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Investigate Careers through Informational Interviews

If you're a college student exploring the world of work or a soon-to-be college grad about to launch your career, you know how important it is to have comprehensive and reliable occupational information to evaluate how well a particular job suits your talents and interests. And here's some good news in that regard: there are many great resources you can use to explore hundreds and hundreds of careers, including the nature of the work; tasks performed; education / training / experience / skills required; salary range; job outlook, etc.).

But what if you want to know what it's *really* like to work in one of the careers you're investigating? What if you're curious about the kinds of things that simply can't be answered by researching the facts and figures about the job? In that case, go right to the source to find your answers.

In other words, talk to people who actually do the job! Known as informational interviewing, the main purpose of this technique is to ask questions to get information directly from people who work in a position, career, or industry of interest to you. Whether meeting face-to-face (which is ideal, if possible) or virtually via phone, Zoom, or related technology, you can get the inside scoop about a career.

Yet, the benefits of informational interviews may go beyond getting first-hand information from people in the know. These interviews can help you expand your professional network. And — *while it's never appropriate to ask for an internship or job during an informational interview* — you might even uncover job opportunities in the process.

Get the 411

Even if the many benefits that informational interviews sound intriguing to you, you probably have a lot of questions on your mind right now. Maybe you're wondering:

- What happens before, during, and after an informational interview?
- How can I find people to speak with?
- What do I need to do to prepare for the meeting?



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These are important things to consider in order to make the most of an informational interviewing experience. Fortunately, there are many great resources that provide the answers to your questions. For example, check out:

- [Informational Interviewing: A Key Career Exploration Tool](#)
- [The Ultimate Guide to an Informational Interview](#)

Think Like a Reporter

Once you understand the “how tos” of informational interviews, keep in mind that your primary goal is to get answers to your questions...*especially* the things you weren’t able to uncover from your occupational research. And, if you want good information, you have to ask good questions!

Think like an investigative reporter to get the inside scoop. Open-ended questions — those that can’t be answered with a simple “yes” or “no” — work best. Think *who, what, where, why, when, and how*.

Write a list of 10 – 15 questions. Be aware, however, that you’ll need to be flexible and somewhat spontaneous in conducting the interview. For instance, the questions you ask may trigger new queries. What’s more, the person you’re speaking with may unknowingly answer several questions on your list as a natural progression during the discussion. So, listen carefully. And, out of respect to your interviewee’s busy schedule, informational interviews are typically short meetings (15 – 20 minutes). Therefore, prioritize your list of questions in order of importance to you (just in case you don’t get through all of them).

Below are some **sample questions** to get you started. Tailor your questions based on the information you’re looking to uncover.

General questions:

- What are the primary responsibilities of your position?
- What kinds of problems do you have to solve in your work? Which ones are the most challenging?
- What types of decisions do you make?
- What skills / qualities / characteristics does a person in this job need to be successful?



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- What tasks do you perform in a typical week? Which of these do you spend most of your time doing?
- What do you like best about this position? What are some of the more difficult or frustrating parts of the work?
- How did you get interested and started in this type of work? How did you prepare for this career?
- What's the typical career path for this career? Was that the path you followed?
- If you had to do it all over again, what, if anything, would you have done differently?
- In addition to this one, what other similar careers using _____ or involving _____ would you recommend I consider?
- I understand that people in this career sometimes specialize in _____ or _____. What other specialties would you recommend I learn about? Where might I get more information about these areas?
- How do you see this occupation / career / field / industry changing in the future? How might these changes impact the nature of this work?
- What's the most important piece of advice you have for me regarding this occupation / field?
- How does this career affect your lifestyle?

More specific questions:

- What major(s) / minor(s) would you recommend I study for this career / field? (*Ask this question if you haven't declared your major or are considering changing majors.*)
- What do I need to know about the things they don't teach you in college?
- Which entry-level jobs in this field offer the most valuable learning opportunities?
- What types of advancement opportunities are available in this field for an entry-level professional?
- What are the more common missteps you've seen young professionals make early in their career? What are the most strategic / smartest decisions they've made?
- Which professional organizations / associations would you recommend I join? Are there any particular certifications you would recommend I pursue for career advancement?



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- How has the process of finding a job in this occupation / field changed over the years?
- Would you be willing to give me some feedback on my resume? What do you like about it? What's missing? What can I improve?

Wrap-up questions:

- May I get your business card? May I contact you if have other questions?
- Is there anyone else you would recommend I talk to? May I tell him / her that you referred me?

Report the News

After conducting an informational interview, there's one more person you need to interview — and that person happens to be *you*! Reflect upon what you've learned from the discussion. Then ask yourself:

- What's the good news about this occupation / career path / field / industry? What's the not-so-good news?
- How does what I've learned about this occupation fit with my aptitudes, interests, values, and personality characteristics?
- How does what I've learned complement / contradict the occupational research I've done?

What's Your Story?

With the answers to the above questions in mind, ask yourself the leading question: "Can I see myself working in this occupation (using the skills required to perform these types of tasks in this type of work environment to solve these types of problems)?"

- If you answered this question with a decisive "*no*", cross the occupation off your list of possibilities and explore other options.
- If you answered with a wavering "*maybe*", perhaps you need more information. You might find it helpful to research the occupation further, conduct additional informational interviews, and / or job shadow a professional working in the career.



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- If you answered with a categorical “yes”, thoroughly investigate what it takes to get there. Then put together and implement an action plan to achieve your career goal.