

Assess

Career Planning and Assessment



Informational Interviewing

Ever wondered what a general contractor's typical day is like? Are you curious about what a geologist does? Have you considered a career as a dietician,

but you don't know much about a dietician's work environment? Are you considering a career change from teaching to retail store management and want to find out more about a manager's typical duties? All of these questions are reasons to conduct an informational interview.

What is an Informational Interview?

An informational interview is an interview with someone in your targeted field, ideally in the exact position that you are considering. During the interview you can learn firsthand about the career and position that you are considering.

When you conduct an informational interview, you can address a broad range of topics – from the elements of a typical work day/week/month to the outlook for advancement in the career and growth in the industry. If you are a student, you can use the informational interview to help you choose elective courses and specializations as well as your major and minor course of study. By discussing working conditions and future prospects with a professional in the field,

you will gain insight into the likely consequences of career decisions that you are considering. Find out all you can to help you make informed career decisions. You don't want to study for four or six years to discover that the career you've chosen is radically different than what you had imagined. Likewise, you don't want to trade a successful career for a risky opportunity in which you have little chance to succeed. Choosing a career is one of the vital decisions in your life, and you should decide your career based on as much information as you can collect. The

informational interview is one such information-gathering tool.

Why Should You Conduct an Informational Interview?

Unlike a job interview, the goal of an informational interview is not to obtain a job offer. Instead the informational interview is designed to help you learn about a career and

a specific position. You are the interviewer, not the interviewee. You should come away from the informational interview with a clear idea of what the interviewee's typical job duties are, what his normal working conditions are like, and what his vision of the prospects for the profession are. Ideally, you should talk to several people in your targeted field at levels above and below your targeted position. This will give you a 360° view of the position. You do not have to conduct all of your informational interviews within the same company. In fact, a better idea is to canvas several companies so that you obtain a broader

“Choosing a career is one of the vital decisions of your life...”

Even though you aren't interviewing for a job, you are discussing the profession with a potential future colleague...

view of the position and the profession. Remember the goal is to gather information that will help you decide on a career. You are on a fact-finding trip through your potential future career!

When you are interviewing for a job, you are being carefully examined and everything that you say and do is being studied. Your interviewer is trying to make a decision about your potential with her company. Alternatively, when you conduct an informational interview, you are asking the questions and will be making the decisions about future career plans. That doesn't mean that you don't have to take an informational interview seriously and conduct yourself in a professional manner. Even though you aren't interviewing for a job, you are discussing the profession with a potential future colleague – perhaps a future supervisor or even a future employee. Make the best impression that you can.

Later, when you are job hunting, your informational interviewees may agree to become part of your job search network, if you managed to impress them positively. Here are some points to consider when planning and conducting an informational interview:

1. Be punctual, don't make the interviewee wait for you, be prepared 10-15 minutes beforehand and use the time to make any final preparations for the interview.
2. Be prepared, organize your questions, and record the responses with a handheld recorder (with your interviewee's permission) or take notes.

3. Give an accurate estimate of the time you will need to ask your questions and ask the most important ones first – stick to your time estimate, don't abuse your interviewee's time.

4. Let the interviewee do the talking, use active listening skills to indicate that you are focused on her answers, ask intelligent follow-up questions when appropriate.

How Should You Conduct an Informational Interview?

The first step in informational interviewing is determining whom you should interview. Research the profession that you are interested in to determine the typical job titles used for the position you are targeting. Then, locate companies that employ people with those titles. You can use the Internet, business guides, and local directories to locate likely companies. To locate individuals to interview, you can call the company's Personnel or Human Resources department, and explain what you are doing. They will be able to direct you to the appropriate individual. Alternatively, you can call the main telephone number for an individual department, and ask if you can talk to someone with the appropriate title. Listen carefully and note the potential interviewee's name, title, and telephone extension.

The next step in the process is very important. You need to convince the potential interviewee to spare some time to talk with you. There are various reasons why someone might agree to help you. The first is basic altruism – some people are naturally inclined to help those who ask for it. Many people are passionate about their profession and enjoy talking with others about it. Often, people are flattered to be asked

“Many people are passionate about their profession and enjoy talking with others about it.”

sharing their accomplishments. People you interview might also be looking for new talent for their profession and will see you as a potential employee.

Whatever the motivation, be professional and direct when explaining your intentions and asking for assistance.

When you have arranged an interview, here are some examples of questions that you can ask.

Job Duties

- What are your primary job duties?
- What are your principal job tasks?
- What are the top five responsibilities in your job?
- What is the most important task that you do?
- What is the top priority for your position?

