

Tips for Informational Interviews

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Informational interviews are meetings with professional colleagues to discuss career pathways, specific jobs, or general professional exploration. Such meetings are an important part of professional development as well as growing your professional network. Here I offer some tips on informational interview etiquette based on my personal experience.

Purpose

Informational interviews are typically used as a mechanism for learning more about the career pathway or skill set and experiences of someone working in a position that you are interested in. These conversations offer the opportunity to ask detailed questions about what technical skills you need to be qualified for a position, or whether a certain path or skill is helpful. You can also ask about people's recommendations for whether to attend graduate school, or whether a certain certification, degree or field of study is necessary to do the type of work you are interested in. You can also request an informational interview to learn more about an organization, upcoming job opportunities, or a specific job posting that you are considering applying for.

Beforehand

Before you request an informational interview, make sure you are ready to portray yourself professionally.

- You may wish to create or update your LinkedIn account or resume, to share in your introductory email as a virtual introduction. Recognize that your interviewee may decide to share these materials with others after your meeting, so you want them to be polished and up to date.
- You'll also want to think through what you want to learn from the meeting, and come up with a few thoughtful questions to guide the conversation. Be prepared to take notes during your meeting, and identify action items that you can follow-up with if necessary, such as who you should write to or who they offered to introduce you to.
- Brainstorm informative questions that take advantage of your time with them; for example, rather than asking for a summary of their career path (which you can read on LinkedIn), consider asking why they took that path, what experiences were helpful in learning the skills they most require for their currently position or what they might have done differently.

The interview process

Below is a general workflow with some tips to consider at each stage.

1. *Identify who to speak with:* Consider what information you need to help advance your career (e.g., people currently in or who supervise your ideal position or people who do the hiring for your ideal position), then find the people who can offer that information. Consider which of your colleagues may have connections you'd like to meet (you can search through their connections using LinkedIn). Look for alumni of your alma maters (schools, fellowship programs, etc) (LinkedIn can help with this too, or you can ask school career centers or fellowship program managers). Ask your family and friends too.
2. *Determine whether you need an introduction:* Personal connections help boost the likeliness that the person will respond, but you can also write to strangers (there's a good chance they'll write back!). If your colleague or friend knows someone you'd like to meet, ask politely whether they'd be willing to make an introduction on your behalf, and explain why so they can frame the introduction appropriately. Consider sending your colleague/friend your resume or a brief paragraph explaining what you're hoping to learn, so they can include this in their introduction to save additional emails. It's important

to realize that your colleague/friend may be going out on a limb or using up a favor when they introduce you, so be sure to express your gratitude for their help.

3. *Connect and set up the interview:* If someone sends an intro on your behalf, follow-up promptly to thank them (consider moving them to bcc) and provide more information to your interviewee about why you want to speak with them. Consider sharing your LinkedIn or resume, if it hasn't been shared already. In the same email, invite them to suggest a time that might work to connect, ask what platform they would like to connect with (phone, Zoom, Whatsapp, etc) and thank them in advance for their time. If you send the initial email yourself, do everything above, but first provide some context for how you know them (your colleague X recommended getting in touch...or you're both alumni from X school...or you are hoping to learn more about the type of work they do in their position). Also, read up on their background before you write to them; you can include some of these details in the email, and prepare for the interview itself.
4. *Conduct the interview:* Be on time or early. At the start of the call, thank the person for taking the time to speak with you. You may wish to ask them how much time they have to speak (typically 30-60 min), since that will affect how you prioritize your questions. Give a brief overview of why you're interested in speaking with them (flattery is helpful), and share a brief overview of your background and career experience (just the relevant highlights, so they can tailor their responses to your situation). Then you can guide the conversation to touch on the topics you wish to discuss. It can be helpful to have a prepared list of questions or themes to touch on. Some common questions include:
 - “Could you tell me about the work experiences through your career that helped you get to your current position?”
 - “What is a typical day in your position?”
 - “What is your most/least favorite part of the position?”
 - “What skills or experiences would you recommend for me to work on in order to be a strong candidate for position X?”
 - “Where do you feel our field is moving in the future? Are there any emerging types of issues or skills that I should consider to be a strong candidate for X position?”
 - “Are there any upcoming opportunities in your organization?”
 - “Is there anyone you'd recommend I should talk with?” Ask them if they could introduce you.

