

# ULTIMATE GUIDE TO INFORMATIONAL INTERVIEWS

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# Table of Contents

<b>Table of Contents</b> .....	<b>1</b>
<b>About Informational Interviews</b> .....	<b>2</b>
What is an Informational Interview? .....	2
How Does an Informational Interview Work? .....	2
Benefits .....	2
Responsibilities, as the Initiator .....	2
<b>Let's Begin</b> .....	<b>3</b>
Introducing yourself through email.....	3
Follow-Up and Give Thanks .....	4
<b>Professional Presentation</b> .....	<b>4</b>
Dress .....	4
Presentation.....	5
Thank You Notes .....	5
<b>Informational Interview Checklist</b> .....	<b>6</b>
Before the Interview .....	6
Interview .....	6
Post-Interview .....	6
<b>Appendix</b> .....	<b>8</b>
<i>Sample Email: Initial Contact, General Purpose</i> .....	8
<i>Sample Email: Initial Email, Company Interest</i> .....	8
<i>Sample Email: Adult/Graduate Student or Alumnus</i> .....	9
<i>Sample Email: Request for Mock Interview</i> .....	9
<i>Sample Questions: Informational Interview</i> .....	10
<i>Sample Note: Thank You Note</i> .....	11
<b>Bibliography</b> .....	<b>12</b>

## About Informational Interviews

### What is an Informational Interview?

An informational interview is an opportunity to gather career and industry information from a professional by asking a series of questions related to the aspects of the specific career or job and the professional's experience. An informational interview is a learning experience and **NOT** a solicitation for a job or internship. An informational interview is a conversation with an objective to learn. The activity typically spans 30 minutes to one hour.

### How Does an Informational Interview Work?

As the person interested in seeking information, you are responsible for initiating the conversation, conducting yourself with professionalism, and following-up. The initiation, and corresponding conversation, may take place in-person, over email, or over the telephone. Additionally, you can conduct an informational interview with anyone – executives, alumni, supervisors, colleagues, friends, family, or family friends!

### Benefits

If you're not sure informational interviews are for you, review the insights and guidance commonly received by those who reach out to conduct them.

- Provides direction in choosing a career field or preparing for a career change with firsthand, up-to-date, insider information,
- Offers insight to guide future job searches,
- Prepares you for an upcoming interview,
- Revises your resume to better fit the specific industry or career field,
- Allows you to assess your compatibility with a particular career,
- Expands your professional network,
- Improves your interviewing skills.

### Responsibilities, as the Initiator

By reaching out to a professional contact with the intent to conduct an informational interview, you are responsible for directing the interaction. This responsibility entails the following.

- Demonstrate desire to explore career options, personal skills and attributes,
- Generate your own list of questions addressing specific career-related aspects such as work environment, career preparation, salary, lifestyle, a typical day, problems, referrals, and advancement as well as questions about the contact's personal experiences,
- Provide the host with your polished and professional resume (upon request),
- Maintain professional presence and conduct during the entire interview,
- Coordinate the scheduling of the interview and related details.

## Let's Begin

Conversations with mentors can take place over email, on the phone, or in-person. Usually, conversations and informational interviews are initiated through an introductory email.

### Introducing yourself through email

Email correspondence has become a popular and widely accepted form of business communication. According to Anita Campbell, editor of the Small Business Trends newsletter, “62% (of small business owners) believe email is just as effective or more effective than in-person or phone communication.” With that in mind, it was only a matter of time before email became a critical component of networking as well. Although we rely on email because we find it safe and easy, communicating through email can be tricky. Email is a one-sided conversation and your first email to someone is also your first impression on that person. This begs the question, “What should I say?”

Attempting a “cold call” through email can be challenging, but there are a few techniques that can simplify the process.

