

Conducting an Information Interview

Objectives

1. Learn the definition and description of an information interview.
2. Become familiar with the process of conducting an information interview.
3. Learn strategies for executing and making the most of an information interview experience.

Why Do an Information Interview?

An information interview is an appointment you schedule with a particular individual for the purpose of gaining current, regional, and/or specialized occupational, industry, or other career-related information from an “insider’s” point of view. If you are in the process of choosing an academic major, making career choices, changing careers, or beginning a job hunt, information interviews may help you explore your possibilities. Unlike job interviews, information interviews do not require that you sell yourself to an employer and do not depend on existing job vacancies. Information interviews are arranged with those likely to provide information directly or with those who can refer you to persons with information relevant to your career situation.

- *To get valuable information* for your job hunting and career planning (e.g., choosing an academic major or career). It is a good way to “reality check” what you’ve read, heard, and thought.
- *To learn about a particular organization* or field, how you might fit in, and what problems (or opportunities) are present in the industry. Knowing these things will help you slant your qualifications towards the needs of the organization if you choose to apply for a job at some point.
- *To increase your interviewing skills* by discussing yourself and your career interests with professionals.
- *To enlarge your circle of “expert” contacts* in your desired field. **It is often who you know (or get to know) that gets you a job.** Information interviews allow you to both learn new information while establishing a new contact.
- *To ask for referrals* (e.g., “Can you suggest some other people whom I might talk to about jobs in this field?”)



What’s Inside?

How Do I Find Potential Contacts?.....	2
How Should I Prepare?.....	2
What Questions Should I Ask?.....	2
How Do I Arrange the Interview?.....	3
What Should I Do During the Interview?.....	3
What Should I Do Afterwards?.....	4

Who Should I Contact?

Feelings of uncertainty in identifying who to talk to can make the idea of information interviewing intimidating at first. Thoughts like “I don’t know anyone in my desired field” or “I don’t want to bother anyone by asking for an information interview” are normal, but rest assured that information interviewing is a common activity in the world of work and most professionals are familiar with the practice. When identifying individuals to perform information interviews with, look for those who:

- Share a common academic major, interest, enthusiasm, or involvement in some activity or lifestyle that appeals to you.
- Work/have worked in a setting that appeals to you (e.g., hospitals, textile companies, colleges, airlines).
- Work/have worked in career areas in which you are interested (e.g., counseling psychologist, market researcher, public relations).
- Work/have worked in specific jobs in specific organizations (e.g., counseling psychologist at a university counseling center, consumer education representative at a utility company, market researcher at IBM) in which you are interested.

How Do I Find Potential Contacts?

- Ask friends, family, neighbors, colleagues, faculty, peers, and former employers — anyone you know for an information interview or for a referral.
- Contact Career Center personnel or other University offices. The Employer Relations and Recruitment Services unit of The Career Center has the names of many employer contacts. You can review employer business cards in The Career Center Library and look at employer attendees at Career Center-sponsored career fairs at www.career.fsu.edu.
- Use Professionle, an online database of alumni and other individuals who have volunteered to participate in career-related conversations with FSU students. It can be accessed through SeminoleLink (www.career.fsu.edu/SeminoleLink).
- Call community service agencies and trade/professional organizations (e.g., women's organizations, Chamber of Commerce, Information Management Association), or review their websites.
- Scan the Yellow Pages at www.yp.com, articles in newspapers, magazines, and journals.
- Attend meetings (local, state, regional) for professional associations in your career field(s).
- Create a LinkedIn profile and begin building an online professional network. LinkedIn has several features that can help you connect to individuals through contacts you already have. The Career Center's LinkedIn group is a good starting point to connect with your peers, alumni, and employers. Log in and search for *Florida State University Career Center* to join. For more information about how to get started with linkedin.com, view the "Building A LinkedIn Presence" guide at The Career Center or online at career.fsu.edu/Resources/Career-Guides.

How Should I Prepare?

Preparation is key to getting the most out of an information interview. People are generally happy to talk about what they do and how they do it, especially with someone who shares their interests or passions, but do not waste their time (or your time!) by arriving to the interview without doing your homework. Know how to articulate your values, interests, and skills as well as and how these relate to the career field represented by the person(s) you are interviewing.

Research the career area and organization of the person you'll be interviewing. Check materials in The Career Center, Strozier, and other local libraries for print information. If no print materials are available, you may want to call and ask the organization to send you any literature they might have (annual report, promotional brochures, etc.). Also, check the Internet for any websites associated with the organization or career field in which you're interested.

Know exactly what kinds of information you want and have a list of questions in mind. Generally, do not ask personal questions regarding topics like your interviewee's salary, benefits, or other sensitive topics. Keep questions professional and try not to ask for information that can routinely be found elsewhere.

What Questions Might I Ask?