“What additional experience would you recommend for someone entering the profession?”

Skills Needed

- What certifications do you need to be qualified for your job?
- What licenses should you have to be qualified for your job?
- What are the top five general skills that you use on the daily basis?
- What procedures do you use on your job?
- How did you develop the skills that you use on your job?

Knowledge Needed

- What college degrees do people in your position typically have?

What were the most beneficial courses that you completed in your training?

What kind of continuing education opportunities have you had? What was the most useful?

What are the principal periodicals in your profession?

What other types of knowledge have you needed that you didn't gain in your educational background?

Most Valuable Experience

Of your previous work experiences, which have been the most valuable for success in your career?

What additional experience would you recommend for someone entering the profession?

How do you recommend that a new person to the profession should gain practical experience? Volunteer organizations? Internships? Mentorships?

Have you mentored junior associates? If so, what experiences did you encourage them to pursue?

To what degree have your skill, knowledge, and experience been formed on the job?

Typical Work Environment

Please describe your physical work environment.

Please describe the reporting relationship in your position.

How would you characterize the social climate in your department/profession?

What technology tools do you typically use?

What would you change about your work environment if you could?

“To what degree have your skill, knowledge, and experience been formed on the job?”

What attributes have been most important for successful new employees?

Describe the daily/weekly/monthly routine in your position?

What is your work schedule like?

Are there typical peaks and valleys of activity in your profession?

Estimate the percentage of time that you spend on major responsibilities in your position.

Rewards

What is the typical range for a starting salary?

Have salary increases accompanied increases in job responsibility?

Has pay been tied to job performance?

Are bonuses typically paid to people in the profession? To what degree?

Are other forms of incentive pay common in the industry?

What fringe benefits can someone typically expect to receive?

Significant Challenges

What was the most difficult task that you have completed?

What are the top five challenges in your position?

What are the top five challenges facing the profession?

How did you meet your top challenge?

What other challenges do you expect to encounter in your position?

Common Obstacles

Describe some of the obstacles that you encounter in completing your tasks.

What obstacles are commonly found in the profession?

What is the most significant threat to the profession?

How have you overcome obstacles to your success?

What skills have proved to be most useful in overcoming obstacles?

Outlook for the Profession

What is your view of the overall outlook for the profession? Do you see growth or decline?

What is the most significant change that you have seen in the profession?

What is the most significant change that you have experienced in your job?

What areas of the profession would you describe as stagnate?

What areas of the profession would you describe as hot/popular/in demand?

Potential Career Paths

Describe your career path.

What other career paths have you observed for people in the profession?

What is the most likely next step for you?

What is the most common promotion for someone in your position?

From what other departments do new employees come into your department?

Likely Entry Points

How did you enter the profession?

What entry point would you recommend for someone new to the profession?

What attributes have been most important for successful new employees?

What previous experience has been most important for successful new employees?

“What obstacles are commonly found in the profession?”

How valuable is experience in a volunteer or internship position when applying for a new job in the profession?

Degree of Respect

How are your efforts respected and valued in your company? In your profession?

What opportunities have you had to meaningfully contribute to your profession as well as your company?

In what ways is your work valuable to society?

Describe the contribution of your work to your company's profitability.

Is the value of your profession increasing or decreasing in society?

Autonomy

What degree of autonomy do you have in managing your daily/weekly/monthly activities?

In what responsibilities of your position do you have the most self-direction?

In what responsibilities of your position are you managed most closely?

Describe the quality of the feedback that you receive about your job performance.

In what areas would you like more autonomy? More direction?

Collegiality

Describe your working relationships with your co-workers.

What types of interactions do you have with other professionals in your field?

How would you describe the quality of interpersonal interactions with other people in your department? In your company?

What is the degree to which the people in your department/company share common goals and aspirations?

Give some examples of how your work environment is an enjoyable place in which to work.

Management Support

In what ways does management support employee success?

How are employee suggestions for improvements treated?

How do employees support each other's success?

How informed are you about company goals, successes, challenges, and issues?

Are you encouraged to participate in general process improvement?

General Advice

What general advice can you give to someone new to the profession?

Following up

After you have conducted your informational interview, send a follow-up thank you note to your interviewee, expressing your appreciation for his time and assistance. Keep the contact information and your notes from each interview for future reference. As you proceed in your career planning and job searching, keep your contacts informed of your progress and solicit any advice or leads for job opportunities. If you have made a strong, positive impression on someone in your targeted profession, he may become a valuable resource in your job search.

“In what ways is your work valuable to society?”

Keep the contact information and your notes from each interview for future reference.