- **DON'T SKIP THE SUBJECT LINE.** To ensure an email is not questioned or deleted as spam, make use of the subject line. Use this to address your specific need or intention, such as “Pepperdine Student Requests Informational Interview”. An empty or awkward subject line from an unknown email address will be deleted.
- **INTRODUCE YOURSELF.** Take a sentence or two to explain who you are and how you came about getting your contact's email address. This is especially important for referrals or online directories.
- **STATE YOUR REQUEST.** Ambiguous emails leave little room for response. Explain why you are reaching out for help and describe what you hope to gain from the connection. Include one or two specific questions that can be answered in a response.
- **KEEP IT SIMPLE.** Write a concise email without attachments. Consider your first email to be an invitation to connect. Once accepted, you can reply with the specifics and offer to send attachments as needed. Do not attach your resume to this introductory email, but have it available if it's requested.
- **CLOSE THE SALE.** Include your contact information and ask for an opportunity to connect again for a more in-depth conversation.
- **SPELLING AND GRAMMAR STILL COUNT.** You wouldn't walk into an interview wearing sweatpants or introduce yourself to a recruiter with a high-five, so why make similar mistakes in email? Many of us have become accustomed to the shorthand used in texting and instant messages. However, emails, particularly in the business setting, still demand a higher level of professionalism. “Plz send info 2moro” is simply not appropriate. Ever. Spell words as they are spelled and use appropriate grammar, punctuation, and tone.

- **OTHER TIPS TO CONSIDER:** To maximize the effectiveness of your introduction, heed the following final tips:
  - Use an appropriate email address. If you wouldn't use it for a job application, don't use it here.
  - Think office memo. Save the smiley faces and jargon for Facebook.
  - Err on the side of formality. Use capitalization and abbreviations only as necessary.
  - Spell check. Spell check. Spell check.
  - Mind your manners. Remember that someone is setting aside time for you; don't forget to say please and thank you.

### **Follow-Up and Give Thanks**

Email has provided new opportunities for introductions and networking. Making new connections has become less intrusive than a phone call and more convenient than a letter. But while it is a swift and efficient means of communication for us, we often overlook the basics. Whenever someone offers guidance or support, we must always remember to thank them. Sending a follow-up note of appreciation goes a long way; forgetting can seem ungrateful and disrespectful. Effective networking depends on the ability to create connections with people. Networking through email requires follow-through.

See the sample introductory emails in the appendix.

## **Professional Presentation**

When appearing for an interview or meeting, you always want to put your best foot forward. Presenting yourself in a professional manner will help you to show that you mean business. Whether you plan to meet with the professional in person, via phone, or email it is recommended that professionalism be practiced in every aspect. Regardless of the formality of the specific workplace, it is best that you make a good impression by your professional presentation. If you are not certain about the specific workplace expectations, ask your contact when you schedule a meeting.

### **Dress**

When you meet in-person to conduct a professional informational interview, present yourself in a way that puts your contact at ease. This means, dress appropriately. If you are meeting at a coffee shop, you may dress casually in comparison to meeting in a corporate conference room. To measure the degree of casual for your wardrobe, however, take a hint from your context and use sound judgment. For example, appropriate dress for a coffee shop in Venice, CA on a Sunday afternoon is very different than appropriate dress for a coffee shop in downtown Los Angeles on Monday morning.

Tips for dressing in a professional environment:

- In general, dress more conservatively than not.
  - Men should wear dark pants with a tie (with or without jacket).
  - Women should wear dark skirt or slacks with a blouse, and closed-toe shoes.

- Keep your outfit simple. For a distinctive accent, accessorize with a tie or a beautiful scarf.
- No matter how carefully you select your wardrobe, the effect is spoiled if what you wear is anything less than fresh, clean and in impeccable repair. Starch and iron all clothing. Consider having cotton shirts laundered.
- Your personal grooming is also key. Come to your meeting freshly showered, with your hair well attended to.
- Dress a notch above what you think someone in the profession might wear.