Questions related to the following topics are perfectly acceptable in an information interview:

- **Background:** Tell me how you got started in this field. What was your education? What educational background or related experience might be helpful in entering this field?
- **Work Environment:** What are the daily duties of your job? What are the working conditions? What skills/abilities are utilized in your field?
- **Challenges:** What are the toughest challenges you deal with at work? What problems does the industry as a whole have? What is being done to solve these problems?
- **Lifestyle:** What obligation does your work put on you outside the work week? How much flexibility do you have in terms of dress, work hours, or vacations?
- **Rewards:** What do you find most rewarding about this work?
- **Typical Compensation:** What salary range might be typical for an entry-level professional in this field? What kinds of benefits are typically offered to individuals in this kind of work? What are other forms of compensation (e.g., bonuses, commissions, securities) that might be offered?
- **Potential:** Where do you see yourself going in a few years? What are your long term goals?
- **Demand:** What types of employers hire people in this line of work? Where are they located? What other career areas do you feel are related to your work?

- **Promotional:** Is turnover high in this field? How does one move from position to position? Do people normally move to another company/division/agency? What is your policy about promotions from within? What happened to the person(s) who last held this position? How many have held this job in the last 5 years? How are employees evaluated?
- **The Industry:** What trends do you see for this industry in the next 3 to 5 years? What kind of future do you see for this organization? How much of your business is tied to the economy, government spending, weather, supplies, etc.?
- **Advice:** How well-suited is my background for this field? When the time comes, how would I go about finding a job in this field? What experience, paid or volunteer, would you recommend? What suggestions do you have to help make my résumé more effective? What other advice would you give to someone like me looking to enter this field?
- **Hiring Decision:** What are the most important factors used to hire people in this field (education, past experience, personality, special skills)? Who makes the hiring decisions for your department? Who supervises the boss? When I am ready to apply for a job, whom should I contact?
- **Job Market:** How do people find out about your jobs? Are they advertised in the newspaper (which ones?), on the web, by word-of-mouth (who spreads the word?), by the personnel office?
- **Referral to other information opportunities:** What professional organizations might have information about this career area? Can you name a relevant trade journal or magazine you would recommend I review regularly?
- **Referral to others:** Based on our conversation today, what other types of people do you believe I should talk to? Can you name a few of these people? May I have permission to use your name when I contact them?
- Other questions you have in mind — keep it professional!

How Do I Arrange the Interview?

Phone or email to explain your request and obtain an appointment. Email requests for appointments are most effective if followed up by a telephone inquiry to confirm an appointment time.

If possible, introduce yourself using a personal referral, like a mutual acquaintance. If you found this contact using services from The Career Center, use The Career Center as the bridge for your contact. (e.g., “I’m Jessica Long, a sophomore at FSU. I found

your name in The Career Center’s Professionale database”). If a personal referral is not available, let the individual know how you found them and emphasize your common interests, goals, or career pursuits as the bridge to connect you.

Explain your request to schedule an appointment for gathering information about their field of work. If questioned, indicate clearly that you are not applying for a job at this time. Rather, you are conducting career research to help you make better decisions. If the person you are trying to reach is not in, you can leave a message or ask when to call back.

Try to schedule a 20-30 minute appointment, to be conducted by phone or in person at their convenience. If the present time is too busy for the person you contact, ask when would be a better time or ask if he/she can suggest another contact that could provide you with helpful information.

If your intent is to speak with the individual in person (which is optimal), try to avoid letting your phone call to schedule the appointment turn into the actual interview. Sometimes the potential interviewee might say over the phone: “I have some time now ... what did you want to ask me?” You should be prepared to conduct the interview over the phone if the person gives you an opportunity to do so. If you are able to schedule an on-site visit, remember to ask for directions and parking information.

What Should I Do During the Interview?

- Dress as if it were an actual job interview. First impressions are always important.
- Get to your appointment a few minutes early and be courteous to everyone that you meet — secretary, receptionist, etc. Do not exceed your requested time, but be prepared to stay longer in case the contact indicates a willingness to talk longer.
- Bring your résumé to the interview, but do not immediately ask the interviewee to review it. Wait for an appropriate time to show them your résumé.
- Once inside the organization, look around. What kind of working environment is present — dress style, communication patterns, sense of humor, etc.? Is this a place you would want to work?
- Ask open-ended questions (questions that require more than a “yes” or “no” answer), which can promote discussion.
- Thank the interviewee for taking the time to meet you. Emphasize your willingness to stay connected, and ask for a business card if available.

What Should I Do Afterwards?

- **Evaluate** your experience. How did you manage scheduling and conducting the information interview? How well did you prepare? Did you get the information you sought? What information do you still lack? Do you need to interview more people in order to get more than one biased viewpoint or additional information? What do you need to do next?
- **Follow up** with a thank you note expressing your appreciation to your contact for his/her time and interest. You may also want to include your conclusions/decisions resulting from the interview. This thank you note can be emailed or handwritten.
- **Record** the information that you obtained: names, comments, and new referrals for future reference, and make appointments to interview the referrals. After doing several information interviews, you may be more informed. You may also be able to make better decisions which are based on accurate, current information.

Summary

Information interviewing is a great way to build your network and learn important information about occupations, organizations, and industries. If you have additional questions or require assistance to begin planning for an information interview, visit The Career Center.



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