

# The Informational Interview

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## Thinking About a Big Change

If you're seriously thinking about making a career change, you'll need more than just a "good feeling" about your prospects in a new job field before shopping your resume in uncharted waters. Changing your career should not be a leap of faith or a roll of the dice. It should be an informed decision on your part, and you can start by asking yourself some very basic questions:

- *What do I really know about this new job field I'm interested in?*
- *What would be my reasons for leaving my current job?*
- *Why do I think this new job field will be better for me?*

If you can come up with concrete answers to questions like these, then you're ready to make some moves, but do make sure you reflect on your situation before doing anything drastic. The danger in not taking the time to do your homework on a new career field exists whether you get a new job or don't: if you don't get the job, then your efforts will have felt like a waste of your time. If you *do* get the job, you may end up with "buyer's remorse" a month or so later, regretting that you made such a big change without thinking about it.

## Career Information-Gathering

A great first step when thinking about changing careers is to sit down with someone who works in the field you're interested in and ask her questions. This is called an *informational interview*, and it's one of the more effective and pressure-free ways to help you become more knowledgeable and prepared when you apply for a new job in a new field.

Informational interviews are **not** formal meetings during which you ask for a job; rather, they are structured yet informal conversations with people who can lead you to a job. Informational interviews are great confidence builders, because when the actual job

interview comes along, you can draw from the expert advice and wisdom you acquired from your original contact; the input you gather during these interviews can and should be used to modify your job search.

Keep in mind that the person you've chosen to interview is going to be very experienced and knowledgeable about the field you're interested in, so you'll want to be methodical and strategic in deciding the questions you ask him/her.

## **How to get an Informational Interview**

Like a job interview, an informational interview does not just fall in your lap; you have to work to get one. Here are some of the ways you can find an informational interview contact, and as you can see, you don't necessarily need to have lucrative connections or "friends in high places" to land the interview. All you need is a clear strategy and the wherewithal to carry it out:

### **1. *Put Your Rolodex to Work***

Take an inventory of the people in your professional and social networks. If you have a FaceBook and/or a LinkedIn account, then you're already halfway there. Compile a list of everyone you know, literally. You can refer to this as your "Personal Network List." Realistically, you're bound to forget some people, but try your best not to leave anyone off this list. Once you feel satisfied with the list and can't think of anyone else to add it, read through the names on it.

- First, ask yourself: "is there anyone on my Network List who would be a good person to interview?"
- Create a short list of people from your network that are potential informational interviewees. For example, if you're trying to become a paralegal, then you'll want to put a star next to every person on your list that has experience in the legal field, whether they are a lawyer, a judge, or a receptionist at a firm. Call this your "Interview List."
- Next, go through your Network List again, only this time, ask yourself a different question: "is there anyone on my list who may *know someone else*

for me to interview?” For example, your best friend from high school may be a good contact because he has a roommate who is a paralegal at a top law firm. Call this your “Contact List.”

## **2. Call in the Professionals**

Ultimately, you will need to take your interviewee-search to the next level. For example, say you’re interested in becoming a Pharmacy Technician, but you feel stuck at square 1 because no one you know, and no one *they know*, has any experience with that field. When both your immediate and second-hand contacts cannot give you the information you need, go straight to the source:

- Research hospitals, medical centers, pharmacies, certificate programs...any institution that includes or is focused on *pharmacy tech*. Make your online search effective by limiting it to places and areas within driving distance, or companies and other organizations you would want to work with.
- Call the company or organization and ask to speak to someone in the area who is doing the job you want to work in. This will be an informal chat, not the actual informational interview, but it can be a simple way to tell the person: *“I’m interested in what you do, and I may want to do it myself someday. Can I come by again, whenever you have some spare time, and ask you some questions?”*
- No matter what, don’t feel shy about taking the initiative and reaching out to a professional in your field of interest. You will find that people generally feel honored to act as representatives of their professions and will be more than happy to give you insights and advice.

## **3. Send the Message**

Communicate with the members of your interview and contact lists through a personal message—either an email or a phone call. Let people know what you’re looking to achieve and state your intentions clearly. For example, you could open the message you send to an interview prospect like this: *“...I was wondering if I could meet with you to ask some questions about your field, because I see myself working in that field someday. I would greatly appreciate any information and advice you could give me about trying to enter this industry and/or career.”* For your contacts, aka “people who may know *other people*,” you can be somewhat more casual in your

approach. For example: *“Hey, I was wondering if you still knew Mr. Smith and were in touch with him these days. I’m thinking about becoming a paralegal, so Mr. Smith would be great to talk to about it. Do you know how I could reach him?”*

## **Go in Prepared**<sup>i</sup>

In an informational interview, *you* are the one who is asking the questions, so it is up to you to make the experience as worthwhile and informative as possible. The following are some sample questions you may consider asking in an informational interview. These questions are designed to give you as much information and honest advice from your interviewee as possible.

1. Can you tell me about a typical day on the job?
2. How did you get started doing this type of work?
3. What is your favorite part of your job?
4. What is your *least* favorite part of your job?
5. What surprised you the most when you started working in this field?
6. What is the typical salary range for someone in this line of work (ask generally)
7. How do you see this industry developing in the future? How is it changing?
8. What advice would you give to someone who wants to enter this industry/field?
9. What are employers typically looking for when hiring people in this line of work?
10. How does my professional background and experience (briefly note your qualifications) compare with expectations of employers in this industry?
11. May I have your business card?  
→ **This way, you have all the information needed to contact this person in the future.**

12. Is there anyone else I might talk to about this? May I use your name when contacting that person?

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<sup>i</sup> [www.careerchoiceguide.com/informational-interview-questions.html](http://www.careerchoiceguide.com/informational-interview-questions.html)