

Talking With Others about Their Careers

Talking with people about their careers, or “information interviewing,” can help you in a number of ways.

If you’re exploring & gathering information on several careers...

interviewing people in these fields can give you a more specific, up-to-date, and personalized perspective. Aside from actually working in a career, interviewing and observing people in the work setting is the only way that you can “get a feel” for whether you would like a particular work environment or not. From a survey of students who use the Career Center, we learned that: 94% of the students who did informational interviewing said that it was one of the most helpful strategies they used in their career decision making!

If you’re job hunting...

you’re probably aware of how competitive the job market is. Did you know, however, that only 20% of all the job openings are advertised? This means you need to use contacts to tap the “hidden” job market. From personal contacts with people working in your field, you will learn what types of employers are hiring and how to break-in to the field. You will get an “inside track” on your job search.

Whether you’re exploring careers or making connections for job hunting, you’re probably feeling nervous about contacting strangers to give you career information. It may help to know that people are usually pleased when you ask them for advice. They enjoy talking about themselves and their work just like you enjoy giving another student advice on which classes to take and which to avoid. You can also ease some of your fears by practicing your interview with a friend, or someone else you feel comfortable with. The more you prepare for your interview by following the tips from this handout, the more relaxed you will feel.

Steps for Successful Information Interviewing

Step 1: Focus on you

The first step involves deciding what you want to gain from the interview. Since one of your purposes will be to pinpoint satisfying career/job options, a good place to start is to define what you mean by “satisfying.” One person’s “job satisfiers” may be a chance to provide leadership, manage others, obtain power, and earn a high salary. Someone else’s “satisfiers” might be a work setting which enables him/her to be creative, work independently, and offer help to others.

You may also want to think about your strongest skills and the skills you would enjoy using in your career. There are a number of self assessment exercises in Station 1 of the Resource Room to identify your interests, values, and skills. A free Web-based career assessment tool, Focus, is

available at http://www.careercenter.umd.edu/student/explore/car_test.htm. Invest some quality time to discover more about what you're looking for in a career.

Step 2: Focus on careers/jobs

The next step involves brainstorming different careers, jobs, and work settings that meet your needs based on your self-assessment in Step 1. Friends, relatives, and counselors can also help you brainstorm fields you may have never considered before.

When you have identified a variety of careers that spark your interests, gather information by reading books, journals, and other publications in Station 2 of the Resource Room. Professional and trade associations are also good sources of information. Find out what all the options are within your fields of interest, explore training, and research salaries and career paths. Most importantly learn what people in these jobs really do every day.

Step 3: Locate organizations and resource people

Build your network of contacts by asking friends, relatives, professors, and past employers if they know people working in your field of interest. Members of your mosque, temple, church, or other religious organization may be willing to be interviewed or they may know someone working in your intended career field or industry.

Once you have exhausted these resources, you can begin to secure names by using the telephone book (printed or online), directories in Station 5, or from employer Web sites. Contact (in phone or in person) the general switchboard, personnel office, or receptionists of organizations employing people in your field of interest. Ask who is in charge of the department that handles the type of work you are researching. (Telephone examples are at the end of this handout). Take down the person's name, job title, phone number, and office location.

Next, write a letter, send an e-mail, or call to arrange an appointment with the person identified. Calling is best, but if this doesn't work try writing or e-mailing if you have the person's address. Sometimes it is possible to guess the address. With both approaches it is important to stress that you are seeking information, not a job.

<u>Contacts</u>	<u>Name</u>	<u>Field</u>	<u>Work Location</u>	<u>Phone (Home/Work)</u>

<u>Organization's/Company's Name</u>	<u>Address</u>	<u>Phone</u>

Step 4: Prepare your questions -----

With preparation, your interview should go smoothly and the conversation should flow easily. You'll be able to direct the conversation naturally and make sure questions are answered.

Based on your self-assessment in Step 1 or with Focus, prepare a list of questions that will be useful in determining whether the particular career, job, or work setting will be satisfying to you. You may also list questions that were based on or left unanswered from your reading about the career. In preparing your questions make them open-ended – questions which generate answers with more substance than just “yes” or “no.” (For example, saying, “Tell me what you like about the job” is better than “Do you like your job?”)

