

Informational Interviewing

An occupational informational interview is used to obtain first-hand impressions of work from people currently employed in a specific field. It is not a job interview; it has a different focus and feel. You are exploring alternatives rather than marketing yourself. Some of the other differences are you are talking informally; you are the interviewer rather than the interviewee; and, the interview is generally limited to 20-30 minutes.

This method of collecting information is the best way to find answers to many important questions you may have. For example, what does someone actually do all day long? What are the rewards and demands of a particular kind of work? What are the entry-level jobs? By meeting directly with people, you can also gain deeper insights into the pros and cons of working in a particular organization.

Contacting people may seem intimidating at first, but remember that most people love to talk about their work. Moreover, they will be impressed with your initiative and interest. Additionally, most people are interested in your college experience. You may develop a contact that could be valuable to you in your job search, and you will gain practice in the skills of interviewing.

IDENTIFYING CONTACTS

The entire process of making contacts should begin months before you actually need a job. This way, you will be well informed by the time you are meeting with potential employers. To begin the process, you must develop a list of people to contact. Choose the job you want information about, and write down anyone you know who holds the position or who could put you in contact with someone who does. Make use of friends, relatives, professors, fellow students, and co-workers. One of your strongest resources is the Lewis & Clark College Career Network, or L&C Net, on LinkedIn. This will connect you to hundreds of alumni who are eager to talk to students. To access L&C Net, first go to LinkedIn.com and create your personal profile if you have not already done so. Then complete the confidentiality user agreement on our website at go.lclark.edu/lcnet/student. The Lewis and Clark College Career Insights page on LinkedIn (<https://www.linkedin.com/school/lewis-&-clark-college/alumni/>) can also be a valuable tool for identifying alumni in your areas of interest. The staff in the Career Center can provide you with more information about the L&C Net and LinkedIn, as well as upcoming Alumni events.

You can also use social media, business directories, and professional organizations to find people to contact. Be sure to check with the personnel office of an organization to get the correct name and job title of the person with whom you want to speak. In order to get a representative view, try to identify as many people as possible.

OBTAINING AN INFORMATIONAL INTERVIEW

Now that you have identified people, you are ready to arrange the interviews. There are several ways of doing this, depending on your relationship with the person. If a person's name has been obtained indirectly, you might ask for a personal referral by the intermediate party. An alternative might be to contact the individual directly, and introduce yourself with the words, "...so and so suggested I contact you ..."

When no intermediary is involved, there are two common approaches. Call for an appointment or send an email of introduction and follow up with a call. The latter is often appropriate when arranging an out-of-town appointment. Remember – it is important that **you** take the initiative for calling after you write.

When you call to set up the interview, make sure to give your name and affiliation with Lewis & Clark College. Explain the purpose of your visit – to learn about the field in order to help you explore career options. Specify the kinds of information you are seeking. Ask to meet in person if at all possible, so you can see the work environment. Be flexible. You may have to work around busy schedules. Always get complete directions to the business, and leave your number in case the meeting needs to be rescheduled.

INTERVIEW SUGGESTIONS

Before the interview you should conduct research on the organization or occupation in order to have some background information. Sources of information include publications on occupational fields, professional journals, newspapers, job descriptions and web sites.

Develop a manageable number of questions on topics pertinent to you. Try to frame your questions in a way that will allow you to elicit the most information. You want more than “yes” or “no” answers. The following are questions you may want to consider using in the informational interview. Keep your own interests and values in mind when preparing your questions.

- How would you describe your typical workday (or week, or month, as appropriate)?
- What background is necessary or helpful in this position? What are typical career paths?
- What skills, knowledge, and personal characteristics are important in your job?
- What do you like best about this job? What are the greatest challenges?
- What do you find most rewarding about your work?
- If you could change something about your work, what would it be?
- How would you describe an ideal applicant to your organization?
- Looking back, what would you have done differently regarding your career path?
- How would you characterize the working conditions (i.e. closely supervised, supportive management, high pressure, independent, etc.)?
- What are current trends, changes, or controversies in the field?
- What do you see in the next five years for your profession?
- If I work in this field, what are the big mistakes to avoid?
- What is the typical salary range? How does this vary by setting?
- Can you suggest some recent publications that discuss this field?
- Can you suggest other people I could talk to? May I use your name as a referral?
- Can you suggest the names of other organizations in this field/industry?
- Are there other insights you have that would give me a greater understanding of this career?

Finally, you should dress appropriately and be on time. Be prepared to present a brief (1–2 minute) introduction of yourself. Bring your resume, as the person you are talking to can be more helpful if he/she has some information about you. Practice your introduction and questions a few times before the first interview. Ask for a business card to obtain accurate name, title and address information.

AFTER THE INTERVIEW

Send thank you notes following all visits, within 1-2 days. Any written correspondence you send should follow business form, in order to reflect your professional orientation. Not only is this a common courtesy, but a good way to remind your contact of your interest in the profession. Remember, this person is now a part of your professional network and it's important to stay in touch.

Keep records of your informational interviews. Notes on who you met, what you discussed, and what resources they referred you to will be helpful as you expand your informational network. When done effectively, informational interviewing can take a tremendous amount of time and energy. Hence, you must be committed to carrying the process through until your goal is reached. The long-term benefit is the acquisition of information and skills that will be valuable throughout your life.