

How to Explore Careers Through Informational Interviewing

During the course of a given day, you have many opportunities to learn from people about their careers or jobs. You will find most people more than willing to talk about the subject at hand-themselves. The process of talking to people who have jobs that interest you is called informational interviewing. The following guidelines will help you with an informational interview.

Know What You Want to Accomplish

The primary objectives of informational interviewing are to:

- Investigate a specific career field.
- Assist in narrowing options.
- Obtain advice on where you might fit in.
- Learn the jargon and important issues in the field.
- Broaden your network of contacts for future reference.
- Create a strategy for entering your field of interest.

Conducting the Informational Interview

Before the interview:

- Learn as much as you can about the organization.
- Write down the questions that you wish to ask.
- If possible, learn something about the person with whom you will be interviewing.
- Dress professionally.
- Bring copies of your resume. (Distribute only upon request.)
- Arrive 10-15 minutes before your appointment.

During the interview:

- Restate your purpose and why you are talking with this particular person.
- Be prepared to initiate the conversation, since you are the interviewer.
- Adhere to the original time request of 20-30 minutes.
- Ask for referrals to other appropriate individuals in the field or in related organizations.
- Keep in mind that this is an information-gathering and advice-seeking interview, not an employment interview.
- Let the individual you are interviewing bring up the discussion of specific job vacancies.

After the interview:

- Send a thank-you note and keep the individual you have interviewed posted on your progress.
- Keep the door open for future contacts with this person.
- Evaluate your style of interviewing. What could you have done better? Use what you have learned when you conduct your next interview.
- Evaluate the information you received. How does it relate to your plans?

What to Ask

Make a list of questions you would like answered about a career field or organization. Your questions will yield the most information if you use open-ended questions to engage your contact in conversation. Listed below are sample questions to help you prepare for your interview.

General Topics about the Career Field:

- Types of positions most often found in the career field.
- General skills needed to perform responsibilities (e.g., organizing, supervising, writing).
- Specific skills needed to do the job (e.g., academic, experiential).

- Recommendations for training or education required to perform this kind of work. The need for a college degree in this industry and how it helps a person to advance up the career path.
- Negative aspects of field, for example, "What would you change if you could?" or "If you had it to do over again, how would you have done it differently?"
- Typical entry-level position in the field.
- The outlook for entry-level professionals.
- Alternative methods to gain entrance to the field (e.g., part-time, internship, mid-career change, volunteer work or other kinds of training).
- The future of this field in terms of new and expanding opportunities in Hawaii and on Maui.
- Other information that may be helpful (e.g., critique of resume, job-seeking tactics, names of other professionals in the field).

General Topics About the Organization:

- Short- and long-term goals of the organization such as growth, new products or services, and expansion of facilities.
- Philosophy of the organization and types of training programs available.
- Descriptions of the various positions they have held between entry-level and present job.
- Description of the individual's present job (as defined in the job description as well as what is done beyond the job description).
- Description of typical career path from entry-level to top management.

Informational interviewing is an effective tool in your approach to career planning. It can be one of your most valued strategies in gathering information and establishing contacts as you begin or continue to build plans for the future. Like all other components of career planning, informational interviewing requires planning and focus on your part. Make the interview a benefit for you and your career.

20 QUESTIONS!

Prepare a list of your own questions for your informational interview. The following are some sample questions:

1. What is a typical day at work like?
2. What are the five most important responsibilities of your job?
3. What technical skills do you need to do your job?
4. What interpersonal skills do you need to do your job?
5. What additional skills and/or personal qualities does your position require?
6. How did you acquire the skills you just identified?
7. What part of this job do you find most satisfying? Most challenging?
8. Describe a recent problem on the job and how you solved it.
9. How is your work interdependent with that of others in your organization?
10. How did you get your job?
11. What kinds of information do you need to use, analyze, and/or stay up-to-date on to do your job effectively?
12. What technology and special tools/equipment are used by you and others at your workplace?
13. How do you think your job will change over the next 10 years? Why?
14. What impact does your workplace have on the local and global communities?
15. Is there a demand for people in this occupation in Hawaii or on Maui?
16. What special advice would you give a person entering this field?
17. What types of training do companies offer persons entering this field?
18. What are the basic prerequisites for jobs in this field?
19. Which professional journals and organizations would help me learn more about this field?
20. If a student intern were assigned to assist you, what kinds of projects would you involve him or her in?

Additional Questions to Ask:

1. What would improve the efficiency of your job?
2. How is the workplace managed to ensure that it is productive and financially sound?
3. What are the salary ranges for various levels in this field?
4. What entry level jobs are best for learning as much as possible?
5. From your perspective, what are the problems you see working in this field?
6. If you could do things all over again, would you choose the same path for yourself? Why? What would you change?

(If you provided the resource person with your resume)

7. What do you think of the experience I've had so far in terms of entering this field?
8. With the information you have about my education, skills, and experience, what other fields or jobs would you suggest I research further before I make a final decision?
9. What do you think of my resume? Do you see any problem areas? How would you suggest I change it?
10. Whom do you know that I should talk to next? When I call him/her, may I use your name?

ASSIGNMENT REQUIREMENTS:

- Final report - at least 3 pages. May be in question/answer format or written as a narrative in paragraph form.
- Include a summary statement evaluating the interview and its value to your career development. How did what you learned in the interview relate to your career plans?
- Include your observations about the company's physical environment, interactions with staff, dress code, ambiance, and other aspects of the company's "culture".
- Include complete name, job title, name of company, address, phone number, email address of the resource you interviewed.
- Send thank you letter to resource within 3 days of the interview.
- Submit report with other assignments at the end of the semester.

(Spring 2007)