

## **How to Prepare for an Informational Interview**

### **Informational Interview**

The informational interview is a low-key, informational experience that may be a valuable tool when making decisions about your career. You accomplish several things when you go out on informational interviews:

- Obtain information about your career field and the skills needed to do that job effectively;
- Increase your visibility and make personal contact with agency personnel;
- Gain insight into the hidden job market;
- Become aware of the needs of the employers and the realities of employment; and
- Gain invaluable interviewing experience.

In short it prepares you for what's in store and allows you the opportunity to network with others in your field of interest.

In order to acquaint yourself with the interviewing process, talk with family, friends or anyone with whom you feel comfortable. Consider practicing to minimize the anxiety you may feel about interviewing.

### **Guidelines for Informational Interviews**

#### **Identify an occupation**

Identify an occupation you would like to investigate. Find out as much information as you can about it before setting up an interview. This can be done through telephone, library, the Chamber of Commerce, the State of Wisconsin online job WorkNet directory at: <http://worknet.wisconsin.gov/worknet/>, or by word of mouth. Be sure ALL the information you acquire is accurate.

#### **Set up an informational interview prior to a job opening**

It is usually a good idea to set up an informational interview with a resource person before there is an actual job opening in your area of interest. Managers and supervisors may feel uneasy or uncomfortable talking with a potential candidate when the agency is actively filling a position from an established candidate list.

## **Never ask for a job**

The typical job searcher is going around asking for a job. In an informational interview, you should be asking questions to find out more about the job, the agency and how you may better prepare for openings. This will help set you apart from the many others who are asking for jobs and being turned down. Approach the unit or section of an agency with the attitude that you are seeking career advice.

### **Prepare your questions ahead of time**

Ask questions that are appropriate and will provide you with important information. Convey your motivation and interest to the employer by acknowledging that the information they are giving you is important and that you put some thought into your questions.

Prepare answers to questions the manager or professional/technical person might ask of you during the interview.

**To help you get your foot in the door, it will be helpful for you to have brainstormed some short, concise and informative answers to the following questions:**

- **Why are you interested in this type of work?**
- **Why do you feel you would be good at it?**
- **What interests you about this agency, department, division, unit or section?**
- **How would you quickly sum up your work history to make it fit with this agency?**
- **What do you truly want from this contact, and how will you use the information?**
- **In what stage are you with your career search?**

**Scheduling the informational interview:** Contact the resource person, preferably by telephone, e-mail or letter. Try to schedule your interviews with managers and supervisors who have the authority to hire. Identify yourself and explain that you are doing research interviews for the contact's field of expertise, and that you obtained their name from \_\_\_\_\_.

Persons who grant informational interviews are typically willing to share 20-30 minutes of their time to explain their field or experiences. Be flexible in your scheduling, as these volunteer interviewees may have other commitments. If this should occur, ask a convenient time when you could call back to discuss scheduling an interview. Although there are many techniques to setting up informational interviews, the following is a good approach.

**Hello, my name is \_\_\_\_\_. I am conducting research in your occupational field for a class that I am taking. I would be extremely grateful for the opportunity to speak with you so that I can find out more about your business and field of expertise through personal first-hand experiences and any other helpful information and thoughts you would be willing to share with me.**

**I would appreciate whatever time that you would be willing to spare, but would think 20 to 30 minutes would be sufficient for me to complete my interview with you. For consideration of your time, I have included the initial list of questions that I have in mind, but I am sure they will spark follow-up questions upon hearing your answers.**

**Thank you in advance for whatever assistance you can offer,**

*Your Name Signed*

If you prefer to arrange an appointment in person and cannot get past the front desk, treat receptionists as resources. They hold the key to getting inside the unit or section of that agency if you do not already have an inside contact or referral. Ask them some of your questions. You will usually get good information. Receptionists and other support staff often know a great deal about their agency or firm. They know how it works, the names of key people, job requirements, etc. It is important that they understand what you want. If you ask them something that they feel could be more fully answered by someone else, they will usually give you a referral.

### **Dress appropriately**

Because a large percentage of openings are NEVER advertised, you may uncover job opportunities that never make it to the newspaper or employment office. Be prepared to make a good impression and to be remembered favorably by the employer. Looking for a job means that you should always look your best in appearance and otherwise.

### **Come prepared to take notes**

Pretend you are a reporter. You don't need to write everything down, but there may be names, phone numbers or other information that you do want to remember.

Be enthusiastic and show interest. Use an informal dialogue during the interview. Be direct and concise with your questions and answers. Do not ramble. Have good eye contact and posture. Be positive with your remarks, and reflect a good sense of humor.

Bring your resume (Save it for the last 5 minutes when you answer questions about yourself) You are there to interview them! If you give it at the end...it gives you a reason to re-contact them for a critique and their suggestions – which after making changes, you can email it to them.

Bring a copy of your resume. Try to find out about specific characteristics or qualifications that employers seek when hiring. You may ask the person you are interviewing to critique your resume. Ask if you may follow-up in two or three weeks.

### **Before the interview**

The day before the interview, call to confirm your appointment with the contact person. If you have questions regarding the office location and direction, this is the time to ask. Plan to arrive 10 minutes early for your interview. Carry a small notebook and pen to take notes...YOU ARE INTERVIEWING THEM! This will help you know how to follow-up with them --- Ask for homework.

## The interview

You have arrived and been greeted by the individual at the front desk. When the contact comes out to meet you, introduce yourself. Thank your contact for his or her willingness to meet with you and re-emphasize that you are there to learn and gather information about his or her career field. Use an informal dialogue during the interview.

