

Options and Opportunities – Tool #2: Informational Interviews

An informational interview is a technique used to explore the details of a *specific* job. Conducting informational interviews can help you develop a deeper understanding of a given position and give you an advantage when you start applying. Do this to investigate career options *before* beginning your job hunt. Doing your homework early will save you time in the long run.

The basic concept

An **informational interview** is a professional meeting with an individual who has a type of job that you could be interested in pursuing. **In your interview, you will** ask questions about the job and company and evaluate the extent to which your interests, knowledge, and skills match that kind of job. By conducting multiple informational interviews, you can get a good sense of a career path that you would like to pursue—and those that you do not want to pursue! You can also explore multiple career paths in a short amount of time.

Why do informational interviews?

1. Informational interviews are an ideal way for physics students to learn about different jobs. Sometimes, your faculty advisors have little experience outside of academia and so are limited in the guidance they can provide regarding the **details of specific jobs**.
2. Informational interviews introduce you to the specifics of a certain type of job—including **jargon** that may be helpful for resume writing and job searching.
3. Informational interviews allow you to see an individual in a job environment and **determine if this environment is right for you**.
4. Informational interviews provide an opportunity to **seek advice** from someone working in the field. This allows for a more informed career choice and may help guide you in your educational choices.
5. Informational interviews help you **initiate professional relationships** and **expand your network** of contacts in a relaxed and genuine way.
6. Informational interviews help you to **develop your communication skills** and self-confidence in talking with professionals in a low-pressure interview environment.

How to prepare for an informational interview

Finding people to interview

Research general career fields (e.g., engineering) and specific jobs within that field (e.g., civil engineer) using your list of potential job titles (Exercise #1). Once you narrow down the kinds of jobs that interest you, seek out potential interviewees in those areas. You can focus your attention on organizations that interest you.

Making contacts

Ask friends, neighbors, family, professors, campus career professionals, and alumni associations for suggestions of whom to interview. Many universities have a career mentoring network of alumni and professionals who have volunteered to be contacted by students to discuss what they do. If yours does, this is a great place to start. Also search your contacts on LinkedIn and other social media networks. Do not limit yourself to interviewing people with physics degrees, although such people might have useful perspectives if you can find them. Build a list of potential contacts. Identify people with shared interests, enthusiasm, or involvement. Consider people that work in a setting (e.g., office, academia, classroom, etc) you prefer.

Scheduling the interview

Once you have some names, contact your potential interviewees by email or phone. **Be sure to tell them who you are, why you are contacting them, and from whom you received their name.** Be professional, clear, and state that you are a student seeking to conduct an interview with them about their job as a means of exploring what you would like to do for a career. Request 15–20 minutes for a phone interview, or 20–30 minutes for a face-to-face interview (if the person is local). **You are not asking for a job.**

It is very important to respect an interviewee's time. With that in mind, be sure to stay within the agreed upon timeframe. Keep in mind that visiting interviewees at their workplace can be insightful, especially when assessing workplace culture. This may also be more convenient for the interviewee.

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Remember that an informational interview is *not* a job interview. You can bring your resume or business cards, but avoid asking questions about whether specific employment opportunities exist in the company. Do not offer your resume to the interviewee unless they ask specifically for it.

Preparing for the discussion – Questions and topics to discuss

Because you want to be respectful of the time you take from the interviewee, you will only be able to cover a small number of issues. Prepare your questions in advance, write them down, and take them to the interview. A notepad is helpful. The guidelines below are useful to keep in mind as you prepare questions.

Table 1: Informational interview guidelines

“DOs”	“DONT’S”
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Think carefully about what you want to learn before you write your questions.• Remember that you are looking for information, not a job, so ask broad questions that will result in lots of information.• Do your homework and research the individual, position, division, and company. Let your research guide your questions.• Listen carefully and ask follow-up questions when you feel it is appropriate.• Be confident! Enjoy your time talking to someone with similar interests!	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Do not ask for a job, even indirectly.• Do not ask about the individual’s salary. Instead, ask about the typical starting salary for someone in that field.• Do not be on your phone during the interview.• Do not interrupt someone when they are answering your question.

Because time is short, it’s important to guide the conversation and get answers to your most important questions.

