

How to Get the Most Out of an Informational Interview

by Rebecca Knight

February 26, 2016



When you're looking for a job or exploring a new career path, it's smart to go out on informational interviews. But what should you say when you're actually in one? Which questions will help you gain the most information? Are there any topics you should avoid? And how should you ask for more help if you need it?

What the Experts Say

"Informational interviews are essential to helping you find out more about the type of industry, company, or role you're interested in," says Dorie Clark, author of *Stand Out Networking*. "You may think you

already know all about a certain position, but speaking to someone directly gives you the opportunity to test your assumptions.” John Lees, a UK-based career strategist and author of *The Success Code*, agrees. Informational interviews “give you exposure — a way to get yourself known in the hidden job market,” he says. “The visibility may put you straight onto a short list, even if a job isn’t advertised.” They can also be a great boost to your self-esteem. “You get to wear smart business clothes and visit places of work, which maintains your confidence levels in a job search,” he explains. So whether you’re actively trying to change roles or just exploring different professional paths, here are some tips on how to make the most of an informational interview.

Prepare and practice

Informational interviews are, according to Clark, “a safe environment to ask questions.” But that doesn’t mean you should go in cold. After all, your goal is to come across in a way that inspires others to help you. So do your homework. Study up on industry lingo. Learn who the biggest players are. Be able to talk about the most important trends. You don’t want to waste your expert’s time asking Google-able questions. “You will come across as a more serious candidate if you are familiar with the jargon and vocabulary,” says Clark. Lees concurs. “Showing that you’ve done your background research plants the idea of credibility in the other person’s mind,” he says. Work on your listening and conversation skills too. Lees suggests that you practice “asking great questions and conveying memorable energy” with “people who are easy to talk to, such as your family, your friends, and friends of friends.”

Keep your introduction short

“What frustrates busy people is when they agree to an informational interview, and then the person seeking advice spends 15 minutes talking about himself and his job search” instead of learning from them, says Lees. It’s not a venue to practice your elevator pitch; it’s a place to “absorb information and find stuff out.” Clark suggests preparing a “brief, succinct explanation about yourself” that you can recite in three minutes max: “Here’s my background, here’s what I’m thinking, and I’d like your feedback.” People can’t help you unless they understand what you’re looking for, but this part of the conversation should be brief.

Set the tone

“You want to leave people with a positive impression and enough information to recommend you to others,” says Lees. At the beginning of the interview, establish your relationship by revisiting how you were connected in the first place. “Ideally, this person has been warmly introduced to you” — perhaps you have a friend or colleague in common or you share an alma mater — so remind them, he says. It’s also a good idea to state at the outset that “you’re interested in talking to 10 or 15 industry experts” during your information-gathering phase. “That way, the person will start to process the fact that you are looking for additional sources early on. If you wait until the end to ask for other referrals, she might be caught off guard.” Ask about time constraints up front too, says Clark. “If, at the end of the time allotted, you’re having a good conversation, say, ‘I want to respect your time. I would love to keep talking, but if you need to go, I understand.’ Prove you’re a person of your word.”

Think like a journalist

Prepare a list of informed, intelligent questions ahead of time, says Clark. “You don’t necessarily need to stick to the script, but if you’re unfocused and you haven’t planned, you risk offending the person. Lees recommends approaching your interview like “an investigative journalist would.” You’re not cross-examining your expert, and you certainly don’t want to come across as “pushy or difficult,” but you should “gently probe through curiosity, then listen.” He suggests a framework of five questions along the lines of Daniel Porot’s “Pie Method”:

- *How do you get into this line of work?*
- *What do you enjoy about it?*
- *What’s not so great about it?*
- *What’s changing in the sector?*
- *What kinds of people do well in this industry?*

You can adapt these questions to your purposes; the idea is to help you “spot the roles and fields that match your skills and experience and give you an understanding of how top performers are described.”

Deliberately test your hypotheses

Your mission is to grasp the reality of the industry and the job so you can begin to decide if it's right for you. So don't shy away from sensitive topics. "You want to hear about the underbelly," says Clark. She suggests questions "designed to elicit the worst information," such as:

- *What are the worst parts of your job?*
- *What didn't you know before you got into this industry that you wish someone had told you?*

Some topics, such as money, may seem taboo but can be broached delicately. "Don't ask, 'How much money do you make?' Instead, say something like, 'I've done some research online, and it seems that the typical salary range is this,' so you're just asking for confirmation of public information," says Clark.

It's also okay to ask for advice on "how to position yourself" for a job in the industry by making your experience and skills sound relevant. She recommends saying something like, "Based on what you know about my background, what do you see as my weaknesses? And what would I need to do to allay the concerns of a potential hiring manager?" If the feedback is negative, consider it valuable information but get second and third opinions. "One person's word is not gospel," she says. "You may *not* be qualified, but you also may have spoken to a stick-in-the-mud who discourages everyone. Don't let him limit your career options."

Follow up with gratitude, not demands

While thanking the person for their time via email is a must, Lees recommends also sending a handwritten note to express gratitude right after you meet. "It will help you be remembered," he says. Your thank-you letter needn't be flowery or overly effusive; instead, it should describe how the person was helpful to you and, ideally, that her guidance led to "a concrete outcome" in your job search.

