

Informational Interviews / Meetings: A Networking Tool

An informational interview is an interview that you initiate – you ask the questions. The purpose is to obtain information and get job-search advice from people working in the field (not to get a job). With this distinction in mind, we recommend asking people for **Informational Meetings** to eliminate any confusion!

Reasons to conduct an informational meeting

- Help clarify and define your career goals and build confidence for job interviews.
- Gather information and gain insight into an occupation, industry or specific employer and learn what types of skills are needed on the job.
- Convey your motivation and interest to an employer.
- Expand your professional network and gain visibility.
- Find out what your next best steps might be regarding job-search strategies; receive advice, and information regarding hiring trends.

A few guidelines

- Never ask for a job! The purpose of an informational interview is to seek information and advice about a job, industry or organization. If the person you meet with suggests a position, that's a bonus.
- Schedule a meeting prior to a job opening being posted: Most professionals feel uneasy talking with a potential candidate when the agency is actively recruiting to fill a position.
- Don't forget to get the names of other people to contact before you leave an office, hang up the phone, or sign-off on an email.

Finding people to meet with

- Begin by identifying occupations, fields, or companies you wish to learn more about by assessing your interests, abilities, values and skills. You can find potential employers by using the internet, local Chamber of Commerce, and the library.
- Ask relatives, professors, advisors, friends, fellow students, present or former co-workers, supervisors, and neighbors for the names and contact information of people who work in the occupations, fields, or companies you identify.
- Use the network you already have: fellow Badger Alums! Badgers love to help other Badgers and one of the best ways to contact them is to create an account on **Badger Bridge** (www.badgerbridge.com). The alumni on Badger Bridge have indicated how they would like to help, such as willing to open doors at their workplace, answer industry-specific questions, be a mentor, offer advice, or review your resume.
- You can also create a profile on **LinkedIn** and join the Wisconsin Alumni Association group. Join one of its subgroups such as Badgers in Education/Communications/Government, etc...and even join one of the city groups (such as Big Apple Badgers) for the city you hope to call home one day. Each will give you access to hundreds of alums.
- Use other resources on LinkedIn such as searching the Groups directory to find professional and networking groups in your area of interest to join. You can ask questions in these groups too. One benefit of group membership is that it allows you to contact all the other group members for free and exponentially expands the contacts you can reach out to for guidance and advice.
- Join professional associations, attend conferences and participate in career fairs to grow your network.

Before the meeting

- Prepare your questions ahead of time. See the sample questions on the next page for ideas.
- If you are meeting with someone in an organization you'd like to work for someday, find out as much information as you can about the organization's mission, vision, goals and competitors (if applicable). You can research the organization either through its company website, online career resources, your local library, or Chamber of Commerce.
- Be prepared to talk about yourself. Don't count on it, but some informational meetings have turned into actual employment interviews so it might be helpful to brainstorm some short answers to the following questions:
 - Why are you interested in this type of work?
 - Why do you feel you would be a good "fit"?
 - What interests you about this industry or organization or job?
 - What are some of your longer range career goals?
- Arrange the meeting. Contact the person to set up a meeting by email, phone, letter, or in person. Tell them your name, who referred you (if applicable), why you are contacting them, and that you would like to meet. Emphasize your interest in information rather than looking for a job. Remember to mention that you will only take 20 - 30 minutes of their time. The following is an example of what to say:
"Hello, my name is _____ and I was referred by _____. I am exploring career opportunities and trying to make some good decisions. I thought you might be able to answer a few questions which is why I would like to meet with you. Would you have 20 - 30 minutes sometime to talk with me so I can find out more about your career path, your organization and if you have any advice for someone looking to enter your field?"

The day of the meeting

- Show up early - plan to arrive at least 10 minutes early for your meeting.
- Try to relax and be yourself.
- Dress appropriately. Professional business attire is always safest, but business casual is often acceptable. Jeans, shorts, short skirts, open-toed shoes, sandals and flip-flops are often too casual.
- Remember first impressions count, and not just during the meeting – you never know who you may meet on your way *into* or *after* the meeting!
- Make sure to have the necessary materials. Bring copies of your resume (but distribute upon request only!) You can always send one with your follow-up email if appropriate.
- Come prepared to take notes.
- Write down names, phone numbers and other information or get business cards.
- Make sure you have a list of questions you want to ask, as well as topics to discuss.

