



## Career Information Interviews

The University Counseling Center  
The University of Wisconsin Oshkosh

One great method to explore a career is to utilize people in the appropriate field. This is also known as "informational interviewing". You ask professionals about their careers to learn about the day-to-day functions of the job.

This technique is most effective after you have done some initial research in the Counseling Center's Career Library, have an overview of the occupation, and would like more detailed information about the field. You can then put more emphasis upon the specifics ("Is there a typical career path in this field?" or "What are some of the recent trends and developments in the field?") rather than starting at square one ("Exactly what do chiropractors do, anyway?").

Be aware that it is a good idea to talk with several people for a variety of perspectives.

**Length of time working in a field, work setting, and area of specialization** are just a few factors which may influence the vantage point of an individual. For instance, a sales representative with a spouse and children may consider extensive travel an occupational hazard, while a single person may see travel as a "perk" or benefit.

Informational interviewing is different from other kinds of interviewing in some key respects. First of all, you select people with whom you wish to talk. Secondly, you initiate the meeting. Third, you are in charge, asking the questions, guiding the flow of information, and taking care not to stifle the interviewee's spontaneity.

Find someone in your field of interest to interview. There are several ways to go about this.

- Ask all your friends, family members, professors, and acquaintances if they know a person employed in the career you are researching. When you call your prospective interviewee, you can mention that you were referred by a mutual friend.
- Go to Career Services and ask for information on Alumni Connections, a group of alumni who have volunteered to be information interviewees for currently enrolled students.
- Try the Yellow Pages. For example, if you are looking for an architect to interview, you'll find several under "architects" in the phone book. You can call a firm, explain to the receptionist that you want to interview an architect and ask her who in the firm might be willing to give you a half hour of time, or ask for a specific architect whose name you have.

Here are some sample way of introducing yourself:

"Hello. My name is Mary and I am a (friend/sister/student) of your friend Tom. I'm calling you because I am doing some research on the field of interior design and Tom suggested you might be

willing to help. If I met you at your office or over lunch or simply called you back at a more convenient time, do you think you might be able to find some time for me?"

OR

"Hello. My name is Dan and I am a student at the University of Wisconsin Oshkosh. I am doing some research in the field of technical sales and got your name from the Alumni Connection, where you are listed as being employed as a computer sales manager. I was wondering if you would be willing to help me in my research by telling me a little about your job sometime. I could come to your office, meet you for coffee or lunch or..."

OR

"Hello. My name is Sue and I am a student at the University of Wisconsin Oshkosh. I saw your ad in the Yellow Pages and thought your firm might be a good place to start. I am doing some research on the field of city planning and was wondering if someone in your firm might be able to meet with me for 15 or 20 minutes sometime to answer some questions I've written up..."

Meet with your interviewee as arranged. Meeting is a bit scarier than having a phone conversation, but it is much more rewarding for you both. It is more personal and more productive in terms of getting to know each other. Dress appropriately. You don't have to dress up as much as you might for a job interview, but pretty close. Although this is just an information interview, you may have the opportunity later to ask your interviewee for referrals for job openings or to help you network into the profession. Begin thinking and acting like a professional.

An informational interview can also serve as a way to develop contacts in order to set up job shadowing or internships. You may want to think of informational interviewing, job shadowing and internships as a sequential process in gaining more and more specific information about a field.

Be prepared. At the end of this section is a list of questions you can use as a guide to design your own interview questions. Your goal is to learn about the field, get advice and get information. Ask questions that are pertinent to you and help you become better informed. Remember: You are the interviewer and should provide the structure for your meeting. When you introduce yourself, you can chat briefly about who you are so that the interviewee can get to know you, but remember the purpose of the meeting is the interview.

People often enjoy talking about themselves, their work and giving advice. Be prepared to spend more time than the 15 or 20 minutes. Interviews usually do run overtime because it is a very enjoyable experience for your interviewee to be the "expert," to give advice, to talk about herself or himself. But be sensitive and don't overstay your welcome.

Follow-up. The following are just a few pointers on thorough career research:

- Be sure to keep notes of your meetings for future reference.
- Send a thank-you letter (preferably within a week) in appreciation of the information and courtesy extended to you.
- Stay in touch, especially if the person expressed interest in your progress.
- If given a referral which turned out to be a gold mine of information, drop a note to the person who made the referral. People appreciate knowing when they have been helpful.
- Later, when you do enter the field and accept a promising position, a follow-up thank you would be polite, as well as wise.

### **Information Interview Questions**

#### Job Description

- What is your job title? Are there other titles used for what you do?
- What is a typical day like? What is a month like?
- Would you please describe the kinds of interactions you have with others in your organization, and with people outside your organization?
- How much freedom do you have?
- Do you mostly work at your desk? On the sales floor? Outside?
- What are some of the problems/decisions likely to face you in a day's time?
- What skills are required for handling them?
- What are the most satisfying aspects of your work? Most frustrating?

#### Lifestyle

- What hours do you normally work? Is overtime common? Is there flexible scheduling in this field?
- How much travel is there in this occupation?
- What civic and social participation is expected of, or advantageous to, a person in your field?
- Does the ability to relocate geographically affect one's opportunities for advancement?
- What are the professional organizations in this field? How do they serve members?
- What is the typical salary range for a beginner in this field? For an experienced or management person?
- What are the stresses with which you contend? Are there deadline pressures?
- How does this occupation affect your social and/or family life?

#### Advancement

- Would you trace your own career path for me? Is this typical, and if not, could you tell me what a beginner might expect now?
- What kinds of entry-level jobs do you think are good training grounds for a person entering this field now?

- What are the trends and developments in the field that you see as affecting the career of someone just entering this occupation now?
- What are the possibilities that you see for advancement in your department? In your field in general?

### Preparation

- How did you prepare for this occupation?
- What do you recommend for a person just entering the occupation now?
- What education/degrees/training/licenses are needed? If not mandatory, recommended?
- What university courses do you recommend for an undergraduate as preparation?
- What is the effect of an advanced degree or specific training? Mandatory? Helpful? Required or helpful for upward mobility?
- What are the best places to go for education/training for a position like yours? For higher positions?

### Job Search

- What do you recommend in order to obtain a first job in this field?
- How do people go about entering your field?

### Referrals

- Could you give me the names, addresses, and telephone numbers of other people in this occupation who might be willing to talk with me about their careers as you have done?

**\*\*Information from the University of California Santa Barbara Career Counseling Center**