

Informational Interviews

Building Professional Connections and Knowledge

What is an informational interview?

A meeting with a professional, typically employed in your field of interest, that allows you to gather career-related information and build your professional network.

It is NOT a job-seeking meeting, although it is an important stepping stone in the job search process. Informational interviews help you build your network. You will have a much better chance of learning about job opportunities even when they are not posted or securing an interview with an organization of interest if you have a strong professional network.

Why conduct an informational interview?

Informational interviews are a useful way to:

- Learn more about a field of interest
 - types of career paths/roles
 - advice on entering a field
 - typical hiring practices
 - desired skills and knowledge
 - challenges, trends and hot topics
- Learn whether a field/position is (or isn't) for you
- Refine your career interests or generate new ideas
- Build confidence in yourself and your decision to move into a particular field
- Build and expand your professional network
- Practice talking about your experiences and telling your story
- Make a strong first impression in a low pressure situation
- Gain potential access to 'hidden' (not formally advertised) jobs or internships

Steps in the informational interview process

- 1) **Identify your contacts.** Once you have an idea about the field(s) and organizations of interest, use resources like LinkedIn and the "Team" section of organizational websites to identify people to connect with. Of course, consider CEU alumni or alumni of your undergraduate program. Don't be discouraged, though, if you can't find someone with whom you have a formal connection. It can be useful to reach out to "cold" contacts ... when asked in the right way, people are surprisingly open.
- 2) **Do the right research.** Make sure you know everything possible about career paths and hiring procedures before you reach out to people. Do not waste anyone's time asking questions you could have answered using the Internet! Spending adequate time on research before you speak with people will allow you to showcase your knowledge and interest during the conversation, and this will help you make a good impression as a thorough and competent professional.
- 3) **Make a list of questions to ask during the interview.** It's best to have your questions ready in advance, in case the person you write to responds immediately and suggests you speak that day

(this happens!). Think about what you'd really like to know – what it *isn't* possible to find out for yourself. Tailor your questions to the interviewee, the organization, and the type of work in which you are interested. Remember that this will be a short conversation, so don't plan on more than 4 or 5 questions. Also, be prepared to depart from your list, as you new questions may come to mind over the course of the conversation. (see page 4 for sample questions and find more [here](#)).

- 4) **Email the contact to propose an informational interview.** A good email should include how you learned of the person and obtained their contact information (when applicable). Mention shared connections or interests (if any) and provide a brief summary of what you are doing now and a statement of what you hope to do OR of the hypothesis you are trying to work out (for example, you may be wondering whether a specific field would be a good fit for you). Make sure your email is professional – it is better to err on the side of formality. (see page 3 for a sample email).
- 5) **Conduct the interview.** Even if you are speaking on Skype, keep the tone professional, and dress professionally. Lead with a BRIEF introduction of yourself. Refer to your list of questions, but show that you are engaged by asking follow-up questions and not just reading from your list. Be very respectful of the person's time. Even if it's a great conversation full of energy and enthusiasm on both sides, try to stick to the agreed upon timeframe so you don't leave a bad impression.
- 6) **After the interview.** Take detailed notes about the conversation while it's still fresh in your mind. Write an email to thank the interviewee within 12-24 hours. In the longer term, reach out to the interviewee with updates in order to keep in touch, but do not send them too many emails!

Etiquette and best practices

- Find a connection who is willing to make introductions (when possible).
- Prepare! It is your responsibility to have questions ready!
- Behave in a professional manner, no matter how casual the conversation seems.
- Be genuine and curious – you should only do this if you have a sincere desire to learn.
- Be respectful of others' time – stick to the set time (unless invited to stay longer).
- Ask for suggestions of other people you might approach.
- Be gracious – send a thank you note.
- Stay in touch – update them on your progress or reach out with questions.
- Don't speak with only 1-2 people and assume their views are representative of the field.
- NEVER explicitly ask for a job. Instead, ask for advice on how to obtain jobs in the field.

