WHAT IS AN INFORMATIONAL INTERVIEW?

- An informational interview is an interview with someone who is knowledgeable in a career, job or industry that you would like to learn more about.
- These differ from job interviews in that you schedule and conduct the interview and questioning.
- Questions might include: What are the job duties? What training is required? How does one get into the field? What advice do you have for me?
- You talk with people to gather information, seek advice, expand awareness, and generate referrals.

WHY USE INFORMATIONAL INTERVIEWS?

- The primary purpose is to collect information about a career, job or organization that interests you and to validate your assumptions about particular careers and organizations.
- These interviews allow you to expand your career network.
- These can also assist in finding hidden job markets.
- Informational interviews provide you with the ability to test the employment market and marketing tools by gaining feedback on your qualifications and resume.
- Informational interviews can increase your chances of getting job interviews.

The informational interview will allow you to determine your career objectives and plans by utilizing the input, advice and insight of professionals in the field. They can help you match you expectations about a career with first hand information. The interview approach will help to broaden your exposure and knowledge of careers.
WHEN SHOULD YOU BEGIN CONDUCTING INFORMATIONAL INTERVIEWS?

Networking should begin the first semester of your sophomore year to provide you with a strong knowledge base of how you should plan your career and to help you be sure that your career choice is the right one. It is never too late to begin networking. It takes time to build contacts. Plus, networking will continue throughout your life.

WHO MIGHT BE IN YOUR NETWORK?

• Professors
• Alumni
• Neighbors and community members
• Social/religious/recreational group members
• Family Members
• Co-Workers
• Experts or authorities in your field of interest
• Members of relevant professional organization

STEPS FOR INFORMATIONAL INTERVIEWING (NETWORKING)

STEP 1: RESEARCH - WHERE TO FIND THE CONTACTS?

Use the Internet for Research. Search Departments of Labor by state for listing of companies and names of contact people; Search Chambers of Commerce by region for listings of businesses; Review individual employer web pages for contact information; Google State Education Department websites for listings of school personnel. Use the online Occupational Outlook Handbook and O*Net to locate information about specific position descriptions and fields of employment.

Check Bear Tracker. BearTracker is an online database of jobs, internships and mentors (people who have agreed to help SUNY Potsdam students make the transition to the world of work). It is located in BearPaws and is exclusively for SUNY Potsdam.

Use our Career Library. Find names of managers or directors within companies you are seeking. Our Career Library has a multitude of reference books that list employers by career field, geographic area and alphabetical order. Select some companies that would be top priorities for you if vacancies developed. Include some that are physically accessible to you during a college break; you should visit these in person.

Generate a list of people you know including friends, co-workers and family. Tell each of these individuals what you are interested in learning and ask for the names of people they know with whom you could talk to get the type of career information you are seeking.
Former Employers, Supervisors, and Co-workers. These are people who could serve as references and they can also make excellent referrals - ask if they know of people you could contact (and use your contact’s name when you introduce yourself).

Alumni contacts. Alumni are a valuable resource in terms of people to interview and people to put you in contact with other career professionals. Use BearTracker to identify alumni mentors. Career Planning can also direct you to organizations that have hired SUNY Potsdam graduates. You may also contact the Alumni Office for more information.

Newspapers. These will offer a variety of leads. Check the Help Wanted section, and remember you are not looking for a job opening, but rather for organizations and names of people in careers that interest you. You may also be interested in talking with the Human Resource Director of companies listing employment opportunities because they are a valuable resource in terms of offering information about positions, the required training and opportunities for advancement.

Yellow pages. Use the index to search for headings of obvious industries of interest to you.

Professional Associations and Societies. These can provide informational interview contacts. The Career Planning Library contains an Encyclopedia of Associations that lists thousands of professional organizations complete with names and addresses of contacts.

The “What Can I Do With A Major In…” guide on Career Planning’s web page serves as a vital tool to students that explains sources for additional information. Hard copies are available in the Career Planning Office.


STEP 2: MAKING CONTACT

Once you have chosen whom you would like to interview, send an e-mail approximately two weeks before you call. Write an e-mail to a career professional similar to the following examples (Write according to your personality and style):

EXAMPLE paragraph#1: I am a (student at) (alumnus of) SUNY Potsdam. I am working with the Career Planning staff on my long-range career plans and they have advised me to review this with a professional in the field. I am very interested in your career field and would like to talk with you about it.
EXAMPLE paragraph #2: I would like to have the opportunity to meet with you to discuss your observations and ideas about (name of your career) with organizations such as yours (you can refer to type, size, locality, or other factors of interest if you have specific ones). An hour of your time would be ideal, but I will be happy to have whatever you are able to give.

EXAMPLE paragraph #3: I will be in (name of employer's city or town) during our (Christmas or Spring break, etc.) from (day and date) through (day and date - "through" means the last full day you will be there). Before I leave the campus (After I arrive in town) I'll plan to telephone you to see if I can arrange an appointment.

EXAMPLE paragraph #3: I will plan to telephone you (next week, within the next two weeks) to see if I can arrange an appointment to visit you. Your observations and opinions will be very helpful in my planning process, and you may be sure that they will be appreciated.

STEP 3: FOLLOW THE LETTER WITH A TELEPHONE CALL

For an appointment. If you haven't called people to set up informational interviews before, you might be a little nervous the first few times. Try some of these ideas: put together a script of what you will say and rehearse it before you call. Practice calling with a friend or in front of a mirror.

Talking with a secretary. Treat her or him with courtesy and respect. Say that you wrote a letter and when you sent it. If your letter hasn't arrived, repeat what you said in it. If the person you want isn't available, don't leave word for them to call you back. Say that you wouldn't want to impose on them. Ask when would be a good time to call. If they can't give you one, ask when the person usually arrives at work in the morning; that's usually a good time.

