

Informational Interviews & Networking Tips:

Explore Your Options and Develop a Deeper Understanding

Purpose

Informational interviews provide you with the opportunity to gain insight into different jobs, companies, and industries so that you can learn more about what they are really like. Most of us do not truly know how professionals in different fields and industries spend their workday, so conducting informational interviews will allow you to ask questions and develop a deeper understanding of a professional's experience.

What are You Hoping to Learn?

Before scheduling an informational interview, it is important to determine what you are hoping to gain from the conversation. Things to consider include:

- Are you hoping to get a broad overview of a specific field or industry or do you want to learn more about a specific position?
- Do you want to learn more about the company for which the person is working?
- Are you interested in learning more about the person's career path so you can gain insight into how they got into their current role?
- Would you like to know more about what their average day or week looks like?
- Are you hoping to get advice on how to get a job with their company?
- Moving beyond the research you have done, what questions do you still have about the field or career you are most interested in?

Finding People to Interview and Getting Connected

Personal connections are one of the best places to start! If you do not know any professionals working within your field or company of interest, consider asking your classmates, professors, friends, neighbors, and/or family members if they have any contacts they can connect you with.

If you are still unable to locate a connection to a certain career or company, do not get discouraged. You can also locate someone to interview and learn more about companies by doing research online.

- Visit companies' websites and utilize their staff directories and "About Us" pages to learn more
- Connect with professional organizations for your field of interest
- Utilize LinkedIn to search for professionals working in your field or organization of interest – search for alumni through the "Career Insights" section of the WSU organization page on LinkedIn
- Review company information in local business journals and on GlassDoor
- Utilize Handshake to explore the companies that are interested in hiring Cougs and then connect with the staff in Career Services to determine if they have a connection within specific organizations

In the end, you will want to make sure you have a name, email address, and phone number for the individuals you want to connect with so that you can avoid calling the company to speak with an employee at random.

Once you have determined whom you would like to contact, an initial email might be the best way to get in touch with them. Make sure to let your contact know that you are not looking for a job and outline for them what you are trying to learn so they understand the purpose of the meeting you are requesting. It is typically best to meet in person and you might want to suggest meeting at their office so you can get a clear picture of their work environment.

Preparing for the Interview

It is important to do your research before going to an informational interview. Spend time looking at the interviewee's LinkedIn profile, the company, the position and the industry so that you can develop a solid foundation before the interview; this will show that you are interested and invested in what they do. Doing research will also enable you to prepare a list of meaningful questions to ask your contact during the interview.

During the Interview

Remember that you are the person who requested the meeting, therefore you are the one running the show. Be sure to listen carefully and if the conversation is not heading in the direction you want, attempt to redirect it by asking some of the questions you prepared. Also make sure to be respectful of the other person's time and acknowledge when you are getting close to the end of your time together so they can determine if they need to wrap up or are able to keep going.

Informational interviews are an opportunity to practice your professionalism. Be sure to begin and end with a strong handshake, dress professionally, and have your questions planned out in a logical manner. You want to smile, be engaged, focus on your eye contact, and listen to your interviewee's answers so you can ask relevant questions.

During the interview try to limit how much you talk about yourself so you have adequate time to learn about the other person and their experiences. If the interview is going well and it feels right, however, you might consider asking your contact if they would be willing to look over your resume, as it can be extremely beneficial to get feedback and guidance from professionals within your field of interest.

Follow-Up

After the interview, make sure to follow-up with a personal thank you note to express gratitude for the person's time and energy. Try to incorporate information in the note that shows them what you learned from your time together. Thank you notes should be sent within 24-hours after the interview and can be handwritten on a small thank you card or typed and sent via email.

Sample Questions

Once you have determined what you are hoping to gain from the interview it will be easier to develop questions to ask during the interview. You might want to consider asking things like:

- Would you mind sharing a little bit about your career path with me? It would be interesting to learn more about how you got to where you are today.
- Would you mind telling me about your educational background?
- How did you get started in the field?
- How did you get into your current position?
- What does a typical day or week look like for you? I would love to learn more about your duties and responsibilities, the problems you typically have to address and overall it would be great to get a sense of the pace within your work environment.
- What is the most challenging part of your job?
- What do you like the most about your work? The least?
- Do you have any work-related obligations outside of the office?
- Do you feel like you are able to obtain a sense of work-life balance within your current role?
- Are there any skills or abilities you think are required in order to be successful within this position/field?
- Why did you decide to go into this field? Are you happy you did?
- What courses, trainings or certificates have been most beneficial to you as you've worked in the field?
- If you could do everything over again, would you still go into this field or would you change something along the way?
- What advice do you have for someone starting out in the field?

- What kinds of experiences do you recommend I pursue to get started?
- What do you wish you had known or done when you were in my shoes?

Additional Networking Tips

Networking comes in all forms: Career & Internship Fairs, speaker events, informational interviews, social activities, lunch with co-workers, coffee with mentors, and more. There are many formal and informal opportunities to network, but if you do not have a lot of experience in it, the task may be intimidating. When you meet someone, it is best to be prepared with an elevator pitch that highlights your experiences and your goals. This pitch should be a concise, compelling introduction to yourself.

Sample Elevator Pitch: “Hello, my name is _____. I am a [year in school]/recent graduate of Washington State University Vancouver and I am interested in _____. During my time as a student, I had the opportunity to _____, which helped me discover my passion for _____. I also gained _____, _____, and _____ skills that can be useful in the field. Would you mind telling me a bit about the work you do?”

In addition to those throughout this document, here are some helpful tips to have a more meaningful opportunity when in a group networking setting:

- Before attending an event, set a challenging but achievable networking goal.
 - *For example: having genuine conversations with at least 4 new people*
- Take risks! While you might be attending with a few friends, or know a few people in the room, make sure to engage in conversation with people you do not already know. The person next to you might appreciate you breaking the ice. They might be a fabulous contact for you or know the right person for you to talk to.
- Be true to yourself while networking. If you have to be more outgoing than normal, you still do not have to put on a facade. If you feel like you are being a little awkward, it is okay. Remember, everyone else is probably nervous too.
- While talking with others, focus on relationship building. Keep your discussions fun, light, easygoing, and professional.
- Smile and say “hello.” Being engaged and ready to mingle communicates confidence.
- Passions are a perfect conversation topic. When people discuss their passions (area of studies, or career of interest), it enlivens conversation. Talking about what you enjoy is often contagious, and creates a notable moment.
- Conversation starter ideas:
 - Discuss the event
 - Look for people by themselves and introduce yourself using your elevator pitch
 - “What brought you here tonight?”
 - Ask an open ended question
- If you are really nervous, ask someone you already know if they can introduce you to someone else they know.
- Being relaxed, professional, and reciprocating interest is important. Sincere interest in the other person goes a long way and can lead to a variety of opportunities.
- Focus on positive or uplifting topics to build the other person’s confidence in you. Avoid negative or gossipy topics.
- Keep moving around the room (depending on the situation), so you can build multiple relationships.
- Write the date and event on any business cards you collect so you can remember when and where you met people and follow up with them afterward via email or LinkedIn.
- You can connect electronically with your friends and family after the event so do not let your phone be a distraction or shield to hide behind.