

5.4: Selling U - The Power of Informational Interviews

Learning Objectives

- Learn about informational interviews and how they can help your career search.

“Find someone who does what you want to do, then go talk to them.” That’s the advice that Ike Richman, vice president of public relations at Comcast-Spectacor consistently tells students when he is a guest speaker. That is the essence of what an **informational interview** is: one-on-one communication that helps you learn about different industries and potential careers. You learned about the power of networking in the *Selling U* section of Chapter 3. And informational interviews are one of the best ways to network. They are the ultimate in business communication because you are “trying on jobs for size to see if they fit you,” according to Richard Nelson Bolles, author of *What Color Is Your Parachute?* and the person who coined the term “informational interview.” “Informational Interviewing Tutorial: Background Information about Informational Interviews,” Quintessential Careers, (accessed July 12, 2009).

What Is an Informational Interview?

An informational interview is exactly what it sounds like; it’s an opportunity to learn about a particular profession, industry, or job. “Informational Interviewing Tutorial: Background Information about Informational Interviews,” Quintessential Careers, www.quintcareers.com/information_background.html (accessed July 12, 2009). That means that if you are interested in sales, you might meet with an account manager for a software company and talk to her about what it’s like to be in sales. Or, if you think you want to pursue a job in advertising, you could meet with someone who works at an advertising agency. This gives you the chance to learn the inside story about what it takes to start a career and work in your target industry.

You’ve probably learned about several different professions in your classes; you most likely heard from guest speakers. And through your networking activities, chances are you’ve met people who do what you think you want to do. But it’s impossible to know exactly what career you want to pursue without getting some one-on-one information. What does the job entail? Will you be working with people out in the field or sitting at a desk? What kinds of opportunities are available for personal development? What kind of skills and experience do you need? Is this really a career you will enjoy? What’s the best part of the job? What’s the worst part of the job? All these are excellent questions to ask during an informational interview. Learn more about informational interviews by watching this video.



Informational Interviews. Learn how to maximize them. Source: Susan Ireland

Ask for Information, Not a Job

Informational interviews are an excellent source of information and insight. In fact, you can gain knowledge through informational interviews that you might not be able to gain in any other way. It’s important to note that informational interviews are *not* the place to look for an internship or job. “Informational Interviewing Tutorial: Never Ask for a Job,” Quintessential Careers, (accessed July 12, 2009). A job or an internship could result from an informational interview because it is a time to make an impression on someone, demonstrate your skills, and network. However, it’s best to keep in mind that when you ask for an informational

interview, you are asking for someone to take the time to share insights and information with you. If you ask the interviewer for a job, you misled the interviewer about the purpose of the meeting. “Informational Interviewing Tutorial: Never Ask for a Job,” Quintessential Careers, (accessed July 12, 2009).

Informational Interviews Made Easy

Informational interviews are an excellent way to gather real-world information about your career direction. Here’s a guide to everything you need to know to get the most out of informational interviews using the tenets of journalism. As a guide, remember the five *Ws* and an *H*: who, what, when, where, why, and how.

Why Go on Informational Interviews

You might think that if you shouldn’t ask for a job, why bother going on an informational interview? There are plenty of reasons to pursue informational interviews.

- You can learn about what it is like to work in a particular industry, company, or job. “Informational Interviewing Tutorial: Potential Results of Informational Interviews,” Quintessential Careers, (accessed July 12, 1009).
- You have the opportunity to get to know key people in the industry. “Informational Interviewing Tutorial: Potential Results of Informational Interviews,” Quintessential Careers, (accessed July 12, 1009).
- You can learn about jobs that you didn’t realize exist—jobs that are open now or that might be open in the future. “Informational Interviewing Tutorial: Potential Results of Informational Interviews,” Quintessential Careers, (accessed July 12, 1009).
- You can learn about where you might fit in a specific organization. “Informational Interviewing Tutorial: Potential Results of Informational Interviews,” Quintessential Careers, www.quintcareers.com/information_results.html (accessed July 12, 1009).
- You can ask for referrals for the names of other people in the industry or company with whom you can meet. “Informational Interview Questions,” Career Choice Guide, (accessed July 20, 2009).
- You can hone your interviewing skills in a low-pressure environment.
- You can get “insider” information that other job seekers might not get, because informational interviews are an underused approach. Kate Lorenz, “How Does an Informational Interview Work?” CareerBuilder, Getting-Ahead-How-Does-an-Informational-Interview-Work (accessed July 20, 2009).

