

The New York Times

Shifting Careers

Smart Thinking at Work.

JANUARY 29, 2008, 7:59 AM

Mastering the Informational Interview

Informational interviews can be a useful tool throughout your career, not just when you're thinking about a new job or a new line of work. You can do informational interviews when you want to learn more about a certain career move or even what it would feel like to get involved in a new project like writing a book, starting a blog, or running your own company.

In November, I did a post about informational interviews, and since then a few readers have told me they wanted more on this subject. In the original post, I focused on some of my [pet peeves about informational interviews](#). But I should have also offered suggestions on how to get the most out of them, and that is what I will do today.

Finding people to interview can happen in a variety of ways. You can ask friends and colleagues to make introductions. You can find people through an alumni network or a social networking site like [LinkedIn](#).

Once you have found people to approach, you'll need to contact them to see if they are interested in having a brief meeting or phone call. If someone rebuffs you at this stage, give up and try some other contacts. If a person is receptive, set up a meeting, keeping these few thoughts in mind:

1. The other person is doing you a favor, so it should be about what's convenient for the interviewer, not you. Follow his or her lead as to whether meetings will be in person or by phone.
2. These meetings are not about asking for job leads; the point is to learn something.
3. Think about informational interviews as a way to build a relationship and expand your network, not as a way to get a job.
4. Wait for the right time. So often we get a number and feel as if we should call immediately. But if you're not ready, you may bungle a meeting. Why wouldn't you be ready? When you're overextended and it's hard to find time on your calendar or if you haven't done enough research about the industry or the company where the person works.
5. Don't overstay your welcome. It's always better to signal the meeting is ending and let the other person say he or she is open to continuing the discussion.

Finally, how do you make the most of these meetings? People who are successful at something (the reason you're approaching them) are often pressed for time. So be respectful. Ask how much time the person has. But it's safe to assume that a 20-minute phone call or a 30-minute meeting is a reasonable request. Before the meeting, do your homework. Try to find out a bit about the person you're meeting. What's going on in his or her company or industry? Do a Google search and if you have some time in advance, set up a [Google news alert](#) so that you

don't miss big developments. And you should also know what you want. Don't expect the other person to set the agenda.

Finally, here are some questions you may want to consider:

1. Can you tell me how you got to this position?
2. What do you like most about what you do, and what would you change if you could?
3. How do people break into this field?
4. What are the types of jobs that exist where you work and in the industry in general?
5. Where would you suggest a person investigate if the person were particularly skilled at (fill in the blank — quantitative thinking, communications, writing, advocacy)?
6. What does a typical career path look like in your industry?
7. What are some of the biggest challenges facing your company and your industry today?
8. Are there any professional or trade associations I should connect with?
9. What do you read — in print and online — to keep up with developments in your field?
10. How do you see your industry changing in the next 10 years?
11. If you were just getting involved now, where would you put yourself?
12. What's a typical day like for you?
13. What's unique or differentiating about your company?
14. How has writing a book (starting a blog, running a company, etc.) differed from your expectations? What have been the greatest moments and biggest challenges?

After the meeting, make sure to follow up. If you said you'd send an article, contact someone or do something, make sure to do what you said you would. If you want to continue the relationship, figure out how to stay in touch. If there was no chemistry, move on.

Updated Jan 29, 11:03 A.M.

As an astute reader pointed out, I neglected to mention one very important aspect of follow-up. Make sure to properly give thanks, either by an e-mail or handwritten note.