

Informational Interviews

For Graduate Students



Informational interviews are conversations to help you gain information. These can occur at conferences, with seminar speakers, or with professionals in business, nonprofits, and government; they are ideal opportunities to develop professional relationships.

Informational interviews are short, informal conversations during which you ask for advice rather than a job. Talking to people is the most effective way to learn about specific industries and organizations. These are people who can share their knowledge about how they succeeded in transitioning from their graduate education into their careers. They can discuss the transferable skills and experiences that were most important in that transition and in their careers. This is exactly the information you need to be successful.

Growing your professional community creates a network of individuals who can provide career advice, an opportunity to help young professionals, and the potential to supply their company with appropriate candidates. Recent studies indicate that a growing number of businesses are targeting company referrals in their hiring process¹. Therefore, creating a community of professional colleagues who know about you, your work, and your skills can be greatly beneficial as you look toward your next career endeavor.

Keep it short. If you are talking to someone at a conference or event, be sure not to monopolize their time and be generous to include others in the conversation. For informational interviews, keep a strict time limit of 20-30 minutes. This indicates that you respect their time, and you can always ask for another meeting (ask for their email or contact information) if you have more questions later.

The key to a successful conversation is preparation. You should be prepared to 1) **introduce yourself** and 2) **have a Conversation Plan** that addresses whom you will talk to, where and when you will have the conversation, and your prioritized, specific questions.

CONVERSATION PLAN

Your Conversation Plan should begin with identifying **the purpose of the conversation**. Are you asking for general information about a career path, job skills and experiences, and/or asking for specific next step advice? Once you have a Conversation Plan, you should **practice first with friends** and peers so that you will be more comfortable when meet with new people.

Prepare & prioritize specific questions that address your queries about the career area; show you have done your research and reviewed their recent work, LinkedIn/professional/company profile; focus on your interviewee/colleague, etc. Formulate open-ended questions.

1) Brown, M., Setren, E. and Topa, G., 2016. Do informal referrals lead to better matches? Evidence from a firm's employee referral system. *Journal of Labor Economics*, 34(1), pp.161-209.

YOUR CONVERSATION PLAN

WHO?	
WHERE?	
WHAT?	

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GRADUATE COLLEGE
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Good Questions Lead to Memorable Conversations

Here are some potential questions:

Ask questions about the person (but do your research first):

- What is your educational background, and why did you seek this career path?
- How did you know where to start your job search and what steps you needed to take?
- What was the transition like from graduate school to this position?
- What skills and experiences from your graduate education have been most useful in your position?
- What skills and experiences have you gained since you left graduate school?
- What recommendations do you have for someone getting ready to make this transition?

Ask question about the career field and industry:

- What credentials, educational degrees, licenses, etc., are required for entry into this field?
- What are some skills that have proven important in your job that you did not anticipate?
- What are the employment trends in your field or company?
- What type of professional development or training opportunities are there?
- What do you wish you would have known prior to entering this field?
- What is the profile of someone who is successful starting in this field?
- Where should I look to learn more about this field or this job?

Ask questions about the job and workplace:

- What do you spend most of your week doing? What skills do you use?
- What are some of the problems and decisions you are likely to face in a day or week?
- What are the greatest rewards and challenges of your job?
- How much flexibility do you have in choosing work projects?
- How do you determine what tasks you will work on and how to structure your time?
- How would you characterize your work relationships or environment (formal, informal, etc.)?
- Do you work primarily alone or in collaboration with others? With whom?

Ask for Advice to you:

- What professional associations or organizations should I know about?
- What advice do you have for me as I break into this field?
- Are there people you think I would benefit from talking to?
- May I use your name when I contact them?
- If I have any questions, may I contact with you again?

Remember to follow up with a personalized thank you email. Be sure to thank them for something specific in your conversation.