### Presentation

Your personal presentation is like the cover of a book. It may not be the most accurate representation of its contents, but it's the source of a first impression. Do not neglect the importance of making the best first impression. Here are a few tips:

- Carry a professional portfolio that contains a notepad, pen and copies of your polished and professional resume. Use a professional looking pen and pad of paper (i.e., avoid using a purple pen or stationery with glitter on it).
- Use a professional, conservative looking handbag or shoulder bag to carry your personal items. The bag should match your outfit. Preferable colors would be black, dark blue or brown.
- Use professional body language and mannerisms when interacting with the contact. Introduce yourself by shaking hands. Sit upright and attentively when meeting with the contact to demonstrate that you are listening. Remember this is a career development activity: pay attention to how you conduct yourself in the workplace and observe those around you. Reflecting on this afterwards will give you more perspective on if the career is a fit for you.
- While you are meeting with the contact, take the time to observe the dress and professional expectations of the workplace. This is an important aspect when considering whether you would be comfortable in a specific career environment. Be aware of how employees communicate with one another, how they conduct themselves in the office and if possible, observe any work documents to observe their professionalism and presentation.
- In a phone call meeting make sure you remain attentive, do not have music or other loud distractions in the background. To be safe, make your call indoors in a controlled environment.
- In communicating through email please use professional language, refrain from using shortcuts in writing (i.e. btw, thanx).

### Thank You Notes

Thank you notes are tools to express gratitude. If you ever think that you do not need to send a thank you note because you thanked them enough in-person, over email, or by buying coffee, think again. The thank you note is a tangible expression of your gratitude and leaves a long lasting impression on your contact. This should never be neglected. Here are a few tips:

- Write a thank you note to your contact within 24 hours of your meeting or interaction.
- Use professional stationery or note cards (avoid kittens, balloons, etc.). The Pepperdine Bookstore is a good source for professional stationery and note cards.
- Write with black or blue ink.
- Write out a draft of what you want to say on scratch paper first.
- The thank you note should be handwritten, neat and legible.
- Be specific in your thank you note about what you got out of the experience or how the experience helped you. Try to point out specific examples instead of using vague, cliché remarks.
- Thank the contact for taking the time to meet with you.
- Send the thank you note to your host

## Informational Interview Checklist

### Before the Interview

Strategies	To-Do List
Prepare Logistics for the Interview	<input type="checkbox"/> If meeting in-person, develop a list of recommended locations. <input type="checkbox"/> Get information about directions, parking, and money for parking.
Research your contact's field	<input type="checkbox"/> Review current information about the industry and organization of the contact. <i>Sources include:</i> Company web site National newspapers Regional business journals (ie, LA Business Journal) Moody's/Mergent's Online (available via University library)
Research your career interests	<input type="checkbox"/> Develop your resume and identify your own interests, skills, and values that you seek in a career field
Prepare topics of conversation	<input type="checkbox"/> Compose a list of questions to ask the contact, based on your interests, your research, and the "Sample Questions" listed in the appendix.
Research the contact	<input type="checkbox"/> Learn about the contact's background in advance where possible. What, if anything, do you have in common? What interests you most? <i>Sources include:</i> LinkedIn Web searches
Identify your goals	<input type="checkbox"/> Ask yourself, "What do I want to get out of this

	conversation?"
Dress to impress	<input type="checkbox"/> Get a pen and pad of paper for taking notes, copies of your resume, and your questions list <input type="checkbox"/> If meeting the contact at his/her place of work, ask about appropriate clothing
Carry cash	<input type="checkbox"/> Always bring cash in case of parking, or if you offer to buy coffee or lunch. Never assume plastic will be accepted.

