

Networking/Informational Interviewing

Networking is the art of developing and utilizing contacts with other people. Informational interviewing is a structured way to network that is especially useful for career exploration and job searching. By talking directly to people who work in fields that interest you, you can.

- ☞ Meet people who share your enthusiasms and have similar talents
- ☞ Confirm your interest in particular career fields; decide which others to rule out
- ☞ Find out about current “hot topics” in an industry
- ☞ Build a set of future contacts for internships and full-time positions
- ☞ Learn about hiring and employment practices
- ☞ Gain experience, confidence, and skills in communicating with employers

How do you identify people for information interviews?

Make a list of people from the following categories who may have connection to your career field(s) of interest:

- ☞ Friends & family
- ☞ Supervisors and co-workers (past and present)
- ☞ Neighbors & members of community organizations
- ☞ Faculty, advisors, coaches, former teachers
- ☞ New Paltz classmates & acquaintances
- ☞ Teammates, fellow hobby/sports participants
- ☞ Your doctor, accountant, broker, therapist, clergy person, etc.

If you do not generate much of a list from the people you already know, then you’ll need to dig deeper. First, begin asking all the people you know if they can refer you to anyone in your field(s) of interest. You have to make your wishes known in order for people to offer help. You can also arrange information interviews without having personal connections. The following resources can help you to identify appropriate contact people.

- ☞ Academic departments
- ☞ Chamber of Commerce directory
- ☞ Professional associations in your field

Arranging for an Information Interview

You can contact a potential interviewee by phone, mail, or e-mail. (If you introduce yourself in writing, however, plan to follow up with a phone call.) Make it clear that you are not interested in a job interview, but simply in gathering information. Set up a specific meeting time (30 minutes should be sufficient), if possible at the interviewee's workplace. If getting together in person isn't feasible, you can arrange a phone interview.

If you have the name of an organization, but not a specific individual, you may want to call and speak with the secretary or receptionist. Explain what you want and ask to be referred to an appropriate individual. Be sure to get the name of the person you will be speaking to.

Courtesy and professionalism should be your guides throughout the information interview process. Remember that your contacts are busy people. Most will feel flattered you sought them out for advice; however, they may have periods of time when it simply isn't convenient to talk with you.

How do you prepare for an information interview?

First, read or review material on the career field so that you do not waste time on preliminary questions. Know in advance what it is you hope to learn. Make sure your questions are open-ended and cannot be answered with a simple "yes" or "no." Following are some sample questions:

For career exploration:

- ☞ How do you spend a typical day or week?
- ☞ What functions do you perform?
- ☞ How did you get into this line of work?
- ☞ Was yours a typical career path?
- ☞ What do you think are the most important skills/qualifications for someone in this job?
- ☞ What type of academic preparation is best for your line of work?
- ☞ What type of environment is this to work in?
- ☞ How would you describe others in this field?
- ☞ What type of work schedule does this career require (overtime, weekends, freelancing, travel, 9-5, etc.)?
- ☞ What is a typical entry-level position?
- ☞ What about starting salaries?
- ☞ What professional organizations are active in this field?
- ☞ What trade or professional journals do you read?

- ☞ What advanced opportunities exist beyond the entry level?
- ☞ What advice would you have for me if I chose to pursue a career in this area?

For job search:

- ☞ How are job openings publicized in this field?
- ☞ What departments here might have jobs that would use the skills and interests I've shared with you?
- ☞ I'm interested in relocating to _____. Do you know of anyone in your industry that I could talk to there?
- ☞ How do most people get hired into this organization?
- ☞ Are some methods more effective than others?
- ☞ Are there opportunities for part-time or freelance work here?
- ☞ Does this organization require application forms or exams?
- ☞ How competitive is the entry-level job market in this geographic region?
- ☞ What is the turnover rate for this type of position?
- ☞ Do you anticipate any vacancies in the near future?
- ☞ Who has the hiring power here?
- ☞ What are other organizations in this field to which I might apply?

At the Information Interview:

During the interview, you should conduct yourself in a professional manner. Dress neatly, be on time, and bring a copy of your resume (or send it with your initial letter) so that your contact has some background information about you. Be an active listener and an active participant. Have your questions on a notepad to refer to if necessary? Unless you need to write down a name or number, save your note-taking until after the interview. You'll be better able to listen and concentrate this way. Finally, make sure to ask your interviewee for referrals to other people who can help you in your career research.

Follow up!

Take careful notes as soon as you leave the meeting, and within a week send a thank you note to the person you interviewed. It is also polite to let your interviewee know when you have decided on a career field or accepted an offer. If you will want to use this person as a job contact in the future, stay in touch every few months or so.

Last but not least, set up your next information interview. You should have new referrals as a result of meeting with your last contact.