Additional Resources

[Ultimate Guide to an Informational Interview](#) (from *LiveCareer*)

[How to Get the Most Out of an Informational Interview](#) (from *Harvard Business Review*)

[Five Tips for Informational Interviews](#) (from *The Muse*)

[Questions to Ask During an Informational Interview](#) (from *LiveCareer*)

Sample Introductory Email

In most cases you will propose an informational interview via email. It is important to be clear and concise, yet still informative. Even if you have not been directly referred by someone, you can still reach out to a person based on your interest in their career path and the organization they are working for. Don't be shy!

The below email is to request an informational interview with a senior editor at Hackett Publishing Company to learn more about the field of academic publishing. The writer is careful to avoid asking for a job, or anything other than a chance to listen and ask questions.

Email Subject: **Request for an informational interview**

Dear Ms. Smith,

I am currently a student at Central European University in Budapest, Hungary pursuing a master's in Comparative History. I am writing to you because I have an interest in the field of academic publishing and was hoping you could provide some advice and insight regarding entering this field.

If you were referred to them through a personal or professional contact, you can mention this in the beginning as well.

I first became interested in a career in publishing while an undergraduate at the University of Bologna, where I served as an editor for an undergraduate academic journal. Since then, I have been involved as both a writer and editor for Central European University's student-run newspaper. I am eager to learn more about the field of publishing, and am particularly interested in Hackett Publishing Company due to its focus on publishing in the humanities and commitment to developing a relationship between author and publisher. I am also curious to hear about your own career path which has brought you to where you are today.

Briefly present your relevant experience or interests that relate to the field (1-2 sentences).

Highlight something specific about THEIR organization or THEIR field that interests you.

Would you be open to a brief conversation over the phone or via Skype in coming weeks? In general, Monday, Wednesday and Friday afternoons after 1:00 pm are quite open for me. If your schedule at the moment is too busy, would there be someone else you might suggest I contact?

Be specific in proposing some timeframes to meet, but still allow for some flexibility.

Thank you very much for your consideration. I have also attached my CV to give you a sense of my background and experience.

Attach a copy of your CV so they have an idea of your work experience and education.

Sincerely,

Your Name

Note: Don't be afraid to follow-up if you don't hear back from your contact within 1-2 weeks. People are usually busy and you likely won't be a top priority, but **this does not mean that they are not willing to speak to you**. Persistence is important and people often appreciate the reminder. Be aware that you won't hear back from everyone, even after a reminder ... this happens and should not be taken as a rejection or a failure.

Preparing for the Informational Interview

Sample questions

The questions below might be relevant for your informational interview. Through research into the career path of the person you will speak with and the organization for which they work, you will be able to develop more specific questions tailored to the field of interest. Remember that you won't have time to ask everything. However, it is better to come in with more questions than you can possibly ask than to be stuck without an idea of what to say or ask. Allow the conversation to flow naturally, and ask follow-up questions regarding topics of genuine interest to you.

- Can you tell me about your career path?
- Is there a typical career path in this field? If so, what is it?
- How do I get my foot in the door once I've decided this is the field I want to work in?
- What types of positions/jobs exist within this field?
- How is X organization different than other organizations in this field?
- What are some skills and competencies that are helpful or necessary in this field/position?
- Do you have any advice on how I can stand out as a candidate?
- What does an average day or week look like for you in your current position?
- What do you find to be the best/most interesting aspect of your job? What is the most challenging component of your job?
- What are some of the trends and hot topics in your field right now that are worth learning more about?
- What is the hiring process like in this field?
- Are there any particular resources or professional associations that you suggest I check out to learn more about this field?
- Do you have any recommendations of other people I should get in touch with to learn more about X, Y or Z?

Speaking about yourself

While the focus of an informational interview is not necessarily to promote yourself, you should be prepared to start the interview with a very brief introduction and to speak throughout in a clear and concise manner about your background and future ambitions, as the person you are meeting with may be curious to get to know more about you. Be sure you have thought about how you would communicate answers to the below questions:

- What are your current work roles? (student, researcher, program assistant, etc.)
- What is your current career interest and how has that developed?
- What transferable skills have you developed that may be applicable to this field?
- What is your biggest concern or doubt about entering this field (consider experience you may lack and what the field/position entails)?