

How To Conduct An Information Interview

By Marcia R. Fox, PhD

The information interview is one of the most useful skills you can acquire. Before describing this technique and how to employ it, let's quickly look at the advantages it offers.

*It permits students to obtain information about a company or an industry.

*It helps uncertain students decide on a career path.

*It helps locate industries that are booming during difficult economic times.

*It helps students become adept at interviewing techniques.

*It increases self-confidence when dealing with people.

Like any worthwhile technique, the information interview requires work on your part if you expect to use it successfully. It's also important to note that the information interview's purpose is to obtain information, not to conduct a job interview, while you are investigating your options.

What is an information interview? It is a dynamic conversation with a purpose. However, unlike a job interview, which takes place in a tense competitive framework for the purpose of getting a job offer, the information interview occurs in a context of extraordinary freedom and control: you define its focus and structure and conduct it entirely for your benefit. The entire process, from identifying the interview purpose, to the selection of key resources and finally to the interview stage itself, is an excellent vehicle for practicing important and transferable analytical and interpersonal skills. Although this process is often initially difficult for students, those who grapple with the sophisticated demands of the information interview early in their professional lives find that the benefits of improved decision-making and greater self-confidence more than outweigh any inherent difficulties.

Ironically, for all its usefulness, the information interview is largely underutilized by students for several reasons. First, because the university community places a great deal of emphasis on self-sufficient intellect, people tend to work independently in that setting. As a result, the notion of asking another person for intellectual help strikes many students as an altogether unfamiliar and uncomfortably dependent process. However, later the value of an interdependent professional "community", where people vigorously trade information, will become clear.

Secondly, inexperience can lead to underestimating the complexity of certain decisions or transitions.

Finally, some people are either too self-effacing or socially timid to initiate contact with busy or "important" strangers on their own behalf. Of the three most common factors, this latter is by far the most problematic to overcome. For every assertive student intent upon knocking on all doors in search of information that answers his or her personal needs, there are two equally needy but misguided souls who shirk an often essential task in becoming a more competent and effective human being. Once you decide that your dreams and needs are as important as anyone else's, it becomes easier to motivate yourself to conduct information interviews when necessary.

Before we turn to a checklist of tips aimed at helping you plan for and conduct a successful information interview, review the following principles that often prove troublesome to novices.

* People generally enjoy being asked for advice because it is an implicit homage to their vanity and a form of powerful psychological recognition. Provided

they are approached gracefully and with sufficient concern for the very real time pressures under which they may be operating, many people like being interviewed for information. However, the information you are seeking must logically relate to their interests, concerns, or position. To the extent that you can tap into a topic that interests them, you will be far more successful in getting access and in creating the basis for a dynamic conversation.

In general, the more successful the person, the more likely he or she is to consider your request a part of the normal order of doing business. So don't waste time worrying that people don't like to be interviewed. Given the right circumstances, many executives don't mind at all (and if they do, they can always say no). Indeed, unbeknownst to you, they may obtain a personal or professional benefit from complying with an important third party's request on your behalf. Or they may have their own agenda, such as investigating the quality of life at your university for their son or daughter.

*The successful information interviewer cannot afford to be a fragile or easily offended soul. The beginning of wisdom may be to accept just how low a priority you are likely to be on anyone's appointment calendar. To be sure, the person may be willing to see you in principle; however, in practice finding the time to do so is quite another proposition. So expect to wait two weeks for an appointment, smile when the inevitable postponements occur, be gracious in the face of last-minute delays, and finally, when you get to the interview itself, take in stride any telephone or in-person interruptions.

*Just as one wouldn't seek out the thrice-divorced man for information about the health of the institution of marriage, so too, in seeking important

information, interview only conspicuously successful, well-adjusted sources. In all likelihood, their perception and objectivity will be trustworthy.

Now let's turn to the specifics of how to go about the process. Because the occasions for conducting information interviews will be determined solely by you, there is no "right" occasion. The best advice is to follow your instincts. But before you act, here is a checklist of key points to review.

Define the information need. Write out honest (even if somewhat vague) questions that hone in on your information needs. Ask yourself, "What information about myself or a particular industry do I need in order to make a decision?" Writing these out is an important clarification process.

Chances are that initially there will be some personalized or emotional questions that result which may be too difficult for others to answer, such as "Will I be successful as a human resource planner?" Such a question is best articulated honestly and then rewritten as, for example, "What skills and talents are necessary for success as a human resource planner?"

Review your questioning skills. Have you written open-ended questions? To stimulate maximum commentary from another person, sentences should start with words like how, what, why and in what way. The answers you get will typically provide fertile ground for more specific probing. Avoid phrasing "closed" questions which can be answered by a "yes" or "no". Consider, too, reviewing any book on interviewing techniques which includes sections on questioning, listening, and nonverbal communication skills.

Now review your questions. They should be well-phrased and representative of your genuine concerns. Consider whether getting the answers to them would help you feel more self-confident, motivated, and more focused about forthcoming decisions. If not, go back to the drawing board, for further analysis of your needs may be necessary.

