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Women's Resource Centre

Informational interviews

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INFORMATIONAL INTERVIEWS

Informational interviews are invaluable

What if you could get “inside information” about an organization you are interested in working for, or about a specific job you are applying for?

If you are thinking about changing careers, talking to someone who does the job you are interested in can give you insight into what you will — and will not — like about your desired job. For someone who has not interviewed for a job in a long time, an informational interview can also provide valuable practice before applying for jobs and going on interviews.

Informational interviews (also called information sessions, informational meetings, virtual chats, or coffee dates) are interviews that are conducted to gather information to help prepare for a job interview and/or learn more about a specific job, industry, or company. However, an informational interview is *not* a job interview, and should not be confused with one. With an informational interview, you are not seeking a job — you are seeking information to help you get a job.

Anyone can conduct an informational interview, although they are most used by new graduates and those considering changing careers. Informational interviews are not used as often as they should be by jobseekers, but they can be a valuable tool in your job search — one that can help you make an informed decision about starting a career in a new practice area or even working at a specific organization.

Sending outreach emails

At this stage, you should have already developed a list of 30-40 employers/individuals from the guide, [Knowing what you want and developing a list of dream employers](#). Now you are ready to start contacting them. Email is generally best for this.

From your list of employers, choose someone:

- Who is doing the job you want, or
- Who works in the practice area you want to work in - but not necessarily doing the job you want (maybe you are a paralegal and want to speak with a partner), or
- Who is knowledgeable about hiring practices or the organizational culture (like someone from Human Resources or a Professional Development Officer).

Who you choose from the above options could depend on the connection you feel you have with the person. For example, if you are a paralegal, you might choose to speak with a partner who practices in your area of interest because you were both born in the same country. Or perhaps as an in-house lawyer, you want to speak with a General Counsel because that is the position you want to move to next. Or perhaps you are a new-call and want to speak to the Professional Development Office because you know that firm funnels all outreach requests to the Professional Development Office.

Here is a sample email template to send to a complete stranger (it can also be modified to use with someone you are acquainted with):

Dear [Name]:

I was given your name [by X person or found your name by conducting research] in the hopes that you would answer a few questions I have about working [in the ___ practice area, or at ___ organization]. I would love to [speak with you by phone/video conference or meet with you for coffee] for [time period]. I am [just graduating from ___/looking to make a career change to ___ practice area/hoping to learn more about the work your organization does], and your insights would be most helpful.

If you would be willing to [meet with me/talk with me by phone/video conference], please let me know a couple of days and times that will work for you to choose from. I understand that this may be a busy time for you, so I will follow up next week to see if that is a better time to schedule something.

Thank you,

[Your name]

Make sure you keep your email brief and to the point. Do not include your whole life history. Remember, you are asking that person to do you a favor. Do not waste their time. If you have not heard back after a week, send a follow-up email (like the above script forces you to do). If you do not receive a response after the second email, move on to the next employer/person on your list.

Are you feeling hesitant?

If you are feeling hesitant about reaching out to a stranger, consider a few possible reasons why someone would agree to meet with you for an informational interview:

- *To do a favor for someone.* Being introduced by a mutual acquaintance is a terrific way to secure an informational interview.
- *To help others.* Many people enjoy “giving back.” Also, those who do not want to mentor others may still take a one-hour meeting to share their expertise.
- *To receive recognition for their accomplishments.* People love to talk about themselves — especially successes in their professional life.
- *To build their own network.* Someone new to the field — or just out of school — provides a fresh perspective, which may help the interviewer do their job better.

Preparing for an informational interview

Before you request and schedule an informational interview, familiarize yourself with the person you will be interviewing, their job, the company, and the practice area. You do not want to waste someone’s time asking them a question that could be answered with a simple Google search.

When you have the opportunity to ask questions of someone who has the job you want, make sure you are making the most of the time you have. You may only have a half-hour with the person, which might only be enough time to ask a handful of questions. Make sure you know how much time the person is devoting to your meeting, so you can be respectful of that time!

You should prepare for an informational interview like you would prepare for a job interview — except you will be asking most of the questions, instead of answering them. Prepare a list of questions to ask in the interview. How many questions you are ultimately able to ask depends on the amount of time you have, so once you have listed your questions, rank them in the order you would like them answered.

What kind of questions can you — or should you — ask in an informational interview? Here are some possibilities.

About the job specifically:

- What skills are most important to perform the job?
- What is a typical day like in this job?
- How much does this type of job pay? (A range? At this organization specifically?)
- What is the most important function someone in this job performs?
- What do you wish you would have known before you took this job?
- What is the worst part of this job? (And how often does it happen?)

About the organization:

- How would you describe the culture?
- How does the organization advertise job openings, or find job candidates?
- What does the organization look for in candidates applying for this type of job?
- What kind of turnover exists for these jobs in this organization? Why do people generally leave the organization?
- What are the policies about vacation time, employee benefits, paying for continuing education, etc.?

About preparing to work in this practice area:

- How do people generally get started in this field?
- What kind of training or educational preparation is needed for this job or career? What courses best prepared you for success in this job?
- Are there any degrees or certifications that are required for this job?
- Will my education prepare me for a job in this field — if not, what kind of additional experiences should I be seeking out?
- Are there any professional or trade organizations I should join?
- What kind of work history or experience would best prepare someone to do this job?

