

INFORMATIONAL INTERVIEWING- Tip Sheet

Definition

Informational interviewing is a technique used to gain information about careers. Through this process, you gather firsthand knowledge about a specific job, career field or industry. Typically, informational interviews last about 30 minutes to one hour.

Informational interviews are beneficial at all stages in the career development and job search process, whether you are a first-year student exploring options, a senior preparing for the job search, or an alumnus making a career change.

Purposes of Informational Interviews

- Learn more about the realities of working in a particular occupation.
- Explore careers and focus your career goals.
- Decide among different occupations or choose an occupational specialty.
- Access the most up-to-date career information.
- Help you to find your niche in a particular field or company.
- Discover careers you never knew existed.
- Uncover your professional strengths and weaknesses.
- Learn about different ways to prepare for a specific career.
- Help polish your communication skills and gain confidence before the high-pressure situation of a job interview.
- Make personal contacts in a field and expand your professional network.
- Gain insight into the hidden job market.
- Become aware of employer needs and the realities of the job market.
- Gain insight/advice on how to successfully make a career change into a new field.

Beginning the Process

Before selecting someone to interview, you will need to determine which careers you would like to learn more about. If you are unsure about your career goals, you may want to make an appointment with a career coach in the Career and Professional Development Center (CPDC). Each career coach works with students and alumni from specific schools or departments within the University and can help you explore how your interests, skills, and values relate to career options. You may also wish to take an interest inventory to explore your career interests in more detail. To schedule an appointment with your career coach, please call the CPDC at 412-397-6333.

Other career resources that may be helpful include the following:

- Career Resource Guides by Major – www.rmu.edu/cpdc
(Available through Handshake: click on “Career Center” and then “Resources.”)
- Occupational Outlook Handbook - www.bls.gov/ooh
- O*Net Online - www.onetonline.org
- Strong Interest Inventory- Contact the CPDC to discuss taking the Strong Interest Inventory.

Identifying People to Interview

Once you have targeted specific occupations to explore, you will need to identify the individuals you would like to interview. The following suggestions will give you some ideas:

- People you already know such as friends, family members, fellow students, current or former co-workers, supervisors, neighbors, etc.
- CPDC staff
- Robert Morris University Career Network- a LinkedIn group that provides RMU students, alumni, faculty and staff an opportunity to connect with each other about career-related topics: <http://tinyurl.com/cxqtfk3>
- Professional organizations
- Company/organizational directories
- *Foundations* (RMU magazine that includes alumni notes)
- People you have met through workshops, seminars or conferences
- Professors, advisors, department heads
- Community contacts

Arranging Informational Interviews

Once you have identified people you would like to talk with, you can begin to arrange the interviews. Contact the individuals and ask to arrange a time to meet in person or to conduct a phone interview. For many people, this initial contact is the most difficult part of the process. Many on your list of people to interview may be strangers. Asking strangers for career help may be intimidating; however, there are many reasons why people are willing to help students and career changers. First, people often like to talk about themselves and their careers. Second, some may feel they are helping to further their profession by encouraging others to enter it. Finally, some of the people you contact may have conducted informational interviews in their own career development process and will be happy to return the favor. Overall, as long as you are polite and courteous, it doesn't hurt to ask. Some people may not be willing or able to talk with you, but many will.

There are four methods of arranging an informational interview:

1. Introduction by a mutual acquaintance

People you already know such as friends, family members, etc. can be helpful in setting up informational interviews. Your personal contacts may be able to suggest individuals for you to interview. Your contacts may also be willing to make the initial request for you. In that case, you should then follow-up with the individual to set a date and time for the interview. You could also make the initial contact yourself, using your personal contacts as referrals by mentioning their names when writing or calling to set up the interview.

2. Email/letter

Some people prefer to receive an email/letter before arranging an informational interview. The email/letter provides background on the purpose of the meeting and allows the person time to check his/her schedule before responding to your request for an informational interview. Sample emails/letters are included at the end of this tip sheet.

3. Telephone

A faster way to contact people is to call them. Before calling, you should outline the basic points you want to mention and practice once or twice before making your call.

4. LinkedIn

With the expanding use of LinkedIn to make connections to share career information, it is beneficial to arrange informational interviews using LinkedIn. A sample connection message for LinkedIn is included at the end of this tip sheet.

Preparing for the Interview

Now that you have scheduled the informational interview, you will need to adequately prepare. There are three key steps you should complete:

1. Research the organization/interviewee

People agreeing to an informational interview are donating their time to you. It will make better use of their time if you first research their organization. Conducting research will help you develop better questions, and demonstrate your enthusiasm and professionalism. Organizational websites and trade magazines are a good source of background information. You may also call the organization and request information. In addition to researching organizations, LinkedIn can be utilized to research interviewees. The LinkedIn profile reveals education, skills, and professional associations. You can use the profile to ask better questions and to study the path interviewees took to achieve their career goals.