Short Exercise: What questions do you want to answer for yourself at the conclusion of your interview. For example, would I enjoy working primarily in an office environment?” or “What are the challenges of a job where I have to travel a lot?” Be as specific as you can. **Note: These are not the questions you ask the person you interview.**

<p>Question 1:</p>
<p>Question 2:</p>

Example questions for an effective informational interview

The following are some suggested topics for your informational interview questions. You should plan for 4 – 6 questions, which leaves some time for follow-up questions in a 15 – 20 minute conversation.

- Typical position duties and responsibilities
- Necessary skills for this type of job
- Most satisfying/challenging/frustrating aspects of the job
- Atmosphere/culture of the work place
- Where are open positions posted in this field
- How well the job lends itself to work–life balance
- Important personal characteristics for this type of job (e.g., tenacity, creativity, initiative, leadership)
- What professional/trade associations people in this field join
- Advice for an undergraduate looking to enter this field
- Who you might contact for more information
- Advice about building an effective resume that might be attractive to the company

Conducting an informational interview

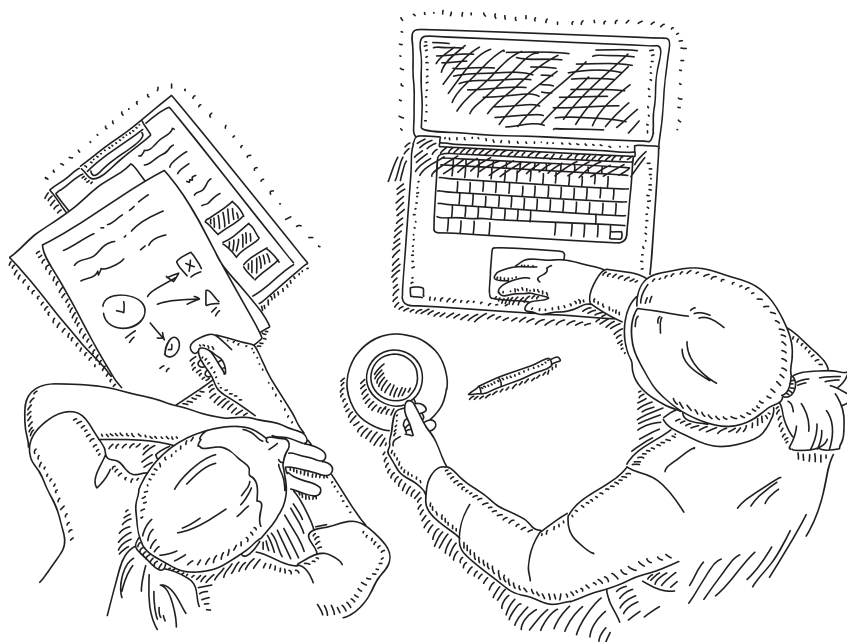
Approach the informational interview as a chance to learn and expand your network of contacts. Be polite, on time (or early!), and respectful. Dress professionally, make eye contact, and exhibit good posture. Also, be prepared to introduce yourself and give your **elevator speech** (see pages 25-26). Bring a notepad to take notes and have your written list of questions on hand.

Following up after the informational interview

Do not forget to follow up after the interview. This may be one of the most important points in conducting an effective informational interview.

- **Be sure to send the interviewer a short, personal thank you note within a few days of the interview to convey your thanks and demonstrate your professionalism. In the note, mention something that you found particularly useful or helpful from the interview.**
- **Write down what you learned and decide on next steps. For example, if the interviewee said that most people in that field are members of a specific professional society, you might consider joining.**
- **If the interviewee connected you to other people or opportunities, be sure to follow up on the leads with an email or a short note.**

Use the Exercise templates on the following pages for conducting your informational interviews and keeping records. These templates are available online.



Exercise - Tool #2: Planning For Your Informational Interviews

⇒ Carry over the job titles you are most interested in from page 14.

Job titles I am interested in learning more about:

⇒ What would you like to know about each job? Brainstorm a list of potential questions.

Potential questions to ask during an informational interview:

Spend some time finding potential interviewees in these areas. To start with, you might try your campus career center, faculty members, family, friends, and LinkedIn or other social media sites for ideas. Don't forget to ask around your network!

Potential interviewees			
Job title	Name	Email address	Phone number

⇒ Use the following pages to plan and keep track of what you learn from your informational interviews. (You can make more copies as needed.)

Informational interview record

Informational interview with:	
Job title:	Date:
Company:	Time:
Email address:	Location and phone number:

Questions to ask:

Notes from interview:

Follow-up steps:

Date the thank you note or email is sent:	
On a scale of 0–10, how interested I am in pursuing a job like this:	
Additional follow up:	