WHAT IS NETWORKING & INFORMATIONAL INTERVIEWING?

Networking and informational interviewing are essential tools in the career exploration and job/internship search. Loosely defined, networking is a process of developing informal contacts and building relationships that provide you with knowledge, advice, information, and further contacts – all of which may allow you to tap into unadvertised opportunities. Informational interviewing is part of the networking process and is a way to strengthen your network. Both networking and informational interviewing include elements of the following:

- Contacting people you know (and do not know) in order to find information about an industry, organization, or job/internship.
- Asking individuals whom you contact for further relevant contacts in order to build your network.
- Building relationships with people who can help the progress of your career exploration or internship/job search.

WHY DO NETWORKING & INFORMATIONAL INTERVIEWING WORK?

Networking and informational interviewing work because they are proactive and driven by your initiative. Although there are many ways to find information about careers, jobs, and internships, speaking with people who are currently working in your field of interest provides you with the opportunity to engage in a substantive dialogue that other resources do not afford. Networking and informational interviewing allow you to get your questions answered and put you in touch with individuals who can give you ‘insider information’ on vacancies, industry or organizational culture, required skills, etc.

Remember, recruitment is a resource intensive activity for employers; it takes staff time and valuable budgetary resources to advertise vacancies, screen resumes, interview candidates, and negotiate offers. Thus, a potential word of mouth recommendation from a contact within your network saves you and the employer time and resources.

GETTING STARTED

Making the Most of Your Contacts

Consider all the people you know and the people they know as part of your existing network, which may include:

- Relatives (and their friends)
- Former employers
- Friends (and their relatives)
- Neighbors and community members
- Alumni
- Professors and Advising Deans
- Student organizations

Also consider making contact with individuals that you do not already know well but are interested in learning about. For example, if you are interested in breaking into the production of TV documentaries, note the names of editors.
and researchers shown at the end of your favorite documentaries. Then contact them through their production companies or Google them.

**Your Networking and Informational Interviewing Strategy**

The primary purpose of networking and informational interviewing is to gather information that can lead to further contacts and information regarding job/internship opportunities. As such, never approach this activity as ‘getting a job’ but rather as career research. Research leads to information, which leads to opportunities. Before you begin to network and conduct informational interviews, please refer to the following suggestions:

- Have a clear idea of what industry or career areas are of interest. If you are still unsure which industries interest you most, speak with a career counselor.
- Identify the information you want to learn the most about.
- Join professional organizations and listservs to meet people in the industry you hope to enter.
- Develop your list of contacts (e.g., people whom you would like to know about your job/internship search and gain information from).
- Make sure you know as much as you can about your contact’s industry and position in the organization, so that you can ask informed questions and convey serious interest. Remember, you are aiming to impress.
- Devise a list of questions. Be clear about what information you need from each individual.
- Ensure you have a resume ready for meetings, to email upon request, etc.
- Approach contacts, either in person or over the phone, for informational interviews. Include an explanation detailing how you received their contact information, your academic status, and your interest in meeting/speaking further.
- Offer flexibility in your schedule. Always fit your agenda around the interviewer’s schedule.
- Ask your contact if they can recommend other individuals with whom to speak, especially if they are not available.

After the interaction:

- Send a thank you note in a timely fashion after every successful exchange.
- Maintain the relationship by contacting the person every month or so to report progress.
- Keep a record of your calls, conversations and meetings.
- Do not take it personally if people cannot or do not help you.

**Sample Questions for Networking Situations and Informational Interviews**

Open-ended questions encourage description and dialogue.

- What do you think is the best educational preparation for a career in ________?
- What are the qualifications you look for in a new hire?
- How did you become interested in this field?
- Tell me about your current position. Could you describe a typical work day?
- What aspect of your job do you find most challenging?
- What do you think of the experience I have so far, in terms of getting into__________?
- What are your thoughts on my resume? Would you suggest any changes?
- I already read _____ every week. What else would you recommend to help me keep abreast of developments in this field?
- Do you have a recommendation for whom I should talk to next in the field? May I use your name?
- What else should I know to make an informed decision about choosing a career in this field?
- If you could do it all over again, would you choose the same path? Is there anything you would change?
HOW TO AVOID OBSTACLES & COMMON PITFALLS

The following are recommendations for dealing with unexpected obstacles and situations that you may encounter while networking:

**You feel uncomfortable:** Networking and informational interviewing are respected means of career exploration and job searching. It is likely that your contacts will have networked themselves, will applaud your initiative and be excited to share information. Remember that networking helps both parties! If you do your research, you may also be able to share information that benefits your contact.

**Silences:** Create and refer to your prepared list of open-ended questions that cannot be answered with a yes/no response.

**Rude responses:** If you receive a rude response or an inappropriate comment, thank the contact and, if necessary, leave or end the conversation early.

**Lengthy answers:** If the information is not helpful, refocus the interview by stating that you don’t want to take too much of his/her time, and ask another question from your list.

**You ask for a job and the conversation seems to end:** Networking is best used to develop relationships, not simply to locate job leads. Use networking meetings to gain information, develop further contacts, and seek advice to improve your job search.

**You become the interviewee:** If an actual job is presented to you, you may choose to be interviewed formally on the spot. In this case, it is appropriate to ask more questions about the job, such as what skills or experiences are relevant, before answering interview questions.