



Informational Interviewing: A Powerful Career Exploration Tool for PhDs

What is an informational interview?

Informational interviewing is the process of gathering career information from people who are already working in occupations, organizations, or geographic locations you are interested in. Both the content of the information and the process of gathering it will help you to refine your career goals and possibly discover new ones.

The benefits of interviewing for information can be substantial. These conversations enable you to gain information and insight into career fields of interest. Your knowledge will be increasingly impressive as you continue to interview key people in a field.

Your new knowledge will help you to develop confidence and to make potentially valuable contacts for the future, contacts you can easily re-establish at a later date. You are getting inside the communication network of people with the best information about employment possibilities.

How do I set up an informational interview?

Start by conducting informational interviews with people in your immediate circle of friends, family, colleagues and acquaintances with the goal of getting referrals to people you don't already know. Simultaneously, identify potential contacts by using the "Find Alumni" feature in LinkedIn or the Terrapins Connect alumni tool. Once you've identified people you would like to talk to, contact them within LinkedIn, Terrapins Connect or by email. Remember to tailor and proofread all your correspondence so that it is error-free. If you telephone the person directly, be sure to be cognizant of the time of day and begin by asking if they have five minutes now. In all methods, introduce yourself, who referred you, explain your interest in the individual's career path, organization, current role, and propose a meeting or phone conversation. Ask for 20-30 minutes for an informational interview at a time and method (phone, Zoom, Google Hangout, Skype, or in person) that is convenient for them. As a current student, you have the liberty to reach out to alumni and other professionals for career advice. Be clear that you are not looking for a job, but rather seeking their advice.

How do I prepare for the informational interview?

This is a critical step! Too many students often set up interviews and then show up for their scheduled informational interview without doing any preparation or research. Study the field and organization before the interview to answer your most basic questions ahead of time so you can optimize the time with your contact. Employers are often frustrated when they talk with a student who knows nothing about their field. Develop and bring a list of open-ended questions that give the person a chance to talk about his or her job. Avoid "yes-no" questions such as "Do you like this line of work?"

The more you know about an area or an organization, the more intelligent and productive your questions can be — plus your interviewees will be impressed by this knowledge and preparation on your part. You can do research for your information interview in some of the following ways:

- Determine the focus of the informational interview-What do you want to learn? This focus can vary and change as you do more informational interviews.
- Plan ahead what you want to communicate about yourself: your current role, where you are in the career development process and what your long term career goals are. This will be very brief. Be prepared to introduce yourself and frame the focus and purpose of the conversation.
- Review the person's webpage, LinkedIn Profile, and any other online information about the person.
- Review the website of the organization and department.
- Research recent magazine or newspaper articles about the organization.

Focus on the interviewee's views, opinions, thoughts, and feelings rather than cold facts. Your interviewer will enjoy the interview more, and will feel more positive about you as a result.

How do I conduct the informational interview?

In preparing for your interview, it's important to clarify your objectives for the informational interview. Determine what type of information you are seeking. Your goals for the interview will change along a continuum from general career research to specific job research advice.

General career research interviews include questions on work responsibilities, lifestyles, working conditions, educational and experience entry requirements, while accumulating acquaintances in a field or in a particular kind of work environment or organization of interest to you. This type of interview will dominate your early career planning activities.

Specific job search advice interviews are conducted after you know what you want to do, but are unsure of how to achieve it. Your goal is to acquire advice on how to break into the field or organization of your choice. Remember, this should be a low-stress, enjoyable conversation, not an anxiety-provoking interview.

Beginning and Middle of the informational interview

Introduce yourself and remember that you are in charge of the progress of the interview. It's normal to spend a few moments engaging in informal conversation about mutual contacts, the office environment, or weather. More than a few moments of this will make a contact think you are wasting his/her time. Restate your time goal at the beginning of the interview and do not exceed it without negotiating an extension. Develop rapport by asking about their jobs, their personal career development, and their likes and dislikes about the field. (See list of questions in the next section.)

What question should I ask?

Take a few moments and think about what you need to know before you would enter this field or organization. Write the questions down. You also may find the following questions of use:

Information about preparation:

- How did you enter this field from your PhD?
- What are the minimum qualifications a person needs to enter this field?
- What kinds of preparation do you wish you had?

Information about the field:

- What do you like about what you do?
- Whom do you supervise and to whom do you report? (You are looking for organizational structure.)
- How is your time divided between people, data, and things?
- If possible, describe a typical work day, work week, work year.
- What are some of the possible career paths in this field?
- What are some of the challenges and major issues in your field?
- Would a geographic move affect your career in any way?
- How much work do you take home? How many hours do you work each week?
- How much do you travel? How often and for how long?
- What are some of the toughest situations you have encountered?
- What don't you like about what you do?

Advice:

- What do you wish you had known before you entered this field?
- What are the professional organizations and journals in this field? May non-members attend meetings?
- What kinds of job hunting strategies would you suggest to enter this field?
- Is there anyone else with whom I should speak for additional information?

Closing the Interview

Once you are nearing the conclusion of an information interview, you should always ask, **"Can you think of any other individuals who can provide me with additional information about this occupational field and its employers? May I say that you suggested that I email (or call?)"** In almost all cases, your contact will be able to refer you to others and will be pleased to do so. Ask if they will do an email introduction or would they prefer to give you the person's contact information.

It is a thoughtful gesture to thank the contact at the end of the interview and to send a thank you letter to him/her. Remember to ask for a business card to stay touch and ensure that you send you thank you letter to the correct address. It will create a favorable impression and smooth the way for further contact in the future. Ask if it would be all right to inquire about new developments and leads in the future. Extensive networks of satisfying personal and professional relationships have been built through informational interviewing.

What do I do after the informational interview?

Follow Up

Record accurately with whom you have interviewed, the dates of the meetings, what was discussed, and names of additional contacts. Write a thank-you note after each informational interview. Express your appreciation for the assistance you received and mention one or two specifically helpful points. Be sure to keep copies of all correspondence.

The information-gathering phase of the job search will generate additional sources of information and also job opportunities. The people you meet are potential members of your professional network. When you have found your position and your search is over, notify everyone of your wonderful news. They will want to hear what happened to you.

Self-reflection about the Interview

As an important final step, you need to evaluate the information you have gathered. Answering the following questions should help you in this evaluation.

What are your "next steps"? With whom else do you plan to talk? (Beware of relying too heavily on the views and advice of only one or two people). What other steps do you plan to take based upon the advice of your interviewee? What positive impressions do you now have about this area of work? (Think in terms of yourself: interests, skills, values, and goals). What negative impressions do you have? How does this interview help you to clarify your own career or job objective? If it was not helpful in this respect, why not?

Have you heard about career and professional development services for PhD students?

The University Career Center & The President's Promise and The Graduate School have teamed up to dedicate a career professional to PhD students at all stages of their studies. Workshops, online resources, and other activities can help you to:

- develop your own personalized individual career and professional development plan that leverages opportunities available in your program, department and beyond
- identify opportunities to develop specific skills and competencies required for different career paths
- clarify multiple careers for PhDs that match your interests and goals
- plan your job search strategy, prepare resumes and CVs and practice interviewing skills
- develop your networking skills and expand relationships in your field

A complete list of upcoming workshops and events is available on the Graduate School Events Calendar: gradschool.umd.edu/calendar.

Schedule appointments with Dr. Susan Martin, Program Director via Careers.umd.edu/Careers4Terps or by calling (301) 314.7242. Email: smarti18@umd.edu

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