In informational interviews, the dynamic is typically that you are the learner, they are the teacher, so don't feel pressure to show off that you know everything. Be an active listener, stay focused, take notes. Try to be relaxed (they can hear it in your voice) and feel free to share (related) personal anecdotes to help strengthen your connection. Your goal is to learn but also to form a relationship, since personal connections are a critical part of professional success.

5. *Follow-up after the interview:* A day or two later, send a thank you email or hardcopy note. Mention specific detail(s) that you appreciated discussing (to show them you were listening). If they offered to introduce you to anyone or share materials with you, gently remind them by thanking them for the offer. If the conversation went well, this is also a great time to add them as a LinkedIn connection and, after they accept, to check if they have any connections that you'd want to ask for an introduction to.
6. *Maintain connection:* If the conversation went well, consider whether you'd like to nurture the relationship over time to form a stronger bond. You never know where professional relationships will take you; sometimes networking can lead you to a future boss! Consider emailing them at a comfortable regularity (e.g. every year) or after major milestones (e.g. graduating from school, getting a new job). Nurturing the relationship is particularly important if you suspect you may “need” something from them in the future, so that you don't come across as exploiting them. Be intentional

about this; consider making calendar reminders for yourself. Be sure to follow-up down the road if they played an important role in helping you get a job or with an important accomplishment.

7. *Repeat!* Follow-up with other people they may have recommended. It may be helpful to make a goal for yourself to keep you motivated, such as doing informational interviews with 1-2 new people each month.

Good luck and have fun networking!

Sample introductory email

Dear Dr. Green,

My name is Anita Kumar and I'm a wildlife conservationist interested in federal land policy. In May I will complete my BS in Natural Resources Management at Claremont McKenna College and am in the process of exploring possible career paths. I found your profile online while researching Defenders of Wildlife, and was excited to see that your expertise and scope of work is closely aligned with my interests. If you have time, I would appreciate the chance to speak with you to hear about your career path and learn more about Defenders of Wildlife. I also noticed that Defenders recently posted a Coordinator position for your department, and would appreciate the chance to learn more about the position.

Might you have time to speak with me either in person or virtually (phone, Zoom, etc) someday in the next few weeks? I'd be happy to meet for coffee near your workplace if it's convenient, or to hop on a call at a time that works for you.

More information on my background is available on my LinkedIn profile [\[hyperlink\]](#) and in my attached resume. Thanks for your time and I look forward to speaking with you.

Sincerely,
Anika

Sample email response if someone else introduces you

Thank you, Nancy, for the introduction! Moving you to bcc to spare your inbox.

Hi Dr. Green, I'm honored to connect with you. As Nancy mentioned, I'm in the process of learning more about positions at wildlife conservation non-profit organizations like Defenders of Wildlife as I strategize where to advance in my career. Your position particularly interests me because of your focus on federal lands, which is the topic of my undergrad honors thesis. If you have time, I would appreciate hearing more about your position and your career path in general to better understand your role and how you came to work at Defenders.

Might you have time to speak with me either in person or virtually (phone, Zoom, etc) someday in the next few weeks? I'd be happy to meet for coffee near your workplace if it's convenient, or to hop on the phone at a time that works for you. Thank you very much for taking the time to meet with me.

More information on my background is available on my LinkedIn profile [\[hyperlink\]](#) and in my attached resume.

Many thanks,
Anika

Sample follow-up thank you email

Hi Susan [can use first name if they use it on the call or in email],

Thank you again for taking the time to speak with me yesterday. I deeply appreciate you sharing your career path and what your position at Defenders entails. The jaguar recovery project that you and your colleagues are leading is inspiring and precisely the type of work I would love to help support.

I am also grateful for your encouragement to apply to the Coordinator position! I plan to submit my application in the upcoming week.

Thank you for offering to introduce me to Jesus Murray. I would greatly benefit from connecting with him and am excited to learn more about the scope of his work at The Nature Conservancy.

Thank you again, and I look forward to staying in touch.

All the best,
Anita