

## INTERVIEWS:

# NETWORKING'S BEST-KEPT SECRET: INFORMATIONAL INTERVIEWS

### Takeaway Points

- An informational interview is similar to a job interview, with one big difference – there's no job opening. The goal of an informational interview is to build knowledge, get advice, and maybe even get leads to people or opportunities that can help your job search.
- Don't ask for a job! This undermines the intent of the informational interview and can damage your credibility.
- Remember to express your gratitude for their time and help in a thank you note, and leave the door open for future contact to strengthen your new networking connection.

By: Team Pongo

You always hear how important it is to network, but the informational interview – one of the most effective forms of networking – is so underused it's almost a secret. An informational interview is similar to a job interview, with one big difference – there's no job opening. The goal of an informational interview is to build knowledge, get advice, and maybe even get leads to people or opportunities that can help your job search. It can be an excellent way to gain insight into a specific field, industry, or organization that interests you, without the pressure of a job hanging in the balance.

Informational interviews are especially helpful for soon-to-be graduates, career changers, passive job seekers, and those returning to the workforce. In fact, they can benefit *anyone* who wants to learn more about a potential career or particular organization.

#### Setting Up the Interview

To schedule the interview, you'll need to contact someone who works in your targeted field and ask for a brief meeting to answer some questions you have. This should be relatively easy if you have a friend at the company who can refer you to a specific person, but even a cold call could be successful. Sure, you might get a quick brush-off if the person is busy, but you also might reach someone who would be happy to help you.

Here are four steps to follow when setting up an informational interview:

1. Learn as much as you can about the organization and the industry beforehand. Then, prepare a list of questions. Have your list of questions ready before you call so you can explain the type of information you're seeking.
2. Find out the name, title, and contact information of the person you want to schedule the interview with.
3. Pick up the phone and make the call. Identify yourself and your background, the name of your friend at the company (if applicable), and why you're calling. Be brief and respectful (after all, you're asking for a favor). Here's a practice script:

*Hello, Ms. Smith. My name is John Seeker and my friend Kathy Parker, who works in the Sales department, suggested I contact you. I am currently a writer, but I'm interested in learning more about the advertising field. I understand that you have a great deal of knowledge in this area, so I was wondering if you could spare some time, at your convenience, to meet with me for an informational interview. I have some questions I'd like to ask you, and would welcome any insights you may have about your [company / career path / industry].*

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*“While it requires time and preparation on your part to make it successful, an informational interview can provide greater insights, knowledge, and practical experience than almost any other networking activity.”*

### Did you know?

Pongo's Interview Tips video program provides 12 how-to videos for every stage of the interview, plus printable checklists and interview guides.

4. Schedule a convenient time to meet. It's usually easiest to meet in the person's workplace, so they can control the timing and don't have to travel. You can also consider offering to meet over coffee or lunch – but make sure *you* pick up the tab!

#### At the Interview

Since there's no job at stake, it can be tempting to be more relaxed and casual for this type of interview, but you should treat this as if it were a real job interview. It's not unheard of for informational interviews to result in internships or even job offers, so follow these rules:

- Dress in conservative business attire, and don't be late!
- Start by briefly refreshing the other person's memory about what you're doing now and what you're hoping to learn.
- Bring copies of your resume to leave with the person for future reference – but only if they ask for it first.
- Don't dominate the conversation. Prepare specific, open-ended questions, and allow time for the other person to complete their thoughts. An easy, open exchange will help both of you gain a realistic impression of each other.
- *Don't ask for a job!* This undermines the intent of the informational interview and can damage your credibility. If you present yourself effectively, you will leave a positive impression that could result in a real job interview when there is an appropriate opening.
- Ask for the person's business card so you can follow up with a thank you note. Remember, this is a new member of your network!
- Politely ask if there is anyone else in the company or industry you might contact (for your *next* informational interview).
- Express your appreciation for their time and help in a thank you note, and leave the door open for future contact to strengthen your networking connection.

Since job searching is all about marketing yourself effectively, the informational interview offers an opportunity to further develop your personal brand without the make-or-break pressure that can come with an actual job interview. It does require time and preparation on your part to make it successful, but an informational interview can provide greater insights, knowledge, and practical experience than almost any other networking activity.

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