Who to Ask for an Informational Interview

Here’s where your networking skills come into play. Identify people who do what you want to do or do something that you think is interesting. Make a list of people using the following resources:

- Think of people in professional organizations you may have heard speak or may have met at an event.
- Think of guest speakers you may have heard speak in class or at a campus event.
- Talk to friends and family to get ideas for people they may know in the profession you want to learn more about.
- Talk to your professors about people in the industry they may know.
- Visit the campus career center and alumni office to identify people with whom you can meet.
- Use online professional networking to find people whom you would like to talk with and learn from.
- Read local business journals and professional organization publications to identify people who have jobs that you want to learn more about. You can usually find these publications online or in person at your school library or public library. “Informational Interview Tutorial: Identify People to Interview for Informational Interviews,” Quintessential Careers, (accessed July 12, 2009).

How to Ask for an Informational Interview

Informational interviews are usually twenty to thirty minutes long and can take place in person or by phone. Once you identify the people with whom you would like to have an informational interview, it’s time to contact each person and ask for a meeting. It’s always best to request an informational interview in person because you have the opportunity to communicate verbally as well as nonverbally. Although it’s appropriate to send a letter or e-mail to request an informational interview, it’s best to call each person to request the interview or talk to him or her in person. If you use your communication skills, a personal conversation will be much more persuasive than a passive e-mail or letter, which could easily go unanswered.

A telephone conversation should include an introduction along with the reason you are calling. Be clear that you are seeking information; don’t frame your request as a veiled strategy for a job offer. If you are honest about learning about the industry, most people will take the time to help you. You might consider a telephone conversation like this:

You:	My name is Jorge Ebana, and I am a student at State University majoring in business administration. I was in Dr. Wolf's Creative Selling class on Thursday when you were a guest speaker. I really enjoyed your presentation. I especially enjoyed hearing about how you landed the XPress account.
Interviewer:	Jorge, thank you so much for calling. I'm really glad to hear that you found my presentation interesting. I enjoyed speaking to your class very much. Yes, the XPress account took a lot of work to land, but it's been a great relationship for all parties involved.
You:	As you were speaking, I realized that as you described the research, preparation, presentation, and follow-up, what you do daily is something that I would really enjoy, too. You made me realize that sales could be the career I might want to pursue.
Interviewer:	Jorge, that's so good to hear. I always like to share my experiences with young people so that they understand the rewards and the challenges involved in selling. Personally, I enjoy selling so much that I can't imagine doing anything else.
You:	I would really like to learn more about how you got into sales. It sounds like you had some very interesting positions at Intuit and CreditSys. I'd like to hear about what's it's like to sell for a major corporation compared to a start-up company, and their differing advantages. Would it be possible to get together for twenty minutes or so? I'd really like to learn more about your background in the field.
Interviewer:	Why don't you drop by on Thursday morning at 8 o'clock. We can touch base, and I can give you a quick tour of the office.
You:	That would be perfect. I really appreciate your taking the time to help me.
Interviewer:	It's my pleasure. I'll see you on Thursday morning.

If you use this type of approach when you are speaking with someone with whom you would like to meet, you increase your chances of getting a positive response. If you don't know the person or have a connection to him, it's still appropriate to call him directly to request an informational interview.

What to Wear, Bring, and Ask on an Informational Interview

Just like any sales call, business meeting, or job interview, you should always be prepared for an informational interview. Treat it as if it were a job interview and dress in a conservative, professional suit. Katharine Hansen, "Informational Interviewing Do's and Don'ts," Quintessential Careers, www.quintcareers.com/informational_interviewing-dos-donts.html (accessed July 20, 2009). Men should wear a white or light shirt, conservative tie, and dark-colored suit. Women should wear a skirt or pants with a blazer in a dark color. Some things the interview "fashion police" would tell you to avoid: too much aftershave or cologne, low-cut blouse or short skirt, wrinkled anything, and athletic-looking shoes or sandals.

✓ Video - What Employers Want



Come prepared as if it were a job interview, even if you already know the person with whom you are interviewing. That means doing research on the industry, company, and person before you arrive. Visit the company's Web site as well as those of competitors, research the industry on databases such as Hoovers.com, and do a search on Google to learn more about the person with whom you are interviewing. Also, look her up on LinkedIn, Plaxo.com, Ryze.com, or other professional social networking Web sites to learn more about her professional background before your meeting.

Bring extra copies of your résumé printed on twenty-four-pound paper (this is also called résumé paper; you can buy it at your campus bookstore or at any office supply store or Web site). It's best not to use regular copy paper as it is lightweight and doesn't provide strong nonverbal communication about your brand. You never know when the person with whom you are meeting will ask for an extra copy of your résumé. And, even if she already has a copy, she may not have it handy. Kate Lorenz, "How Does An Informational Interview Work?" CareerBuilder, (accessed July 20, 2009).

This is a perfect opportunity to bring samples of your work. See the *Selling U* section in Chapter 6 for some tips about how to put together a portfolio that helps you show and sell yourself. If you have had an internship, bring clean samples of any projects you worked on; the same is true for any student organizations, volunteer work, or community service that you have done. You should also include a few key class projects to demonstrate your versatility.

