

The Informational Interview

(It's not what you know, but who you know)

The informational interview can be one of your most useful job search tools. Through an informational interview, you will become known, contacts will become more than just leads, and you will be given an opportunity to acquire information that can help you gain employment. Its purpose is:

- to acquire both facts and feedback on your job search in general, on the general field you are interested in, on the organization you would like to work for, or on a specific position,
- to make yourself known in the field as someone who has a specific skill to offer,
- to accumulate contacts and leads as part of your networking,
- to gain experience in talking with people who are in a position to interview and employ you.

Each information interview is an opportunity to leave a good impression and to be remembered as someone who could offer specific expertise. The success of the informational interview as a job search technique lies in the opportunity it provides for you to be in control. You are the one who sets the agenda for the interview. You are in command if you know the needs of the employers, know your own goals and abilities, and can communicate, to the employer, the compatibility of the two. Because this type of interview is in your control, it is less stressful, less formal, and more predictable than a job interview. It is helpful to view the informational interview as an opportunity to interact with other professionals and to demonstrate your ongoing involvement in your field.

Depending on your purpose; the type of person you contact for an informational interview will vary. Friends and acquaintances may be the best choice for your first interview, as they may give you valuable leads while helping you relax in the interview situation. People who work in positions similar to your goal, customers, clients, students who use the service or product, can all provide valuable input for your research of a position or an organization. However, it is especially important to approach high level executives, personnel managers, and others in a position to assist you regarding actual employment. Find out who the most successful people and organizations are in your job target field.

Approach the person you want to talk to by telephone, or by letter, if the organization is not local, and ask for fifteen or twenty minutes of their time. Clearly state your intentions and emphasize that you would value their expertise, opinions and feedback. Avoid saying that you are looking for work since you may decide not to apply to the organization or individual at all.

To get the maximum benefit from an informational interview you must prepare for it. KNOW what your purpose is, who you will be speaking with, and how your skills, abilities and interests fit into the picture. RESEARCH the industry and the company. PLAN to ask some open ended questions ("How might someone with my background prepare for a job within this field/organization?" "How did you plan for and reach your present position?"). PREPARE to present a professional image. REMEMBER that most professionals in upper level positions are receptive to people coming in for short discussions. You are after all, a colleague and an equal, seeking information - not begging for a job. You will be received as such if you communicate your sincerity, energy and self confidence.

NOTE: Good idea to follow up with a thank you letter.

(From the South Island Professional Association)