- What is the best way to break into this practice area?
- What advice would you give to someone considering a job as a ___?
- Are there any specific places to look for job postings for jobs like this?
- What has been the most surprising or interesting thing you have learned in your career?
- What are some related jobs/job titles?
- How can I best prepare myself to be successful in this job/in this area/with this organization?

About the future/opportunities for advancement:

- What are the prospects for employment in this field? What kind of job opportunities exist with this company, or in the area?
- What are the opportunities for advancement in this field? Is this industry growing or shrinking?
- What is the typical career path in the industry?
- How do you see the industry changing in the next 5-10 years?

About next steps:

- If you were in my shoes, with an interest in ____, what steps would you be taking?
- Can you suggest someone else I should talk to? Can I use your name as an introduction to that person?
- Is it okay with you if I reach out to you again if I have additional questions?
- Can you suggest any other organizations that I should investigate?
- Is there anything I can do to help you, since you were so kind as to meet with me?

What not to do in an informational interview

Do not waste your interviewer's time. Again, be sure that you have done your homework ahead of time so that you are not asking simple questions. This is your chance to get "inside information," so take advantage of the opportunity!

Do not forget that an interview is still a two-way dialogue. One common mistake in an informational interview is to treat it as a cross-examination, instead of as an examination-in-chief. Even though you may have a limited amount of time to ask your questions, do not cut the person off when you have the information you wanted from their answer. Recognize that you may not be able to ask all the questions you wanted to, but that there may be opportunities to ask additional questions in the future if you handle the informational interview well.

Ask if you can take notes during the interview, but do not be so focused on your note-taking that you are not engaged in the conversation. In most cases, the big picture is more important than the small details. But do jot down notes so you can fill in the details later.

The number one rule for informational interviews is that you do not ask for a job (or turn the informational interview into a sales pitch of your skills and abilities). An informational interview *may* lead to a job interview, but the quickest way to have your informational interview end abruptly is to direct your questions into how that person should hire you for the job you want. Focus on getting to know the person, role and/or organization better.

After the informational interview

Take a few minutes after the interview to write down your thoughts and impressions, recording as much of the information as you can remember, including the small details. Also, think of questions you still want answered — or new questions you have because of the interview, even if you do not know yet who can answer those questions.

Within 24 hours of your informational interview, write a thank you note to the person you interviewed and reference something specific about the conversation that you appreciated. Equally important, keep them informed of your progress. Report back if you have followed up on any of their suggestions or recommendations. If the person offered to do something for you, provide a gentle reminder in the thank you note. (*“Thank you for your offer to introduce me to _____. I look forward to meeting them!”*) And if you have offered to do something for the person, make sure you follow through!

Enlisting the help of others with informational interviews can be one of the best ways to move your job search forward or accomplish a career change. Having the right information will help you be more effective in your job search. Research and relationship-building can give you a significant advantage over other job applicants, and help you secure your ideal role.

Checklist

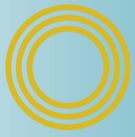
- Prepare for the meeting.** Do not waste the time you have been given.
- Make it convenient for the person you are interviewing.** Suggest a phone call or virtual meeting where appropriate. People are busy and more likely willing to connect if they know it will not be a big commitment. If you do meet in person, choose a place that works for them and buy their meal or drink. Remember, they are doing you a favor.
- Be prepared to answer questions too.** For example, “Why do you want to work in this field/for this organization?”
- Be on time for your informational interview.** Arrive 5-10 minutes early. End the interview when you promised to. If you asked for 15 minutes, only take 15 minutes. Respect the person’s time. If the person offers to extend the meeting, you can go on longer, but otherwise, keep to the agreed-upon time.
- Dress appropriately.** In most instances, this will be business attire.

- ❑ **Be sure you know the correct pronunciation and spelling of the person's name you are meeting with.** If you do not have all their contact information (which you will need to send the thank you note), ask for their business card.
- ❑ **Say thank you.** Also, ask the person if there is something you can do for them in appreciation for their time in meeting with you. ("Is there something I can help you with?")
- ❑ **Do not leave them wondering what happened to you.** Keep in touch, even if it is sending an email as your job search progresses. And when you land your dream job, send another thank you note!
- ❑ **Pay it forward.** If you have been helped by someone, remember that, and give back when it is your turn to do someone a favor.

Resources

- The 2-Hour Job Search: Using Technology to Get the Right Job Faster by Steve Dalton
- [Informational Interviews: A Valuable Networking Tool for Career Transitions](#)
- [How To Power Your Career Transition Or Job Search With An Informational Interview](#)
- [Conducting An Informational Interview: For Law Students](#)
- [How to find your first job as a lawyer: 5 tips from your peers](#)
- ["C" is for the "Courage" it takes for a New-Call to Network](#)
- [Conducting an effective hidden job market search: How to find your first job as a lawyer 101](#)
- [How General Counsels Can Activate The Hidden Job Market \(And Connect With Executive Recruiters\)](#)

Now that you are conducting informational interviews, you will likely be getting formal interviews. Go to the next guide: [Interview preparation and salary negotiation!](#)



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