Now prepare for the questions. Unlike a regular job interview, you have requested this meeting so you should be prepared to ask the questions. Keep the questions focused on learning about how your interviewer broke into the business and what he can share as a result of his experience. Here are some questions you might consider:

- How did you decide to go into this field?
- What was your first job?
- How did you get to your current position?
- What was your favorite job?
- What is the best thing about your current job?
- What is your least favorite part of your job?
- What is the single most important attribute someone needs to have to be successful in this industry?

- What is the typical salary range for an entry-level job in this industry?
- What advice would you give to someone starting out in the industry?
- What is the outlook for the industry? “Informational Interview Questions,” Career Choice Guide, <http://www.careerchoiceguide.com/informational-interview-questions.html> (accessed July 20, 2009).

In addition to having your questions ready, also be ready to talk about your brand positioning points (review this concept in the *Selling U* section in Chapter 1). Use your communication skills to make your experience and interest come alive in the interview. It's a good idea to offer to show the samples of your work while you are talking about why you are interested in pursuing a career path in the industry.

Take the time to print out your questions so you are organized during the interview. Put your questions and spare copies of your résumé in a professional portfolio or folder. Don't be afraid to refer to your questions and take notes during the interview; it's an excellent nonverbal cue that you think what the interviewer has to say is important.

Wrap up your informational interview by asking for your interviewee's business card. Also, ask for the names of some other people that you might be able to learn from; for example, “I really enjoyed our conversation today, and I learned so much about the industry. You have helped me realize that I would like to pursue a career in sales. Can you give me the names of some other people I might be able to learn from?”

✓ You've Got the Power: Tips for Your Job Search

Keep in Touch

What about after the informational interview? Keep in touch. People who take the time to help students also want to know what is going on with the young job-seeking population. Send an e-mail or touch base by phone at least every four to six weeks. It's a great way to develop a relationship and network, even after you land your internship or job. Part of networking is providing exchange, and keeping in touch is your part of the bargain. When you keep in touch, your interviewer might be able to help you in the future; or better yet, you might be able to help her and return the favor.

When to Ask for an Informational Interview

It's always a good time to meet and learn from experienced people in the industry in which you are interested. However, you should actively pursue informational interviews when you are prepared with your résumé and have compiled some samples of your work. Keep in mind that every contact you make is a selling opportunity for your personal brand so it's best to be ready as early as possible in your academic career. It's never too soon to prepare your résumé even as you are building your experience with internships and other jobs. Whenever you meet someone interesting, follow up and ask him for an informational interview so you can learn more about how he got into the business.

Where to Have an Informational Interview

Your interviewee will most likely suggest a location for your meeting; it might be in her office, or you might meet for breakfast or lunch. Some informational interviews might take place by phone. The objective is to connect, learn, and network.

Whatever the location, always prepare and dress for each informational interview as if it were a job interview. Also, always send a thank-you note to thank your interviewer for his time. You should send a thank-you e-mail and a handwritten thank-you note on the same day, so your interviewer will receive your e-mail followed by your handwritten note. That way, you leave a lasting impression and demonstrate your good etiquette.

Key Takeaways

- An **informational interview** is an underused career search method that includes a meeting with a professional to learn more about pursuing a career in a specific industry, profession, or job.
- You go on **informational interviews** to learn what it's like to work in a particular industry, company or job, connect and network with people in the industry, and hone your interviewing skills.
- One thing you should *never* do on an **informational interview** is ask for a job or internship. If the opportunity presents itself and your interviewer asks if you might be interested, it's appropriate to say yes. However, you should not be the one to initiate dialogue about the possibility of a position with the company.

- You should ask anyone who is in the industry or profession that you would like to pursue. It's a good idea to use your networking skills to identify people with whom you can have an informational interview. Professionals such as guest speakers in class, prominent executives, and those in local professional organizations are ideal people to ask for an informational interview.
- It's best to request an **informational interview** in person or by phone because you increase your chances for a positive response. You can also request an **informational interview** by letter or e-mail.
- Prepare for an **informational interview** as if it were a job interview, even if you already know the person. Research the company, bring extra copies of your résumé and samples of your work, and prepare questions that you would like to discuss.

? Exercise 5.4.1

1. Identify three people with whom you would like to have an informational interview. Write down each person's name, company, title, and phone number. Write a phone script that you would use when you call to ask for the interview. Discuss your approach.
2. Write down a list of six to eight questions that you would like to ask on each informational interview. Which questions would you ask on all informational interviews? Which questions would be specific to a particular interview? Why?
3. How would you answer the following question on an informational interview: "Why do you want to pursue a career in (name of industry)?"
4. Identify at least four samples of your work that you would include in a binder when you go on informational interviews. Why would each one be included? What would you tell an interviewee about each sample? How would each sample demonstrate one of your brand positioning points?
5. Write a thank-you e-mail and a handwritten thank-you note that you would send after an informational interview. Would you send both? Why or why not?

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