

Mastering the Informational Interview

Yahoo! HotJobs

By Erin Hovanec

Want an up-close, insider's perspective on a certain industry or career? Get it in an informational interview.

Also called a research interview, an informational interview is one of the most useful yet underutilized parts of a job search.

During an informational interview, you can learn firsthand about an industry, career or company. You can also get personalized feedback on your skills and experience while making valuable professional contacts -- especially important for job seekers who are new to the workforce or changing careers.

Informational Interviewing Defined

An informational interview is a brief meeting (usually about half an hour) between someone researching a career or industry and someone working in that career or industry.

The most important thing to remember about informational interviewing: Its primary goal is not to get you a job. Instead, the purpose is to gather information, which can then be used to make career decisions and conduct a successful job search.

Informational interviews can give job seekers insight into the following areas:

- What a typical day on the job entails,
- What experience is useful for advancement in a particular career,
- What educational background is helpful,
- And, what rewards and challenges a given job presents.

Contacts Are the Key

How do you find people willing to meet with you for an informational interview? Network, network, network.

You probably won't get far by cold-calling Human Resources. Recruiters spend their time meeting with candidates about open positions. Most are too busy to meet with someone just to chat about careers.

Here's who you should hit up for contacts:

- College alumni associations,
- Professional/industry organizations,
- Former colleagues and coworkers,
- Family and friends.

You Can Never Know Enough

The key to a successful informational interview is preparation. By preparing, you demonstrate that you appreciate -- and respect -- the interviewer's time.

Know the basics about the interviewer's industry, company and specific position.

Prepare a list of questions, avoiding those with simple "yes" or "no" answers in order to keep the interview conversational and informative.

And, be sure to take your resume, portfolio and business cards to informational interviews just in case the interviewer volunteers to distribute them to his or her contacts in the industry.

Remember, It's Still an Interview

An informational interview can seem more informal and casual than an interview for a specific job, but it's still an interview. And smart job seekers treat it as such.

Dress appropriately, arrive 10-15 minutes early and bring copies of your resume. In short, do all the things that interviewers expect.

Be assertive in asking questions, but don't dominate the interview.

A traditional interview is about what you can offer the interviewer. An informational interview is about what the interviewer can offer you (in terms of knowledge).

Finally, be sure to send a thank-you note after the interview, even if you don't normally send one. It's the polite way to recognize someone who's been generous with their time and knowledge.