The following are typical informational interview questions (please see last page, as well):

1. What is your job like?
  - How would you describe a typical day?
  - What do you do?
  - What kinds of problems do you deal with?
  - What kinds of decisions do you make?
2. What jobs and experience have led to your present employment?
3. What are the greatest personal satisfactions and disappointments connected with your occupation?
4. What professional obligations go along with your occupation?
  - Are there organizations you are expected to join?
  - Are there expectations outside work hours?
5. What things did you do before entering this occupation?
  - Which have been most helpful?
  - What other jobs can you get with the same background?
6. What sorts of changes are occurring in your occupation/industry?
7. How does a person progress in your field?
  - What is the best way to enter this occupation?
  - What are the advancement opportunities?
  - What are the key qualifications for success in this particular occupation?
8. Can you tell me about others you know who do similar kinds of work or who use similar skills?
9. What can you tell me about the employment outlook in your occupational field?

People are often happy to discuss their positions and willing to provide you with a wealth of information. Try to keep the conversation friendly, but brief and focused on the contact person's job.

Share some information about yourself (Wait for the last 5-minutes of the interview)

Do not dominate the interview by talking about yourself. You are there to get information that will help you learn about the agency and the position, so you can be adequately prepared to compete for the job.

Be aware, however, that many informational interviews have turned into actual employment interviews. If it seems that you are being interviewed for a specific job, ask so you can make sure you emphasize your talents and skills, and why you feel they relate to the job.

### **Be a good listener**

Listening is an important component of effective communication. In addition to being able to ask questions and convey a message to employers, you need to develop the skill of really listening to what they tell you. Be receptive and paraphrase or restate information to show that you understand the key points.

### **Ask if you may stay in contact**

You have spent 20-30 minutes with this person, asking questions, getting advice and sharing a little about yourself. Thus begins your contact network. They have taken time to share with you; in other words, they have invested time in you. Most people like their investment to pay off. The person you have just talked with wants you to find a job. Most people will feel good about your staying in contact with them. You do not have to call or write them every week. Just keep them posted on your research. They may not have a job for you, but they may know of other agencies or people to whom you may be referred. Ask for your contact's business card and exchange one of your own, if you have one. Ask if you may leave a resume for them to critique.

### **Always send a thank you note**

Be sure to send a thank you note or letter within three days of the interview. This is an effective way to keep in touch, as well as to be remembered by people. Let them know they were helpful and thank them for their time. As a nice touch, quote something that the resource person said to you, word for word. Ask them to keep you in mind if they come across any other information that may be helpful to you in your career search. Include your address and phone number under your signature.

### **Make a Reference List**

Keep a list of all the people you have interviewed or plan to interview for future reference. Keep a special notebook or cards with interview notes on your questions covered. Include the main things that you gained from each interview. This file will be a rich source of information as you conduct your occupational exploration.

### **Always get referrals**

People who are in the same kinds of business usually know their competition. As if they could give you the names of others to talk to and if you may say that they referred you. Referrals open doors!

### **Capturing that dream**

You have just taken the first important step in developing your career search strategy. You have shared information about yourself and gained a wealth of information from an individual who is employed in a career in which you are interested. You have built trust with someone in the field and taken responsibility for getting yourself a position that you will enjoy. You have also begun developing a network of potential employers. Although you are not asking for a job, these individuals are now aware of your interests.

Remember not to become discouraged. Establishing this network is vital if you are serious about making a new career change and finding the "good jobs."

When the day of your “real” job interview arrives, the interviewing panel could contain someone with who conducted an informational interview. Chances are that you will stand out in his or her mind when the selection is made. You have developed the necessary confidence and expertise to make your dream job a reality.

**Sample Research questions to explore a job:**

- What is your job like?
- What do you like best about your job?
- What kinds of problems do you deal with?
- What kinds of decisions do you make?
- What skills, abilities, aptitudes and/or temperaments are needed?
- How do people get most of their training?
- Does the work serve values which are important to you?
- What are the greatest personal satisfactions and disappointments connected with this occupation?
- What is the outlook for this type of work?
- How do you see your job changing over the next several years?
- Do you have any tips on how to get such a job?

**Sample Research questions to learn about a person:**

- What jobs and educational experiences have led to your present job?
- Why did you choose the type of work you are doing?
- What has been your favorite job?
- What has given you your biggest sense of accomplishment?
- Do you have any tips for building a successful career?
- What type(s) of job(s) have you thought about doing next?

**Sample Research questions to learn about an agency:**

- What are your most popular products or services?
- What type of jobs do you have here, and is there a path for advancement?
- What type of people are you looking for?
- What entry-level jobs exist?
  
- Do you provide training?
- What are the advancement opportunities?
- What is the approximate salary range?
- What is the benefit package?
- What is the long-and short-range outlook for the organization?
- What are the most important immediate and future concerns for the organization?
- What are the agency's goals and objectives over the next six months? The next year? Two years?
- If you were hiring someone today, for what position would you hire?
- What is the hire procedure?
- Do you have any literature on the agency?
- How did most people here get their jobs?
- What kind of person do you have to be to fit in with the agency?

**Other issues about the organization:**

- Conformity  Low  High  In between
- Delegation of responsibility  Low  High  In between
- Standards and expectations  Low  High  In between
- Recognition and rewards  Low  High  In between
- Clarity and organization  Low  High  In between
- Team spirit  Low  High  In between
- Action orientation  Do It  Fix It  Try It

- Close to the customer:
  - Learning from the people they serve
  - Excellent service?
- Autonomy and entrepreneurship:
  - Fostering leadership and innovations at all levels?
  - Centralized around a few core values that are held clear?
- Productivity through people:
  - Are rank and file treated as the root of quality and productivity?
- Hands-on, value driven:
  - What are the values of leadership and how clearly are they communicated?