During the meeting

- Be prepared to initiate and keep the conversation going. Stay on track, but allow for spontaneous discussion, and ask questions. Adhere to the original time constraint of 20-30 minutes.
- Be enthusiastic and friendly! Show interest. Be polite and professional. Remember to be a good listener, maintain eye contact, and be responsive. Share something about yourself, but do not dominate the conversation.
- Remember that this is an information gathering and advice seeking interview, not an employment interview! Let the person you are meeting with bring up specific job vacancies.

- Before leaving don't forget to...
 - Thank them and ask if you may stay in touch if you have any more questions.
 - Ask him/her to suggest names of others you might benefit from talking to.
 - Ask permission to use his/her name when contacting these new contacts.
 - Consider suggesting a follow-up appointment somewhere further down the line (to stay on their "radar screen").

After the meeting

- Be sure to send a thank-you note within a couple of days of the meeting. This is an effective way to keep in touch and to stay in people's memories. Let them know they were helpful and thank them for their time. Mention something they said that made an impression. E-mail is okay!
- Ask them to keep you in mind if they come across any other information that may be helpful to you. Include your phone and email under your signature.
- Keep a notebook to track your conversations, follow-up ideas or commitments.
- Keep in touch with your contacts by keeping them abreast of your job search.

Suggested questions for an informational meeting

About the person and their present job

- What is your educational background? How did you get started in this field?
- What was your career path like? How did you get your present job?
- Does the career path require an advanced degree and if so, is a Masters or PhD a better choice?
- What do you like most and least about your job?
- What do you wish you would have known prior to entering this field?
- What would you change about your job/career path if you could?
- Where do you see yourself going from here?

Work activities

- What do you do during a typical work day / week?
- What are some of the problems / decisions you are likely to face in a day?
- What do you spend most of your time doing?
- How much paperwork? Interaction with others? Do you have frequent contact with people / customers / coworkers / supervisors / general public? What is the nature of those contacts?

Lifestyle

- How does your job affect your general lifestyle? What is your schedule generally like?
- How many hours do you generally work in any given week?
- What obligation does your work place upon you, outside of the ordinary work week?
- How much flexibility do you have in terms of dress, work hours, vacation, etc.?

Work setting / culture / climate

- Do you determine what tasks you will work on and how to structure your time or is that determined for you?
- How would you characterize your working relations or work environment (formal, informal, etc.)?
- Do you work primarily alone or in collaboration with others? With whom?
- How are decisions made? What is the company's management philosophy?

About the career field / industry

What are the employment trends and how rapidly is your present career field growing?

What specific jobs are in demand and which are being cut back?

Is relocation to another state or company necessary? What is the turnover rate like?

What is the salary range for the various levels in this field?

What type of professional development or training opportunities are there?

Preparation / qualifications

What credentials, educational degrees, licenses, etc. are required for entry into this field? What kind of prior experiences would be good background for the position?

How do college majors fit in?

What specific skills are required? What are some additional skills that will be helpful?

What qualities / qualifications do you look for in an ideal candidate?

What is the profile of someone who is successful in this field?

How are hiring decisions made?

How did the last few people you hired obtain the position? What were their backgrounds?

How do people find out about these jobs? Are they advertised? If so, where? How else does one hear about openings?

Advice to you

Is this a realistic goal? Am I in the ballpark?

How does someone with my background and skills fit the needs of an organization in this industry?

Do I have to develop some skills or gain some experiences to make myself more competitive?

What professional associations or organizations do you think might be useful to contact for information or to belong to?

Next steps

What's next and where do I go from here?

How do people break into the field? What is my next best step?

What advice do you have for me as I try to break into this field?

What entry level jobs are best for learning as much as possible?

Are there people you think I would benefit from talking to?

Can I use your name when I contact them?

If I have any questions could I stay in contact with you?