

Informational Interviewing

An informational interview is a conversation with a professional in an area of interest to you. It offers an opportunity to learn more about the profession and get advice from someone working in the field. Informational interviews often provide insights you might not otherwise find, like the “unwritten rules” of success in the industry and what it’s really like to do the job. Informational interviews are also a highly effective networking strategy that help you build relationships with professionals in your field.

Why Informational Interviews Matter

Pursuing a given career goal is a big decision that will take a lot of time and effort. But it’s hard to know in advance whether a profession is a good fit for you. Informational interviews are one important tool—along with classes, internships, and other experiences—that allow you to assess whether a profession is the right fit and get advice to help you succeed.

By speaking with a professional with substantial experience in your field of interest, you can learn critical information that you couldn’t find anywhere else. And by taking advantage of this chance to build a relationship with a professional in your industry, you can also gain a valuable ally who can help you achieve your goals.

Who to Interview

Anyone with experience in your field of interest is a good candidate for an informational interview. It’s usually easiest to start with people you already know and work up to new contacts. Aim to interview at least three to five professionals to ensure you get a broad range of perspectives. Visiting professors’ office hours is a good way to get started.

Brainstorm about your current contacts, including friends and family, classmates and coworkers, neighbors and acquaintances, and faculty members, mentors, and supervisors. People who work in areas adjacent to your main goal may have many valuable insights, so think broadly and creatively. Ask people you know for suggestions and introductions. You may not even realize that a family friend works in the industry!

Asking for an Interview

Reach out to politely ask the professional if they would be willing to speak with you about their field and career path. Let them know you are interested in working in their industry and hoping to learn. You can invite them out to coffee or ask for a meeting in person, on the phone, or online. Be flexible and go with the time and format most convenient to them.

Most people enjoy talking about their work, and many people are happy to help when someone wants to do what they do. Because most people are busy, it’s a good idea to

ask for something small—say, thirty minutes of their time—and to acknowledge that you are asking for a favor and would be grateful if they are able to help.

Preparing for an Informational Interview

Be sure to read as much as you can about the profession and industry before the meeting. The purpose of the interview is to learn things you couldn't find anywhere else, so don't ask for information that you could have looked up on your own. The more informed you are, the more you will be able to utilize this opportunity to learn. Take the time to write down questions and note any other topics you'd like to discuss.

Questions to Ask

Ask open-ended questions that will help you learn about the industry, get advice for success, and determine whether the profession is the right fit for you. Here are some possible questions to consider.

- What is a typical day on the job like for you?
- How would you describe your role in your current position?
- What was your first job in the industry, and how did you get to your current job?
- What is the most rewarding part of working this field, and what is the most challenging part?
- What skills are most critical for success in this profession?
- What trends do you see influencing the profession?
- What are some of the biggest opportunities and obstacles in the industry today?
- What advice do you have for someone just starting out in this profession?
- What are the best strategies for getting a job in this field?
- Do you belong to any professional associations?
- What are the best ways to learn more about this profession? Is there anything you would recommend I read?
- What do you think I should do next?
- Is there anyone else you know who I should be talking to about this? Would you be willing to put me in touch with them?

Follow Up

Within a few days of the interview, send a message to thank the professional for taking the time to meet with you. Then, look for ways to stay in touch and make this relationship part of your professional network. Consider updating them when you take your next steps, sharing relevant articles, or letting them know when you will be at an industry event. You can get in touch with follow up questions or offer your time if there's anything you can do to help. You can also ask if it might be possible to visit their work site or shadow them for a few hours to see the job in action.