I just want about 30 minutes of your time. What date do you have available?"

Get the appointment:

"Thursdays are best for you. Great! Could we meet on the seventeenth of this month?"

Wrap it up and confirm the date, time, and location. Say thanks:

"That's next Thursday at 4 p.m. at 100 Smithfield Street. Thanks so much. I really appreciate the opportunity to meet with you."

Questions to Ask

About preparation or skills required:

- What kind of education, degrees, or professional licenses are required for this field?
- What skills are most essential for effective performance in this job?
- What types of prior experiences are beneficial for this type of work?
- What personal traits or characteristics are helpful to succeed in this occupation?

About the job:

- What responsibilities and duties do you have?
- Describe a typical work day.
- What are the beginning, average, and top salaries in this occupation?
- Are there other occupations that are similar to this one?

About personal satisfaction:

- What aspects of this occupation or organization give you personal satisfaction?
- What do you like most or find most interesting about your work?
- What are the major frustrations or sources of dissatisfaction in this occupation or organization?
- What problems, both internal and external, cause dissatisfaction in the job or workplace?
- When people leave this kind of work, what is usually the reason?

About the person's background:

- What components of your education have been most helpful to the work that you do?
- What are three strengths that you bring to this position?
- How did you become interested in this field or organization?
- What job(s) did you have previous to this one?

- Since college, how have you enhanced your qualifications to be more effective on this job?
- For what other occupations or organizations is your background well suited?

About changes in the career field:

- What changes have occurred since you began working in this profession or career field?
- Are the number of workers in this field growing or declining?
- Will there be a continued demand for this occupation?

About working conditions:

- How much time do you spend at work?
- What obligations does your work place upon your personal time?
- Is there a dress code at this organization?
- How much flexibility do you have in terms of dress, hours of work, vacation, etc.?
- Is relocation or mobility important to this career field?
- How much travel or overtime is involved?
- What is the overall morale of the people who work in this organization?

About training and promotion:

- What types of formal or on-the-job training does the organization provide?
- How often are performance reviews given?
- What is the next step for people in this position?
- What opportunities exist for advancement, promotion, or change of jobs within the organization?
- What is the average length of time employees stay with the organization?

About the organization:

- Explain what the organization does, its products or services.
- What is the size of the organization and its geographic locations?
- Who are its competitors?
- Who are its customers?
- What are the best things you can say about this organization?
- What strengths set this organization apart from others?

About changes in the organization:

- What changes do you think are coming for this organization over the next five years?
- What is the growth potential for this organization in the future? Increasing or declining?
- How secure will employment be in this organization?
- Will there be a continued demand for this organization?
- Are the number of workers increasing or declining in this organization?

About organizational structure:

- To whom do you report?
- Whom do you supervise?

Related to your career development:

- On what courses or areas of study should I concentrate to increase my marketability in the field?
- What experiences are most valuable for people in this field?
- What extracurricular activities would you recommend to help prepare me for this field or make me more marketable?
- What advice do you have for someone considering or preparing for this occupation?
- How suited is my background for this field (education, interests, activities, experiences, personality)?

About the job search:

- What methods did you use to find work in this field?
- How did you get this particular job?
- What are the best sources of job information for this type of occupation? How do others find jobs in this occupation?
- How does this organization recruit candidates for this position?
- If you were to hire someone to work with you, what factors would be most important in your hiring decision?
- What are some related fields?

About other resources:

- Are there other people in this occupation who may be able to provide additional information? May I please mention that you referred me?
- What professional journals or websites would you recommend for information about this field?
- What professional organizations would help me to meet people and learn more about the field?

Sample Contact Letter

100 Becht Hall
 Clarion University
 Clarion, PA 16214
 March 14, 2006

Mr. John Smith
 Sales Manager, Consumer Foods
 H.J. Heinz
 1062 Progress Street
 Pittsburgh, PA 15230

Dear Mr. Smith:

I recently discussed my career plans with Dr. Roberta Brown, my advisor in the Marketing Department at Clarion University. She recommended you as someone who is very knowledgeable about the food industry and who may be willing to provide advice regarding opportunities in the field.

As a sophomore, I am currently exploring career options. Through part-time and summer jobs, I have had work experience as a stock clerk in a supermarket and a salesperson in a gourmet coffee shop. The food industry is an area which appeals to me.

I would like your insight, and believe your suggestions and advice would be helpful as I develop plans for my last two years at Clarion. I would like to meet with you to find out more about the food industry and to explore the kinds of opportunities available in a company like Heinz. I have prepared a number of questions I would like to ask you.

Please contact me if you would be willing to schedule a personal meeting or a phone session with me. Please note, I am not asking you for a job. I only want a few minutes of your time, and some advice on how to plan for a career in the food industry.

Sincerely,

Lisa S. Jones

Lisa S. Jones

Sample Thank-You Letter

100 Becht Hall
 Clarion University
 Clarion, PA 16214
 March 14, 2006

Mr. John Smith
 Sales Manager, Consumer Foods
 H.J. Heinz
 1062 Progress Street
 Pittsburgh, PA 15230

Dear Mr. Smith:

I enjoyed meeting with you yesterday to discuss the career options available for college graduates in the food industry. After my conversation with you, I am further convinced that this is the career path I would like to pursue.

I appreciate your advice for my final years at Clarion. I plan to get involved in a campus business organization this semester. In addition, I will look into getting an internship between my junior and senior years.

The tour of the Sales Department and the H.J. Heinz facility was an enjoyable experience. Thank you for taking time from your busy schedule to meet with me.

Sincerely,

Lisa S. Jones

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Career Services Center
 Clarion University
 114 Egbert
 Clarion, PA 16214
 Phone: 814-393-2323
 Fax: 814-393-2054
 Web: www.clarion.edu/career