Whatever you do, don't immediately ask for a favor, adds Clark. Not only is it "considered bad manners," but it's also practically "an ambush because you barely know the person." That said, "If, a couple of weeks later, a job opens up at the person's company, you can tell

the person you're applying for it and ask if she has any quick thoughts on professional experiences you should play up in your cover letter." If she takes the ball and runs with it and offers to put in a good word for you, that's great. But do not ask for it."

Play the long game

The real purpose of informational interviews is to build relationships and "develop future allies, supporters, and champions," says Lees. So don't think of them as one-off meetings in which "someone gives you 15 minutes of his time." Take the long view and think about ways to cultivate your new professional connection. Forward him a link to a relevant magazine article, for instance, or invite her to an upcoming conference or networking event. In other words, be helpful. "You want to be seen as giving, not constantly taking," Lees says. Clark notes that it can be a tricky proposition when there's a wide age or professional gap between you, but if you focus on keeping the person "apprised of your progress" — perhaps writing him a note saying you read the book he suggested or that you joined the professional association he recommended — "it shows you listened and that his advice mattered."

Principles to Remember

Do:

- Your homework. You should do enough background research before going in that you sound like a credible candidate who's committed to moving into a new sector.
- Prepare a succinct explanation about your background and what you're looking for
- Send a handwritten thank-you note. It's good manners and makes you memorable.

Don't:

- Go in cold. Practice doing informational interviews with friends and family so you get used to asking great questions and listening.
- Let one negative informational interview sour you on a job, company, or career path. Solicit other opinions.

- Ask for favors — it's unseemly. Instead, ask for advice on how to position yourself in the job market.

Case Study #1: Prepare and be gracious

Two years ago, Matt McConnell, who lives in southern California, wanted to move from finance to marketing. He wasn't entirely sure of his direction, so he began using informational interviews to learn about other peoples' careers in the hopes of narrowing his focus. "I was also using the interviews to learn more about other organizations to see whether they might be places I'd want to work," he says.

His first informational interview didn't go very well, and Matt takes full responsibility. "I didn't prepare," he recalls. "He could tell, and he told me that I was wasting his time."

Matt learned an important lesson. "I've never made that mistake again. I now always overprepare," he says.

To get ready, he reads people's LinkedIn profiles, does a Google search on their careers, and checks out their company's website. He tends to ask the same questions, usually in the realm of how the person got started and how they ended up in their current role. "But I also make notes about particular questions I want to ask so that I have something to reference if the conversation stalls," he says.

Matt also has a post-meeting routine. "I ask for a business card and immediately send a handwritten thank-you note. The thank you is typically three lines long, and I always mention one specific thing from our meeting that resonated with me so they know I was listening and found their time valuable," he says.

"Early on in my career I worried that I didn't have anything to offer anyone in return. [But] I learned that people enjoyed sharing their experiences and offering advice, so I make sure to communicate my sincere gratitude."

Matt eventually had an informational interview with a marketing head of a quick-service restaurant group that yielded results. "After our meeting, the person called me and said her company was hiring for a role she thought I'd be perfect for," he says. "She'd given my name to the HR department, and they were planning on calling me

within the next 30 minutes to do a phone interview. That phone interview led to in-person interviews and eventually a job offer at that company.”

He worked at the company for a few years before moving on. He’s now the marketing manager for Astrophysics, a company that designs X-ray scanners for security screenings.

Case Study #2: Be respectful and don’t let negative feedback discourage you

A few months ago, Susan Peppercorn, a career coach and founder of Boston-based Positive Workplace Partners, decided she wanted to write a book about work satisfaction. Trouble was, she had no experience in the publishing industry beyond blogging. To educate herself, she has been doing a lot of informational interviews.

“Some are with writers, others editors, and others published authors,” she says. “In each case, I think in advance about each person’s expertise and focus my questions on the areas where I think they might have the most valuable advice.”

Susan makes sure she is respectful of the other person’s time, never asking for more than 30 minutes and always meeting at the person’s convenience, not hers. Before each interview, Susan also considers how she might help the person with whom she’s meeting: she might have a contact she could introduce, for instance, or she could offer to look over a resume or cover letter.

One of her recent interviews was with a potential editor. Susan was excited, and she prepared by thinking about what this particular person would look for in taking on a client. She began the conversation with a two-minute description of her book idea. But during the discussion, it became apparent that the editor’s goals and hers were quite different. “He told me in a very nice way that I had virtually no chance of having a publisher accept my book proposal. My balloon was burst quickly.”

Still, after the initial disappointment, she found value in his advice. “I learned about the importance of having a platform before approaching a publisher, since they want to know in advance that your book will sell well,” she says. “That saved me a lot of time and

effort trying to pitch to publishers and helped me look at the viability of self-publishing. It also made me realize that I had more work to do with regard to clarifying and communicating the value of my book.”

The experience also helped her hone her approach for subsequent informational interviews. Now she shares a brief outline of her book in advance, with a short paragraph on her motivation for wanting to write it.

One of her most recent meetings, with a published author, was extremely helpful. “He explained the concept of a platform and helped me brainstorm potential ones for my work,” she explains.

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