The following questions may give you some ideas:

1. What are the different entry-level jobs in this career field?
2. What do you do on a typical day?
3. What background or experience is required or helpful?
4. What aspects of this career field do you like/dislike?
5. What courses might be helpful for me to take to enhance my chances for employment in the field?
6. How competitive is the job market?
7. What is the salary ranges at the entry-level and higher levels?
8. What is the typical career progression in the field?
9. What related fields are available for people with backgrounds such as yours?
10. What is the future of the field in terms of new and expanding opportunities?
11. What would you suggest for someone who is just beginning in the field?
12. What other organizations or people in this field would you suggest I talk with?
13. Are there resource books, articles, or professional associations that you would suggest I use?

If preparing to enter the job market, ask questions such as:

1. Would you please read my resume and offer suggestions for improving it?
2. If you were going to hire a new entry-level person, what would a highly qualified candidate be like?
3. What are the major challenges/problems that your organization is facing and would like solutions for?

Step 5: The Interview

Dress as though you were going to a job interview in your field. Arrive early for the interview – you may be able to learn from the receptionist and from literature in the waiting area. Take advantage of a tour, the opportunity to observe others at work, and/or talk to additional resource people. During the interview, keep an open mind and listen closely, but also objectively evaluate the source of the information.. Take notes follow up, as well as names of referrals. In ending the interview, express appreciation for the time that the professional has spent with you.

Step 6: Follow up

Write a thank you letter to the person you have interviewed, mentioning how the talk helped you and what suggestions you plan to implement. Also, from time to time, let the individual know of your progress and keep his or her name on file. If at some point you desire employment with the organization, send your resume with a cover letter detailing why you were impressed with the firm and how your skills can meet their needs.

Telephone Inquiry Examples

Suppose you want information about a photographer. Think of several settings in which photographers work: news photographer, portrait photographer, advertising photographer, commercial photographer, and so on. Here is how an initial contact might go if you called a local newspaper.

Example #1: You already know the name of the person you want to interview.

Dialogue	What you are trying to accomplish
Receptionist: City Tribune. May I help you?	
You: I would like to talk with Mr. Palmer (whose name you got from the newspaper).	Be resourceful about getting a name of someone to talk to.
Receptionist: All right. One moment please.	
You: Mr. Palmer, I'm _____. I'm very interested in your profession and trying to get as much information about it as possible. The information I've read is rather incomplete and seems to be out-of-date. I felt that talking to someone knowledgeable in the profession would give me a clearer idea about it. I've seen your pictures in the paper, liked them very much and would like to get some of your personal views regarding news photography. If you have the time now, I would like to talk with you for a few minutes; or I would even prefer coming to your office at a convenient time to talk with you . . . or you might say – Mr. Palmer, I'm _____. I'm taking a course in career development in which one of my projects is to interview someone in a field of interest to me. I am very interested in news photography; and since you are respected in the field, I would like to talk with you for a few minutes to get some of your views. I'd be glad to call back at a more convenient time . . .	Show an interest in them and what they do. Show how they could be helpful to you. Make them feel important. Assert yourself. You have the right to ask their help. Don't give up too easily. Be persistent without being rude. Make them feel important. Assert yourself.

Example 2: A technique to obtain the name of a person to interview

Dialogue	What you are trying to accomplish
Receptionist: City tribune. May I help you?	
You: Would you give me the name of one of your news photographers, please?	Assert yourself. You have a right to ask. If you don't get the information on the first try, be persistent. Tell the person it is important for you to find out.
Receptionist: What is it you need? Perhaps I can help you.	
You: I'm doing research on news photography and would like the name of one of your photographers.	Contact the professional directly.
Receptionist: Mr. Palmer is one of the photographers. He's been here for several years.	
You: Thank you very much.	

At a later time call back . . .

Dialogue	What you are trying to accomplish
Receptionist: City tribune. May I help you?	
You: I would like to speak to Mr. Palmer, please.	
Receptionist: May I ask who is calling and what this is about?	
You: This is _____ and I'm calling in regarding to a personal matter.	Contact the professional directly.
Receptionist: Mr. Palmer is in a meeting now.	
You: When would be a good time to call Mr. Palmer?	Be persistent.
Receptionist: He'll be free around 3:00.	
You: Would you give him my name and tell him I'll call back then. Thank you.	At 3:00, call Mr. Palmer and introduce yourself and your request . . .