

## Informational Interview

To find the best employees, companies and organizations conduct time-intensive and costly recruiting activities resulting in numerous **interviews** with multiple candidates to fill just one vacancy. The **interview** process, from the employer's perspective, is to find the best-qualified candidate who has the right match for the **job** and the company. The **job** seeker, on the other hand, sees the **interview** strictly as an invitation that has to be extended by the employer before he or she can step inside the company. What if an individual does not wait to be invited for an **interview**, but instead, requests an **interview**? Is this allowed? Yes it is, in the form of what is called an *informational interview*.

An informational **interview** is a meeting with a person that one arranges to gain information on a career, a company, its employment opportunities, and any other company items relevant to his or her career exploration. Because the individual is not a **job** applicant, the informational **interview** does not require the person to sell himself or herself to an employer. Therefore, an informational **interview** allows one to circumvent the formal **interview** process and have valuable face-to-face time with a person who can provide career advice and who could potentially extend a **job** offer.

Although most **job** seekers may use an informational **interview** as a way to audition for an actual **job interview** by gaining experience and confidence talking about themselves with business professionals, a key objective of the informational **interview** is to become more informed as to whether or not a company is truly a good fit. Fit can come in the form of location, company size, company culture, opportunities for career advancement, or style of management. Informational **interviews** can provide insight on these company aspects and help one to decide whether or not to pursue employment opportunities with the company.

### ARRANGING INFORMATIONAL INTERVIEWS

How are informational **interviews** obtained? First, individuals should identify a target list of 5 to 10 companies, which, based on research (size, location, type of business, etc.) seem most interesting. The next step is for individuals to identify persons they want to meet with through informational **interviews** at any of those target companies.

One can identify people by reading annual reports of target companies or visiting the companies' Web sites to find a person's name whose title is closest to the type of career one is interested in discussing. For example, a person who is thinking of a marketing career may want to find the director of marketing, a marketing manager, or a market researcher. Also, individuals should keep in mind the network of people they already know. Friends, fellow students, present or former coworkers, supervisors, or neighbors can be good sources for contacts.

After obtaining the name of a person he or she would like to **interview**, an individual must decide whether to request the **interview** by writing a letter or a making a phone call. In either case, an individual should simply introduce himself or herself, indicate the source for the person's name, and ask whether the person would be available for a brief meeting to discuss his or her occupation. Because individuals seeking informational **interviews** are not asking for **jobs**, they should convey a genuine interest in simply learning more about a particular person's career and the company. Last, individuals should never send résumés when requesting an informational **interview** via email or regular correspondence, because that signals an intention to change the

meeting into a **job interview**.

## **PREPARING FOR THE INFORMATIONAL INTERVIEW**

The key to a successful meeting is to have a list of questions prepared in advance to ask the interviewee. Be sure to read about the career area related to the interviewee and develop questions that are specific to the interviewee's background, experience, and challenges in his or her career. Some sample questions to ask are as follows:

Tell me what made you decide to enter this career.  
What do you find most rewarding about your work?  
What is the toughest part of your **job**?  
Where do you see yourself in a few years, such as long-term goals you wish to achieve related to this career or starting a new one?

The types of questions to ask about the company are just as critical. Therefore, it will be necessary to complete some research on the company's history, its senior management team, its products, and the type of industry it is associated with. Here are some sample questions:

What trends do you see for this industry that will positively or negatively affect your company?  
How would you describe the company culture?  
Which other companies would you consider your company's primary competitors, and why?  
Aside from profit increases, how does your company measure success?

## **CONDUCTING INFORMATIONAL INTERVIEWS**

Once an informational **interview** has been scheduled, there are some basic guidelines to follow for conducting the **interview**. First, interviewers should arrive 10 minutes early and keep the **interview** within the time frame agreed upon. It is important to not exceed the requested time, as a sign of courtesy and professionalism.

Second, individuals should dress in formal business attire as if the meeting were an actual **job interview**. The first impression one makes with a prospective employer is very important no matter what the circumstances may be.

Third, individuals should take the initiative with the questions they ask throughout the **interview** so that they obtain the information they need but also engage the interviewee in a discussion that allows both parties to have a conversational tone. Finally, be sure to observe the working environment and notice any aspects of the workers in terms of the way they dress or how they communicate. Individuals should also take notice of the offices and other facilities of the company that might enhance or detract from their working experience.

### ***Follow-up Etiquette***

On completion of each informational **interview**, individuals should ask themselves whether they feel more or less enthusiastic about the company. If they like what they learned about the company and believe it could provide a good fit, they should follow up with the interviewee by sending a thank-you card stating their appreciation for his or her time and declaring their interest in being considered for employment opportunities at the company. An individual might visit the company's Web site once a month and as he or she comes across a **job** that is appealing should apply for it as instructed but also send a résumé and a copy of the **job** description to the interviewee requesting a referral to the hiring manager of the position.

An individual who is not interested in working for the company but enjoyed speaking with the interviewee should still send a thank-you note and express appreciation for having learned more about the company and the person's career background.

## CONCLUSION

Informational **interviews** can be an invaluable tool in a **job** search campaign. Instead of waiting to apply for **jobs** that are listed on company Web sites or **job** boards, individuals can be more proactive and introduce themselves to potential employers through informational **interviews**. After conducting several informational **interviews**, individuals will have become more familiar with the hiring process, strengthened their **interview** skills, and developed positive **job**-hunting techniques that make them more competitive and effective **job** seekers.

—Pedro Gonzalez

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## Further Readings and References

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