The Informational Interview Playbook

By Nathan Tanner

Do you want to get really good at networking and build strong relationships with potential employers? If so, learning how to master informational interviews is a great place to start.

What is an informational interview?

An informational interview is a meeting in which potential job seekers get advice on their careers, the industry, and/or the corporate culture of a potential future workplace. During the discussion, the employed professional is learning about the job seeker and judging their professional potential and fit with the corporate culture. (To be clear, info interviews are *not* job interviews.)

Your purpose during an info interview may be any or all of the following:

1) Learn about the company
2) Build a new relationship
3) Make a good impression
4) Find additional people to speak with

You may not know exactly what you want to do, but taking time to figure out your career goals in advance will make your informational interviews far more effective.

Six steps for a successful info interview

1) Scheduling the info interview

In your initial email, provide a one-sentence summary of yourself, share why you want to speak, and request a few minutes (consider asking for 15-30 minutes) of their time to ask questions about their company and work experience. Make sure you make it clear you're asking for advice and not a job. Thank them in advance for any time they can share. They are very busy, so be flexible with your schedule. Here's a sample email:

> Hi Rachel,
>
> My name is Christine Richards, and I'm a sophomore studying marketing at UT-Austin.
>
> I'm really interested in brand management and wanted to learn more about your experience at General Mills. When convenient, would you be open to answering a few of my questions?
>
> Many thanks,
> Christine

2) Preparation

Once you've scheduled the interview, it's time to prepare. Failing to prep for informational interviews wastes everyone's time and can damage your personal brand. Take time to learn about the professional and his or her company.

Researching the company

It's helpful to know what products and services the company offers, information about the CEO, and what he or she has said recently, as well as basic information about the function (e.g. marketing, finance, etc.) in which you'd like to work. You don't need to memorize the details of the company's cash flow statement, but a little research will convey genuine interest and improve the quality of your conversation.

Researching the individual

LinkedIn profiles can tell you a lot. Don't ask questions you can easily answer by glancing at their profile. A general rule of thumb is that if something is listed on a LinkedIn profile, it's fair game to bring up in a professional way.

3) Starting the info interview

Here’s a general outline I like to follow.

- Thank them for their time.
- Remind them that you planned to chat for 15 minutes (or whatever time you said in the email), and ask if that is still okay.
- Share your objective for the call (learn more about the company, get to know them, ask about life inside the company, etc.).
- Say something along the lines of, “Before I ask a few questions, would it be helpful if I shared a little about myself?” They’ll likely say yes. This is your opportunity to provide a *very brief* summary of your background. Sharing a little about yourself allows the professional to get to know you better and tailor the responses to your situation.

Remember, you’re the one driving the conversation. It’s your responsibility to make sure they are engaged.

4) Possible questions to ask

While your goal may be to find a job, that isn't the goal of this discussion. You're trying to build a relationship and gather information. Several of these questions are fairly generic. The more research you've done, the better questions you can ask.

- Can you tell me about your background and how you ended up at your current company?
- What qualities or skills have made you successful?
- What does a typical day look like for you?
- What qualities do you look for when hiring a candidate?
- How has your experience differed from expectations? (This is especially good if they are a junior employee or recently joined the company.)
- How do your company's values influence how people make decisions? (Only ask if they have very defined corporate values. Consider asking about one of the specific values.)
- If you were in my shoes, what would you do to prepare for a potential job or internship with your company? (Good question if you know they are hiring.)
- Reference something on their LinkedIn profile (don't be creepy) and ask a specific question, such as, "I saw on your LinkedIn profile that you were at Procter & Gamble before joining Adobe. How was the transition from CPG to tech?"

- I read that… (tell them something interesting you've learned about the company). Can you tell me more about that?
- Is there anyone else I can speak with at your company to learn more about (fill in the function you're interested in)?
- Do you have any final pieces of advice for someone in my shoes?

5) Ending the info interview

When the allotted time has passed, tell them you want to be respectful of their time and wrap up the discussion. Never go long unless they specifically say it is okay. Thank them again and tell them you would love to keep in touch. Ask if you can follow up if you have more questions.

6) Follow up

Don't forget to follow up! Send them a hand-written note or email expressing gratitude. In the note, reference something you discussed that was insightful. If they helped you get a job or introduced you to someone else, follow up with an update. People love to hear how they've been helpful! Following up will further strengthen the relationship. If you had a good conversation and want to stay in touch, send an invitation to connect on LinkedIn.

Common mistakes to avoid

Below is a list of mistakes to avoid when making informational interviews.

- Don't let your first info interview be with someone fairly high up at a company. Practice an info interview with a friend, classmate, or contact who knows you well. After a few info interviews you'll feel a lot more comfortable and will likely ask better questions.
- When you begin the discussion, don't start rambling about yourself. Make sure that your introduction is brief. The focus is on asking good questions and learning from them, not "pitching" yourself.

- As mentioned earlier, don't ask questions you can easily answer by doing simple research. It will make you sound lazy. *The more specific questions you can ask, the better conversation you'll have and the better impression you'll leave.*
- Avoid telling professionals that you're "just trying to learn about a lot of companies." This is your chance to express interest in *their* company!
- Don't be too mechanical. Be professional, but try to have fun during the discussion. Companies aren't interested in hiring robots. Try to sound energetic and engaging.
- If you haven't met someone, or don't know them very well, don't add them to LinkedIn without including a personalized connection request.

Track everything

Take notes during your conversations. You'll be surprised at how much you forget in a short period of time. During MBA recruiting I took a picture of my notes after each discussion and saved them in a folder marked *Info Interviews*. This allowed me to go back and reference the notes in the future. Come up with a system that works best for you.

Summary

In short, be courteous, do research, ask informed questions, don't go over your scheduled time without permission, tell them thanks, and follow up.

Nathan Tanner is a career strategy author and HR professional at LinkedIn. He has taught thousands of people how to land their dream job and successfully launch their career. His bestselling book, Not Your Parents' Workplace, teaches critical skills for thriving in the new world of work.

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