

Helpful Hints for Informational Interviews

An informational interview is an opportunity to spend time (usually 30-60 minutes) with a professional who is working in a career field of interest to you. By talking with someone already in the field, you will acquire practical career information and expand your professional network. The great thing about an informational interview is that it is a non-pressured situation where you can gain first-hand information about the field you're researching. It's also a wonderful way to build a network for future contacts and leads.

An informational interview is not the time to ask for a job or an internship. Remember that your primary purpose is to gather information. Focus on information gathering, developing your professional network, and building relationships.

Why Conduct Informational Interviews?

- For career exploration.
- To network within a field of interest during the job search.
- For "fine-tuning" possible career options.
- To identify potential internship sites or permanent jobs.

Contacts for Informational Interviews

You can develop an initial list of contact names through a variety of resources/people:

- BryanConnect Career Contact & Alumni Network
- career/employer research
- classmates
- professors
- professional association functions and/or memberships
- networking functions
- friends
- family
- current/former co-workers
- neighbors
- fellow church-goers or club members
- alumni networks
- fraternity/sorority contacts
- volunteer work
- other social networks

Anyone else you can think of...the more people you talk to, the more leads to more contacts you get.

Try to develop a list of target companies – companies you might like to work for in the future. Then, try to identify people you might be able to contact for informational interviews within those companies.

Contact the Professional

- Once you've identified a person to contact, determine how you will contact the person (via phone, e-mail, or letter).
 - **If sending an e-mail:** Be sure to spell the person's name correctly, proofread and spellcheck your e-mail (more than once), and put together an organized, professional looking and sounding e-mail. Be sure your e-mail address sounds professional, too.

In your e-mail message, explain to them why you're contacting them and be prepared to explain to them what an informational interview is. Also, mention the referral source. If

the referral source is a person, include the person's name, and possibly the person's employer and job title.

If you don't hear from them within a week, follow-up with another e-mail or a phone call. If you do hear from them and they are willing to meet with you, schedule a meeting time. See the "If calling" information below for tips on setting up the meeting time.

The same things apply if sending a letter. If sending a letter, be sure it is in a professional business letter format. A letter, however, is probably not the best approach for setting up an informational interview. But it may depend on the situation.

- **If calling:** Prior to calling, write out a script or notes for yourself for the initial phone call. If you're unsure of what to say or how to say it, practice by yourself, with a friend, or with a career counselor.

Your initial phone call is only for scheduling the meeting. If you speak to the person, ask if this is a good time for them to talk. Explain to them why you're contacting them and be prepared to explain to them what an informational interview is. Also, mention the referral source. If the referral source is a person, include the person's name, and possibly the person's employer and job title.

Request an informational interview with the person, asking to schedule a time to meet with them for 30 minutes to 1 hour at their place of employment, if possible. If their office isn't a good meeting place, ask where it would be best for them to meet you. Remember that this person is taking time out of their schedule to meet with you, so let the employer set the most convenient time and place. If the work day is too busy, you may want to suggest meeting over lunch or dinner. As a courtesy, if you have a meal with someone while doing an informational interview, plan to pay for their meal.

A phone meeting can be scheduled, if necessary; however, it's usually better to do informational interviews in person so you can observe the work environment and possibly meet other people within the company. Meeting with someone in-person also gives you the opportunity to make a more lasting impression on them, and hopefully it's a good impression!

Leaving a message: If you leave a message for the person, speak slowly and be sure you are very clear about who you are, why you are calling, how you got their name, and stress that you're interested in speaking with them to learn more about what they do and their career field. State the date and time of your call, and state your name and your phone number twice – once at the beginning of the message and once at the end of the message. Also, let them know that you are a student in the MBA or MSITM program at UNCG. Ask if they will please give you a call back at their convenience so you can discuss this with them further.

- Once a meeting time has been established, remember to verify the location, date, and time. Also, get directions, if needed.
- If for some reason the person you contact does not want to meet with you or doesn't have time to meet with you, ask if they can refer you to someone else in a similar position either with their company or with another company. Always thank them for taking the time to talk with you even if you don't end up meeting with them. It's important to maintain that professionalism.

Preparing for the Informational Interview

- Even though you're not technically being interviewed during an informational interview, prepare for the informational interview like you are being interviewed. Below are some preparation tips:
 - Continue to research their career field, their job function, and their employer. Also, you may want to do a Google search for your contact person to see if you can find any interesting facts or information about them that would be relevant to your informational interview.
 - Organize your thoughts on why you're interested in learning more about this career path and why you're specifically interested in talking to them. Be prepared to discuss these things during your meeting.
 - Be sure that you are ready to give a brief synopsis of your background, your career interests (even if you're not completely sure yet), your strengths, etc. – your “two minute commercial.” This is an opportunity for you to market yourself, as well as gather information about a possible career path.
 - Develop a list of potential questions for the informational interview based on your research and just general questions you have about their position, career field, or company. Stay away from questions that reflect negatively on the company or questions that are too personal.
 - **E-mail the list of questions to the employer 1-2 days in advance so they have an idea of what you want to discuss with them.** You may want to mention that these are the questions you have in mind, but you're interested in covering other topics that you may have missed. It's okay if you don't get every question answered.
 - Make sure you have directions to the person's place of employment or wherever you're meeting, as well as their phone number and correct name. Make sure they have your contact information, too, just in case they need to cancel or reschedule.
 - If you've created personalized business cards, remember to bring those with you to the meeting.
 - Since you're not asking for a job or an internship, it may or may not be appropriate for you to bring your resume with you to give to the employer. Discuss this with a career counselor prior to your meeting. Again, the purpose of this meeting is to gather information. But it's always good to have a resume available just in case.
 - First impressions are important, so put together what you plan to wear to an informational interview. Professional business attire or business casual is appropriate. It may depend on the company you're visiting and/or the particular person you're meeting with. If in doubt, dress in conservative, professional business attire.
 - Print out your questions and have them ready to bring with you to the meeting. Also, have a professional looking notebook/portfolio available so you can take notes.
- If you need to cancel/reschedule for some reason, call them as soon as you know you need to cancel/reschedule. Ask if you can meet with them another time. Only cancel your meeting if it's an absolute emergency!!

