

Options and Opportunities – Tool #2: Informational Interviews

An informational interview is a technique used to explore the details of a particular job. Conducting informational interviews can help you develop a deeper understanding of a specific job and give you an advantage when you start applying. It is a way for you to investigate career options *before* it is time to actually job hunt.

The basic concept

An **informational interview** is a professional meeting with an individual who has a job that you are interested in having. You request an appointment for the purpose of asking questions about the job and company and evaluating the extent to which your interests, knowledge, and skills match that kind of job. By doing multiple informational interviews, you can get a good sense of the career path that you would like to pursue—and those that you do not want to pursue! Informational interviews are an ideal way for physics students to learn about different jobs, because their advisors, physics faculty, usually have little experience outside of academia and so are limited in the guidance they can provide.

Why do informational interviews?

1. 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.
2. Informational interviews enable you to see an individual in an actual job environment and determine if this environment is right for you.
3. Informational interviews provide an opportunity to seek advice from someone working in the field. This allows for a more informed career choice.
4. Informational interviews help you initiate professional relationships and expand your network of contacts in a nonthreatening way.
5. Informational interviews help you to develop your communication skills and self-confidence in talking with professionals in a low-pressure interview environment.

Preparing for informational interviews

Finding people to interview

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

Making contact

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 you like.

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 and clear, and state that you are a student asking for the opportunity 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).

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.

Bear in mind that an informational interview is *not* a job interview. You can bring your resume or business cards, but avoid asking questions about whether or not specific employment opportunities exist in the company. Do not offer your resume to the interviewee unless he or she asks 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. The guidelines below are useful to keep in mind as you prepare questions.

“DOs”	“DO NOTs”
<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 this influence 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.

Example Questions

The following are some topics on which you might base 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 job 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 open positions are 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. For example, what does the company look for that might differ from a resume for an academic setting?

Why informational interviews are so powerful

Informational interviews really work! As a young professional, you will gain valuable insight into the culture of a potential workplace. In addition, most people really enjoy talking about their jobs and their career field choice. Most people are flattered that you have taken the initiative to ask for their advice and assistance with your career and future. And, in general, most people have experienced career transitions and are happy to share their story in an effort to help others.

Conducting an informational interview²

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**. Bring a notepad to take notes and your written list of questions.

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 interviewee 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.

Exercise - Tool #2: Your Informational Interviews

⇒ Carry over the job titles you are most interested in from the bottom of exercise 1.

Job titles worth learning more about:

⇒ Consider what you would like to know about each job, and 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 avenues for ideas.

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 (or phone number):

⇒ Questions to ask:

⇒ Notes from interview:

⇒ Follow-up steps:

Thank you sent (date):									
On a scale of 1–10, how interested I am in pursuing a job like this:									
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Additional follow-up:									