

Informational Interviewing



What is an Informational Interview?

The purpose of informational interviews is to ask for advice and insight, NOT a job. These conversations, with various professionals, can teach you about:

- Relating your major to specific careers
- Preparing for a specific career
- Identifying relevant industries
- Targeting a specific company
- Making a career change and learning how to enter a new field

All of this information can help you make appropriate career decisions, find information about specific opportunities, and market yourself more effectively when kicking off a job search.

In addition to gathering information, you are building a professional network, consisting of contacts with whom you have developed relationships over time. Many jobs are filled by word-of-mouth and networking rather than formal advertising, so the larger your network, the greater your opportunities.

Why It's Not As Scary as You Think

- Most people like to give advice and feel good helping others. Moreover, people often enjoy talking about themselves, which is what an informational interview gives them a chance to do.
- Most successful professionals have conducted informational interviews when they were starting out, and many will be willing to return the favor.
- The worst case scenario is that your contact is too busy to meet with you, or never returns your follow up call.

How Do You Find People To Interview?

Do you know someone who works in your field of interest, or who might have contacts in that field? Ask family, friends, classmates, former and present co-workers, and supervisors if they know anyone working in a field related to your interests. Also consider the following:

- Northeastern Alumni Directory – via HuskyNation on myNEU if you are a senior
- Faculty members – who might know potential contacts or have knowledge of organizations that are hiring
- Professional organizations – many of which have student memberships
- Workshops, seminars, conferences – to meet participants and presenters in your related field
- Online networking – via MySpace, Facebook or LinkedIn (a networking site used for professional networking)
- Web and print material – professional journals, newsletters and websites can help you identify people who are active in the field

Always try to obtain the name of at least one additional contact during each informational interview by asking, “Is there anyone else you could recommend that I might speak with?”

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How Do You Contact Someone for An Informational Interview?

By email/letter

- If you do not know the person, it is more considerate to contact the person in writing, so you avoid the possibility of contacting them at an awkward time. (See sample letters.)
- Explain who you are, why you are contacting this person, and how you found their name.
- Give a very brief description of your work/education history and why you're interested in speaking to him/her.
- Request a 20-30 minute meeting to get information and advice about his/her career field.

By phone call:

- If you already know the person, you can first contact the person by phone.

Prepare For Your Meeting

- Your goals for this meeting are to get information and advice you can't find online and to make a great impression. Being well-informed about the field shows respect for the person's time and makes the meeting more productive.
- View the organization's web site, research the career and industry online and in professional journals.
- Most importantly, prepare a written list of questions in advance.

Possible Questions To Ask

Decide what specifically you would like to find out from this person. Good questions stimulate the conversation.

Job content - what are the nuts and bolts?

- Could you describe a typical work day or work week?
- What part of your job do you find most satisfying/challenging?
- What abilities or personal qualities do you believe contribute most to success in this job?
- Do you happen to know the entry-level salary range for this profession/industry?

Career path - how did your career develop?

- What is the typical career path in this field?
- How did you get your present job?
- Can you tell me about typical entry level opportunities in this field?

Preparation - what does it take?

- What advice would you give to someone who's interested in starting out in this field?
- Do you have any special words of warning or encouragement as a result of your experience?
- Are there any professional associations and/or journals that you would recommend?
- Are there any job hunting strategies that you would suggest to enter this field?

Company / Industry – what's your organization like?

- How would you describe the corporate culture at your organization?
- How does your organization differ from its competitors?

The final, and most important question:

- Is there anyone else you can recommend I speak with for additional information?

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The Meeting

- Arrive on time, in business casual dress, with questions ready. Show your interest and enthusiasm.
- Most people enjoy an opportunity to share their experience and offer assistance. Make it clear you find the conversation interesting and useful.
- DO NOT, at any time, ask for a job. You asked for advice and information when you contacted them. By asking for a job, you risk embarrassment and ruined credibility. Bring a resume but present it only if asked.
- Keep track of the time. Stay longer only if invited to do so.
- Before leaving, ask for a business card and for a referral to someone else in the field.

After The Interview

Jot down some notes after your meeting (name of the contact, date, particularly useful information, etc.) so you remember what you talked about and to help you write the thank-you note.

Write a thank-you note after each informational interview. These notes can be sent via regular mail or email.

- Express your appreciation for the assistance you received and mention one or two specifically helpful points.
- If you obtained an additional person to contact, let the original person know how that contact went

Your informational interviews will generate additional contacts and possibly job opportunities, especially if you keep in touch with your contacts. The people you meet are potential members of your future professional network.

When you have found your position, selected your major, or chosen your career path, notify people you've spoken with; they will want to hear what happened to you. Notifying them also keeps your network alive!

Sample Letters

Sample Email - Student Choosing a Major

Dear Ms. Smith:

As a first-year student at Northeastern University, I am in the process of choosing my major. I have been researching careers related to a communications major, and came across your company's name when doing my research. I was hoping I could meet with you to discuss your career in public relations.

I am interested in hearing about how and why you entered the field, the pros and cons of working in PR, and your advice on how I might test the waters to determine if this field is a good fit for me. Would it be possible to schedule a half-hour meeting in the next few weeks to discuss your position and career path?

I will call you next week to follow up. Please feel free to contact me at 617-555-555 or a.clew@neu.edu. Thank you for your consideration, and I look forward to speaking with you.

Sincerely,
Anita Clew

Sample Letter - Graduating Senior

July 18, 2007
Ms. Jane Doe
Senior HRIS Analyst
Nameless Investment Firm
444 Nowhere Boulevard
Boston, MA 02115

Dear Ms. Doe:

Through the NU Alumni Directory, I discovered that you currently work in HR information management. As I finish up my degree in MIS and HR, I am contacting NU alums in relevant fields for advice.

The work of an HRIS analyst greatly interests me. I realize this is not an entry-level position; however I would like to gain an understanding of what your position demands, the career path you followed, and the pros and cons of this kind of work. I would greatly appreciate it if we could set up a 20 minute meeting, at your convenience, to discuss these topics.

During the last week of July, I will give you a quick follow up call. In the meantime, however, I can be reached at 617-821-3434, e-mail g.hand@neu.edu. Thank you very much for your time.

Sincerely yours,
Gimea Hand

Sample Email - Experienced Professional

Dear Mr. Lee:

Having worked for many years as a physical therapist in a small practice, I have decided to make a career change. I am writing to you having seen in the NU Alumni Directory that you are in sales management for HealMe Pharmaceuticals. This is an area that interests me greatly.

Although being a PT has been gratifying in many ways, I am looking for a new career that will allow me to manage my own time and increase my income potential. I would appreciate your advice on whether pharmaceuticals sales is an appropriate choice for someone with my background and interests.

I will call you in a few days to see if we could set up a brief meeting, either in person or by phone. Any advice or information you could offer a fellow Husky would be tremendously appreciated.

Best wishes,
Wanda Munny