2. Create a resume

Although this is not a job interview, a well-written resume will show that you are goal-oriented and prepared. You may also want to ask the person for their feedback during the informational interview. For guidelines on how to write a good resume, please refer to the Resume Writing Tip Sheet. You may also call the CPDC to schedule an appointment to have your resume reviewed by your career coach before your informational interview.

3. Develop questions

Because you have arranged the informational interview, it is your responsibility to facilitate the discussion. It is very important to develop a list of well thought out questions. You will want to ask about job responsibilities, working conditions and career preparation. In general, it is best to ask open-ended questions. A list of sample questions is included at the end of the tip sheet.

The Day of the Interview

Below are some guidelines to conduct a successful informational interview:

- Dress professionally to make a positive first impression.
- Arrive about 10-15 minutes early, but no earlier.
- Be polite with everyone you meet at the organization.
- Be professional and courteous- don't address your host by their first name unless they ask you to do so; do not sit down until your host does; do not chew gum or smoke; turn off your cell phone.
- Speak professionally- avoid grammatical errors, slang and filler words such as "like" or "uhm."
- Begin by thanking your host for their time, providing a brief background about your experiences and interests, and summarizing the goals of the interview.
- Ask questions enthusiastically and listen carefully to the interviewee's responses. You may want to take notes.
- Monitor the time and be sure to end the interview in the time you indicated. (Of course, you can continue longer if your host would like to!)
- Always thank your host for their time and helpful information.
- Be sure to ask if they can recommend one or two other people they think would be helpful for you to speak with.
- Ask for their business card and for permission to stay in touch.

Follow-Up

Continue conducting informational interviews until you are excited and enthusiastic about a specific career. If informational interviews are part of your networking strategy for your job search, continue arranging informational interviews and building your network until you have secured a position. Networking, in general, should continue throughout your career to maintain professional contacts. After the interview, be sure to send a thank you letter. A sample thank you letter is included at the end of the tip sheet. You should also evaluate what you have learned about the occupation. For example, what did you like/dislike about the occupation? Do you think you would be happy in this type of job? It is important to seek information from many sources before making any final decisions about your career choice.

Sample Questions

Questions about the job

1. What kinds of tasks do you perform on a typical day or in a typical week?
2. What types of tasks do you spend most of your time doing?
3. How is your daily/weekly time split between working with people, data, and things?
4. What do you like best about this job?
5. What is the most exciting part of this job?
6. What are some of the more difficult or frustrating parts of this job?
7. What personal characteristics does one need to be successful in this career?
8. Do you spend more time working independently or as part of a team?
9. What types of decisions do you typically need to make?
10. What types of advancement opportunities are available for an entry-level worker in this career?
11. What are some of the possible career paths in this field?
12. I read that _____ is an important issue in this field. Have you found that to be true?
13. How do you see this career changing?
14. What is the typical entry-level salary range for someone entering this field?
15. What is the current employment outlook/demand for this occupation?
16. Is the demand for this job higher in certain geographical areas?
17. Does your job require you to travel? If so, how often and for how long?
18. Can you describe the organizational structure at your company/organization?

Questions about working conditions

1. How many hours do you typically work each day/week?
2. Is your schedule flexible or do you have set hours?
3. Are your hours typical for most jobs in this field, or do some jobs have different hours?
4. How does this career affect your lifestyle?
5. Do you have any health concerns associated with your career?

Questions about training/preparation

1. What educational background did you obtain to prepare for this career?
2. Is a certain major or degree required for this job?
3. How did you find your job?
4. What classes or experiences do you think are most helpful in preparing for this career?
5. How important are internships?
6. Can you name a few professional journals and organizations that you believe would be helpful to a student interested in this profession?
7. What advice would you give a person entering this field?
8. What do you think of the experience I've had so far in terms of entering this field?
9. How would you recommend using LinkedIn in my career search?
10. Would you mind looking at my resume? How would you suggest I improve it?
11. Based on the information you have about my education, skills, and experience, what other fields or jobs would you suggest I research further before I make a final decision about my career path?
12. Can you recommend one or two other people you think would be helpful for me to speak with about this career? May I use your name when contacting him/her?
13. When you/your organization hire new employees, what methods do you most often use to find candidates (job fairs, internet listings, networking referrals, social networking sites, agencies, etc.)?
14. When evaluating job candidates, what characteristics or experiences make one candidate stand apart from the rest?
15. What do you wish you had known before you entered this field?
16. What kinds of preparation do you wish you would have had?