Select the available resources. Use a disciplined, logical approach. First classify the kind of information you

need and then identify the appropriate resource. Is it feedback about yourself? If so, go to the people who know you well enough to give it to you. Is it concrete career information about a particular field or company? If so, then go to two kinds of people: those "insiders" who know you well enough to be candid, and strangers who will inevitably give more of a public relations spiel but may possess a broader perspective than your company "pal".

Is it an insight into the future direction of an industry? If so, then go to a recognized industry expert. Is it help in identifying additional resource people to interview? If so, then go to a person who is well-connected and can lead you to others such as the alumni director of your school or college.

Though at this point it may be possible to pin names to the identified resource needs, this is largely a matter of basic research. Work with your school placement director, reference librarian, and alumni director, and also use business and other kinds of directories to identify the names of people you want to meet.

Now is the time to review a list of resources already known to you where there are logical links. Influential family friends should not be misused, but they might be tapped to help you get important access.

* Don't overlook school resources legitimately available to you, such as an alumni program where counseling is provided to students with career questions.

The list you assemble will be the starting point for initiating contact. Avoid contacting someone unless you can clearly define the reason you want to see them. If they are famous or powerful, they are likely to be besieged with such requests. Don't make the mistake of using your information interview as a pretext for getting a job. It won't work, and it can be embarrassing to you when it becomes obvious.

How to initiate contact. A written request to a stranger has a better chance of getting a response than a phone call. However, if you already know the person, can mention a strong mutual acquaintance, or just feel more adept at

the process, you may prefer to telephone. But try to call early in the week, in the morning, and on a day when you will be at home to wait for return calls. If you have a phone machine, all the better.

When using the phone, what do you say? The wording will vary according to the substance of your request, but always be concise, to the point, and polite. State your name and the reason you are contacting this particular person (as opposed to someone else). Indicate the specific request you have that might be met by talking with them. Ask for a brief meeting at their convenience and be prepared to be flexible.

Here's an example of a telephone request: "Mr. Smith, my name is Jane Adams. I'm a friend of Jill Sandler, whom I believe you know and who I hope told you I would be calling . . . (moment of chit-chat about Jill). As Jill told you, I'll be graduating next year from New York University's undergraduate business school with a major in marketing and have to decide which industry would be the best one for me to consider entering. I wonder if you might have a half-hour sometime in the near future to talk with me about this subject. I'd really appreciate the opportunity to discuss some specific questions with you."

"You'll be going on vacation next week for three weeks? Oh, I see. Perhaps this is not a convenient time for you. I'm in no rush, so rather than schedule it for now, should I give you a call the middle of the week you return and set up a time then?"

"Fine, I'll put it on my calendar to call you on the 18th. In the meantime, have a good vacation. I'll look forward to meeting you when you return."

Notice Jane's politeness and willing acceptance of delay. Rather than pushing Mr. Smith to see her at an inconvenient time, she quickly backed off when it became clear he was about to leave for vacation. She also wisely took responsibility for initiating the next phone call, therefore preventing what might have been a considerable delay.

If you write a letter, especially to a stranger, make certain that you identify a sincere and substantive link with the person. For example, in the context of

an interview for career information, this might include either a shared enthusiasm for a particular technical area, your appreciation for his or her pioneering or leadership efforts in a specific field, or the fact that you heard that person speak recently. With particularly distinguished people, you'll need all the cleverness and imagination you possess to distinguish yourself from the crowd.

At the interview. First impressions count heavily. So be on time, look professional, give the person a firm handshake, and smile during the introductions. And look the person straight in the eye.

It is expected that you will take control of the meeting since you were the one who initiated it. After the small talk, say "I really appreciate your willingness to talk with me today about some of my concerns. Before we get started, how much time do you have available?" You want your most important questions answered first.

During the interview, referring to prepared questions is acceptable; but don't take detailed notes, lest you lose eye contact. Look at the person and smile. Nods and head gestures to indicate interest will help to create a rapport.

Avoid questions so narrowly defined or factual that it would be preferable to consult a printed reference. For example, don't ask a senior-level advertising executive "What is it like to work as an advertising copywriter?" Instead, ask, "During your career in advertising, what do you consider one of your greatest successes?" This kind of question is likely to stimulate an invaluable commentary.

If conversational tangents threaten to stall your agenda, take polite control. "That's very interesting, and it reminds me of an important question I haven't asked." Use nonverbal signals, such as looking down or breaking eye contact, to show interest in moving the conversation along. Or, in contrast, if the conversation grinds to a halt, prompt more detail by leaning forward, raising your eyebrows and saying, "That's very interesting. Tell me more about that."

Questions about the person's greatest triumphs, or professional likes and

dislikes are always good conversation starters. So are background questions, such as how the career was chosen.

Always ask, preferably near the end, "If you were in my shoes, what would you be asking or doing?" "Is there anyone you can recommend who might be helpful?"

After the interview. A thank-you note is essential. It need not be long but it should mention something of specific value said to you during the interview.

Once the subject that you discussed has been resolved, also follow up with a thank you note to your original contact. Apart from the exceptional interpersonal skills such an action demonstrates, there's a good chance that person will remember you. In any event, you'll have made a favorable impression. Use the skill of information interviewing to expand your knowledge and your world. It will be an asset on and off the job throughout your career.