Networking and Informational Interviews
Building Professional Connections and Knowledge

When asked about the primary source of information that led to their first job after CEU, 70-80% of CEU graduates mention their networks. It’s important to cultivate your network actively to ensure you have connections in relevant professional and geographical areas that you can turn to when seeking experiential learning opportunities during your undergraduate studies and employment after graduation. We understand that many people have a negative connotation towards the word ‘networking’ and we rather like to think about this term or process as building a web of like-minded and inspirational professionals that you can learn from and turn to for guidance as you explore different fields. In this guide we’ll go into detail about informational interviews, one of the most effective ways to build your professional network and deepen your knowledge in your professional fields of interest.

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 steppingstone in the search for an experiential learning opportunity or in the job search process. Informational interviews help you build your network. You will have a much better chance of learning about internships and 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?

- 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. Consider finding people in your existing network (e.g. professors, family, friends, career advisor, former colleagues, peers) who can connect you to people of interest. Of course, keep in mind CEU alumni who are often very happy to connect with current students. Don't be discouraged, though, if you can't find someone with whom you have a formal connection. It can still 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 as much as possible about career paths and hiring procedures before you reach out to people. Spending adequate time on research will allow you to showcase your knowledge and interest during the conversation and allow for a deeper and more meaningful conversation.

3) **Make a list of questions to ask during the interview.** Have your questions ready in advance in case the person you write to responds immediately and suggests you speak that day (this can happen!). Think about what you’d really like to know – what 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 new questions may come to mind over the course of the conversation. (see page 4 for sample questions).

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 Zoom, 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 – display your sincere desire to learn and grow.
- 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/email.
- 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 internships or jobs in the field.

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 Climate Policy Analyst to learn more about the field of climate justice. 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. Peterson,

Hello from Vienna, Austria. I came across your profile on LinkedIn and found your email on the Climate Justice website. I am currently a student at Central European University where I am pursuing a bachelor's in Culture, Politics and Society/Philosophy, Politics and Economics/Quantitative Social Sciences. For summer 2022, I am hoping to secure an internship with an organization focused on climate justice/contribute to a research project focused on climate justice/develop a civic engagement focused on climate justice. I am reaching out to professionals working in the field to ask for advice. In the long term, I’d like to pursue a career in climate advocacy, ideally doing policy research and conducting outreach to educate the public.

Based on your experience in grassroots and international climate-focused organizations, I thought you might be able to offer suggestions about which organizations I might consider and the types of projects I might focus on in relation to my search for summer 2022. My experience to date has included many research papers on climate issues, active involvement in Model United Nations and my university's debate club, and a 2021 public affairs internship with Humanitarian Academy for Development London. I’ve attached my CV to provide a more detailed picture of my background and experience.

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

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.

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

Undergraduate Networking and Informational Interviews

CEU Career Services Office

www.careers.ceu.edu / www.careernext.ceu.edu
If you are open to a brief conversation (20-30 minutes), please suggest a couple of days and times that could work for you and let me know whether you would prefer phone, Zoom or another platform. Generally, late afternoons and evenings (Central European Time) are best for me, but I would adapt to your schedule, my class timetable permitting. If this isn't something you can do at the moment, I of course understand. In any case, I thank you for your consideration and attention to this message.

Sincerely,
Johannes Lindner

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 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 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 might that look like?
- 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 trends and hot topics in your field 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 suggestions of people I should get in touch with to learn 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)?

Additional Resources

[Ultimate Guide to an Informational Interview](http://www.liverecruitment.com) (from LiveCareer)
[How to Get the Most Out of an Informational Interview](http://www.hbr.com) (from Harvard Business Review)
[Five Tips for Informational Interviews](http://www.themuse.com) (from The Muse)
[Questions to Ask During an Informational Interview](http://www.liverecruitment.com) (from LiveCareer)