Sample Request Letter: Based on Past Meeting

123 College Student Avenue
Moon Township, PA 15108

April 7, 2018

Ms. Sharon Information
Director of Public Relations
Company XYZ
456 Employer Way
Pittsburgh, PA 15202

Dear Ms. Information:

I met you briefly in March when I attended the Creativity at Work Conference. I truly enjoyed listening to comments you made about the public relations field. The information you shared was very interesting and helpful.

I am currently a sophomore at Robert Morris University majoring in communication. Recently I have begun to explore career opportunities in the communication field. Based on your comments, I have become more interested in public relations.

I would like to meet with you to discuss the public relations field in more detail, specifically the day-to-day activities, trends in the field, and any advice you could offer to someone entering your field. I would love an opportunity to meet with you, for approximately 30 minutes, at your office to discuss the field in more detail. If possible, I would also greatly appreciate a tour of the company.

Thank you for considering my request. I will contact you next week to inquire if we can schedule a time to meet.

Sincerely,

Susie Communications

Sample Request Letter: Cold Contact

123 University Street
Moon Township, PA 15108

January 7, 2018

Mr. Thomas Miller
Tax Accountants, Inc.
567 Accounts Avenue
Pittsburgh, PA 15212

Dear Mr. Miller:

As a future accountant, I am currently exploring options in the accounting field. I am an accounting major at Robert Morris University and plan to complete an internship this summer. Before I apply for internships, I would like to learn more about the differences between working in public and private accounting.

When recently reading the Pittsburgh Business Times, I learned about the growth your company has experienced. I am writing to inquire about the possibility of meeting with you for approximately a half hour to discuss the accounting field in more detail. Any information, insights and advice you could share about the accounting profession and different work environments would be greatly appreciated. I would be happy to meet you at your office. We could also conduct the informational interview over the phone, if that would be more convenient for you.

I will contact you the week of January 14th to discuss arranging this meeting. Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

William Taxfield

Sample Telephone Script

“Hello, my name is Jane Smith, and I am a sophomore majoring in marketing at Robert Morris University. I heard you speak at an American Marketing Association meeting last semester. I am currently exploring career options in marketing and was very interested in the comments you made about market research. I would like to learn more about market research and get your advice on how to best prepare for the field. I was wondering if it would be possible to schedule a 20–30 minute informational meeting with you at your convenience. ”

Sample LinkedIn Connections Message

Dear Mr. Williams,

We have never met, but I am a member of the Robert Morris University Career Networking group and noticed your LinkedIn profile, which stated that you have worked as an accountant in public and corporate accounting. I am an accounting major at Robert Morris University and plan to complete an internship this summer. Before I apply for internships, I would like to learn more about the differences between working in public and private accounting. Would you connect with me on LinkedIn, so I may contact you in order to arrange an informational interview?

Respectfully,
Edward Roberts

Sample Email Message

Dear Ms. Baker,

My name is Joseph Martin, and I received your name from Dr. Robert Roy, my engineering professor at Robert Morris University. He said you are an RMU alumna and have worked in various types of engineering positions. I am a junior Mechanical Engineering student interested in an internship for the summer and would like to learn more about different positions in engineering. I have always enjoyed using my hands, tinkering with robots, and solving problems. I would like to arrange an informational interview with you, either in person or over the phone, to learn more about career possibilities in the engineering field. I am requesting 30 minutes of your time and am available to meet in your office, if that is preferable to you. I appreciate your time and consideration in advance.

Respectfully,
Joseph Martin

Sample Thank You Letter

111 RMU Drive
Moon Township, PA 15108

January 14, 2018

Mr. William Jones
Network Administrator
TriStar Technologies
686 Technology Boulevard
Pittsburgh, PA 15212

Dear Mr. Jones:

Thank you very much for taking the time to meet with me last week to discuss career options in the information technology field. I appreciate the information you shared about your day-to-day activities as well as your insight about other roles within the company. Your comments regarding the increased need for internet security were topical and very interesting. I plan to incorporate that topic into one of my course projects this semester.

Thank you, also, for suggesting that I meet with Meredith Key. I contacted her yesterday, and we have scheduled a meeting for next week. I am confident she will also provide me with helpful information.

Finally, I'd like to thank you for your generous offer to critique my resume. Enclosed is an updated resume; any suggestions you can offer would be most welcomed. I plan to begin sending resumes out next month for summer internships and would value any feedback you may have as an employer in the field.

I will be in touch from time to time to keep you posted on my career exploration. Thank you again for everything. I greatly appreciate the time and information you have shared with me.

Sincerely,

Karen Systems

Enclosure