Day of the Informational Interview

- Bring your list of questions to the meeting along with a professional looking notebook so you can take notes.
- Arrive at least 10 minutes early.
- Be polite and professional to everyone you see and meet from the time you arrive at your meeting place.
- Greet the person with a firm (but not overpowering) handshake, and show genuine interest and enthusiasm.
- Avoid negative talk or behaviors.
- Don't smoke before or during the meeting, and avoid wearing perfume/cologne.

- Don't chew gum during the meeting.
- Ask your questions, but also go with the flow if the employer wants to go in a different direction with the conversation.
- Be attentive and actively listen to what they're saying. Don't act like you'd rather be somewhere else.
- Watch the time, and be sure you don't go over your agreed meeting time, unless the person asks you to stay longer.
- Remember to relax and be professional, friendly, and confident.
- **Be a sponge!!** Gather as much information as you can about the job, the career field, the company, the work environment, etc.
- At the end of your meeting, thank them for their time and their valuable information, get a business card, and shake their hand. Also, give them your business card if you have one.
- Ask if there is anyone else they can refer you to for another informational interview. Keep in mind, they'll probably only refer you to other professionals if you impressed them during your meeting. That's part of the reason why first impressions and being prepared are so important.
- Ask if you can keep in touch with them if you have other questions and to also keep them informed of your career progress.

After the Informational Interview

- Immediately following the interview, make any notes to yourself about the meeting – what went well, what didn't go well, what you would do differently next time, other questions you still would like to ask, etc.
- Always send a thank you note to the person you interviewed within 24-48 hours. Thank them for their time and information. Mention anything that was particularly helpful or interesting to you. Tell them you would like to stay in contact with them. Thank you notes can be handwritten on professional looking note cards or can be written in a professional business letter format.
- If they referred you to another professional to interview, keep them up-to-date on your progress with that informational interview. This is a great reason to keep in touch...you never know what new information a person might have for you.
- Keep some sort of a filing system that includes the name, address, and phone number for each contact. Make note of the date you first contacted each person, the date you actually conducted the interview, information that you gathered during the interview, your reactions to the information, and the date you sent the thank you.
- Reflect on the informational interview:
 - What did you learn?
 - Does this career field seem to fit with your interests, skills, values, goals, etc.? Why or why not?
 - What do you still want to learn about this career field, company, etc.?

Another helpful resource for informational interviews is the Quintessential Careers Informational Interviewing Tutorial:

http://www.quintcareers.com/informational_interviewing.html

Sample Questions for Informational Interviews

Here is a list of sample questions for informational interviews; however, make up some of your own questions, as well.

- What has your career path been like? How did you get your start in this career?
- What is a good day like? A bad day? Does it have a set schedule or are you expected to adapt to situations as they develop?
- Is there a typical day on the job? If so, what's it like?
- What are some of your primary responsibilities?
- Why did you choose to work for this company? Why do you like working for this company?
- What can you tell me about the corporate culture at your company?
- How is the economy affecting this industry/your company?
- What do you like most/least about your job?
- Does your work tend to be the same each day or does it change daily? Are the hours regular? Are you expected to work evenings, weekends, or overtime?
- How would you describe the pace, level, or pressure of this work?
- Do you work most of the time with others or do you work primarily alone?
- Are you closely supervised with expectations clearly spelled out for you, or are you expected to carry out projects on your own?
- What is the salary range for people in this kind of work? (*Note: Be careful not to sound like you're asking for his/her salary.*)
- How would someone get started in this field? What are some typical entry-level positions for MBA graduates?
- What are the opportunities for advancement in this field? This company?
- What skills are most important for your kind of work? (Highlight some of your own skills.) How do you think I can transfer my skills into this field? Can you recommend any training that would make me more marketable? Is there usually on-the-job training available?
- How do people usually find out about openings in this field? What are the most important factors looked at when hiring for this field (or position)?
- How are people evaluated, and how often are they evaluated?
- Are there certain types of people who wouldn't be a good fit for this field?
- Are there any professional associations you're involved with for your field? Would you recommend that a student get involved in those associations?
- What personal advice would you give a person entering this field? What steps would you advise me to take to get into this field? What would help me become competitive in this field?
- Do you know of other professionals in this field I might be able to contact for an informational interview? May I use your name as a referral?