

Informational Interviews

Informational interviews enable you to accomplish several things at once. They allow you to:

1. Gain valuable insights from someone knowledgeable in the field about trends in the sector, and their particular company
2. See if the field, company and/or skill-set coincides with your expectations
3. Have someone review your resume and provide industry-specific feedback
4. Learn from the experience how you can strengthen your presentation skills
5. Possibly gain network and personal connections you can use

Major Don't #1: Asking for a Job

One thing you are not seeking from an informational interview, ironically enough, is a job. You are there to learn about the person, the field, and see if the field, company and/or skill-set coincides with your expectations. This is not a job interview. You are there to create a conversation and learn from your contact.

Do:

Make sure to research the person, their company and sector so you can ask in-depth questions about them, their career path, their company, trends in the field, and preferred skill-set. You are there to mostly listen to what they have to say, and to create a conversation. (See example questions at the end of the document).

Major Don't #2: Disrespecting Their Time

Don't ask to meet for coffee or lunch—even if it's your treat—unless the time is offered to you. It is a bigger time commitment than someone might want or be able to make. Once the conversation starts, keep track of the time. You do not want to disrespect the agreed upon time by asking question upon question; that will turn them off to helping you.

Do:

Offer to come to their office for a 15-minute conversation or whatever works best for them in terms of time and location. The easier you make the informational interview for them, the more likely they are to give it to you. Be mindful of how much time you are taking, and stick to the agreed upon time unless they indicate otherwise.

Major Don't #3: Being Unprepared

A huge mistake many informational interviewers make is to assume that this is a chance to get basic information about an organization or sector. Don't waste your time or their time by asking them to tell you basic things that you could have found out from research.

Do:

Arrive with more than just basic information about the person and organization. It allows you to ask smarter questions. Synthesize the information you've learned from your research with the conversation you are having; you will present yourself as someone they might take a chance on introducing to their network.

Major Don't #4: Talking Too Much

You are there to learn from the person on the other side of the desk. Avoid the temptation of jumping into the conversation as soon as you see an opportunity to talk. Remember, studies show that people who talk more in conversations think that those conversations went very well. Why not give your contact a chance to be a “great conversationalist,” leaving them with a positive impression about you?

Do:

Prepare specific questions and allow your contact to answer them; let the conversation develop and flow. Be prepared to respond to questions as well. You'll want to be prepared to speak about your interests in the field and jobs, but make sure you are using most of the time to learn more from them, than they are about you.

Major Don't #5: Not Listening

You are getting this time as a gift; use it wisely. Don't ask the obvious, and avoid asking the same question over again. If you've run out of questions, and the conversation seems to be coming to a close, you can always thank your contact and depart. Make sure to leave with asking what the best way is for you to follow-up.

Do:

Pay exceptional amounts of attention to what the person is telling you. Take notes as needed but not so much that you fail to converse normally.

Send a thank-you note!

Sample Questions to Ask at an Informational Interview:

1. What brought you to this agency and this field? In what ways has it lived up to your expectations? In what ways have you been challenged? I see that on LinkedIn you... (ask about what you researched)
2. I read with great interest about how your organization is ...(expanding programs into new areas such as... Can you tell me about the implementation challenges that this poses and how you are planning to handle them?) Ask about their company.
3. What is the work environment like here? What do you enjoy the most? The least?
4. Do you have any advice for me based on your experiences? What do you wish you knew when you started that you know now?
5. How would you assess my background, and where do you think I ought to focus my professional development to add to my skill-set, and be successful in the type of position I seek?
6. Is there anyone else you think I should contact?
7. May I follow-up with you as my job search evolves to keep you posted and get additional advice along the way?