When you get the person you want. Have your letter in front of you and remind them of what you said in it. If they ask, Are you looking for a job?, your answer would be, After my plans are complete I'll be looking, but I'm not there yet. Your experience and comments will really help in my planning. Be sure to make it clear that you are looking for opinions, observations and advice and not a job. Be upfront about how much time you would like.

Make an appointment. Have several days and times in mind, over at least two different weeks if possible. Specify how much time you would like with the professional.

Ask for directions even if you think you know how to find the place. This will help you avoid being late for your meeting.

Thank them and confirm the date and time. If there is enough time between the telephone call and the appointment, write a brief letter or send an e-mail confirming the appointment.
**STEP 4: PREPARING QUESTIONS**

Informational interviews usually follow a question and answer format. Prepare your questions before the actual interview. Write them down. Remember the person you are interviewing will be forming an impression of you based on the organization and the quality of your questions.

Keep your questions to five or six open ended questions with extra in case time allots. Tailor these to your needs and remember that different interviews will have different purposes.

**Sample questions:**

- What is a typical day like for you?
- What are the most interesting or challenging parts of your job? What is least interesting?
- Please tell me your career history. How did you break into the field?
- To be successful in your job/career, what qualities should an individual possess?
- What do employers look for when they hire someone for your type of position?
- Describe a successful employee’s educational and employment background, personality, outlook, etc.
- What are the advancement opportunities in this field? What do employers look for?
- Who are the top five companies in your industry?
- What professional associations do you suggest I join?
- What advice would you give someone starting out in this career?
- Can you provide me with the names of other career professionals in your field that I can talk with?
- Where can I go for more information?

**STEP 5: TIPS FOR THE INTERVIEW**

**Have realistic expectations.**

A well-organized informational interview can prove to be a valuable resource and provide a wealth of information.

**Remember:**

- Be patient. The people you interview with are busy professionals and may not have a great deal of time.
- Be organized, professional, and keep to your time schedule during the interview. If you don’t, you could create a negative impression and ruin the usefulness of your interview.
Don’t expect specific job openings or offers to appear during informational interviews.

*Never use informational interviews to try to set up job interviews.*

It is a good idea to bring your resume to an informational interview, but don’t present it unless you are asked for it. Remember you are not applying for a job. You can however present a business card, if you have one, and leave one with your contact. If asked for your resume, kindly ask the professional to critique it for you.

**Appropriate attire for the interview.** If possible check out the attire people usually wear to work some time before your informational interview. It is best if you dress as though it is the first day on the job. For example, for most office jobs, males should wear a shirt, tie, dress pants and shoes, or a suit. Females should wear a dress, skirt and blouse, dress slacks and blouse or a suit, where appropriate. Remember too, that dressing up will show respect of the professional you are interviewing.

**STEP 6: CONDUCTING THE INTERVIEW**

- **Prepare before the interview** by conducting a mock interview by practicing your sample questions. Note: you can schedule a video taped mock interview with the Career Planning Staff. You should also put together a brief introduction about yourself and include your career plans and why the interview is important to you (a statement of purpose). Arrive promptly. Shake hands and introduce yourself.

- **It’s your responsibility to lead the conversation:**

  *Example:* *I really appreciate your taking the time to meet with me. What I know about (name of job you’re seeking or a brief description of it) is the result of (written descriptions, what I’ve heard from other people, etc.). What I haven’t been able to discover is (ask about your career field with employers similar to this one in size, location, or other characteristics - try not to restrict yourself to this particular employer). I’d appreciate your comments on that.*

- **After your introductions**, you can start by asking questions. Take notes. Listen carefully and maintain eye contact during the interview so the career professional will know you are truly interested.

- **Break off the meeting 5 to 10 minutes early.** You said you’d take an hour and if you don’t end it, they will. You don’t want to take more time than what you had requested, it could leave a bad impression.

- **Get referrals for other career professionals to interview.**

  *Example 1:* *I’ve taken up a great deal of your time and I really appreciate it. That breaks the meeting. Then say….. I’ve learned a great deal today. I think that if I’m to do a thorough job of investigating, I should talk with some people who are in (smaller organizations, or some other employer characteristic that you want). Whom do you think I should talk with next?…….or………..*
Example 2: I want to thank you for all of your help. It appears that I've struck the right combination in my search, and I'm anxious to learn as much as I can. Talking with other people in organizations very similar to yours will really help. Whom do you think I should talk with next?

**STEP 7: SEND A THANK-YOU LETTER**

- **Write a thank-you letter within a week.** See the Career Planning LETTER GUIDE. Keep the letter to one page. If the person had requested your resume but you didn't have a copy with you, this is a good opportunity to send it. In your letter, thank the person for the information you received and the time spent with you. If the career field still interests you, then say so. Keep in touch with them after that; they can give you more information in the future.

**STEP 8: KEEP RECORDS**

Be sure to keep a record of all the people you interview and the correspondence you have sent. Record the person’s name, title, address, phone number and all dates when you have contacted them. Also be sure to make notes about your visit to provide a memory recall in the future.

Keep in touch with the people you interview with by dropping them a note occasionally and letting them know of your career planning progress. In the future, they may provide you with information about job leads.

**STEP 9: FUTURE FOLLOW-UP - Use information from the meeting**

After your visit with a career professional, if you are impressed with the company, when you begin your job search, you may want to apply for a job there. If you want to be considered for all positions in that company or school district, write to the Human Resource office or Superintendent. Note for teachers: If you want only a specific school within a district, write to the principal. **Remember. The focus of the informational interview is information gathering, not job seeking.**

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*PLAN FOR TOMORROW BY VISITING US TODAY!*