### Interview

Strategies	To-Do List
Getting there on-time	<input type="checkbox"/> Give yourself an extra 15-minutes to park, and another 15-minutes if you're going to an unfamiliar area
Make introductions	<input type="checkbox"/> Introduce yourself, your goals for the interview, and your proposed structure for the interview <input type="checkbox"/> Offer your resume so he/she can become familiar with your experience <input type="checkbox"/> Ask the contact to share about him/herself
Begin the Interview	<input type="checkbox"/> Begin asking questions. A good place to start is with "Tell me about your career journey".
During the interview	<input type="checkbox"/> Take notes (this is important. Taking notes demonstrates that you're listening) <input type="checkbox"/> Remember to participate in conversation <input type="checkbox"/> Relax and enjoy.
Wrap up the interview	<input type="checkbox"/> Ask the contact for other contacts who might be able to provide insight <input type="checkbox"/> Ask for any other general career advice not addressed in your questions <input type="checkbox"/> Ask the contacts to evaluate and discuss your interviewing presence and resume <input type="checkbox"/> Express gratitude for the contact's time and insight <input type="checkbox"/> Get a copy of the contact's business card

### Post-Interview

Strategies	To-Do List
Express gratitude	<input type="checkbox"/> Write and send a hand-written thank you note to the address on the contact's business card
Nurture your new relationship through maintaining contact	<input type="checkbox"/> Keep in touch through LinkedIn or quick emails, informing the contact on your progress <input type="checkbox"/> Keep him/her informed if you initiate conversation with a referred contact



## Appendix

### *Sample Email: Initial Contact, General Purpose*

Good morning Jason,

I got your email address after reading your profile on the Pepperdine Alumni Network website earlier today.

I am a junior, about half way done with my degree in Biology. I'm interested in learning more about your lab work and am looking for advice on the best ways to prepare for my own job search.

Would you be willing to take a look at my resume and tell me how you got started with your career planning in order to guide my own planning? I look very forward to hearing from you.

Thank you,

Willy T. Wave

### *Sample Email: Initial Email, Company Interest*

Dear Carlos,

I received your name from the Seaver College Career Center. I am nearly complete with my degree in International Business and have concentrated on corporate strategy and marketing. I understand that you play such a role at [Company].

I would like to learn about your experience, and perhaps any pointers you might have on how to best position my resume to appeal to a hiring manager.

If you can accommodate my request, I can share my resume as a further introduction. I am occasionally in the west suburbs and would welcome the chance to meet for coffee.

Kind Regards,

Willy T. Wave

*Sample Email: Adult/Graduate Student or Alumnus*

Dear Mr. Swanson,

I am currently halfway done with my degree program and am preparing my job search. My background is in medical devices sales and I would like to extend that into consulting for the healthcare industry. I see that you have gone through a similar career change and I am interested in hearing about your experience in an effort to advise my own.

Would you be willing to share your experience with me?

I look very forward to hearing from you,

Willy T. Wave

*Sample Email: Request for Mock Interview*

Dear Mike:

I found you through the Pepperdine University Alumni LinkedIn Group and was hoping we could connect. Based on your profile, you have a career path that is similar to a path I hope for myself.

I am a student at Seaver College. My focus area is Advertising. I would like to discuss the possibility of conducting an informational interview and mock interview for my class assignment.

Is this something you might consider? I look forward to hearing from you soon.

Sincerely,

Willy T. Wave

### *Sample Questions: Informational Interview*

1. What are the entry-level opportunities in this field/organization?
2. Tell me about your career path and those common in this field.
3. What skills and education are needed to enter this field?
4. What kinds of entry-level jobs or internships do you think are good training ground?
5. How do you spend a typical day/week?
6. What are the major responsibilities of your position?
7. What hours do you normally work? Is there much travel involved?
8. What do you find most/least satisfying about your job?
9. What are the positive/negative aspects of working in this field?
10. What trends and developments do you see affecting career opportunities?
11. What are the most significant changes you've seen in the industry over the past 5 years?
12. What recommendations can you give to someone looking to enter this field?
13. What is the corporate culture of your company? Is it informal or formal? Do people work autonomously or in teams?
14. What traits, characteristics and skills do successful people in this field possess?
15. What are the salary expectations for this field currently and in the future?
16. Are you active in any professional organizations? Are students invited to attend? Are student memberships available?
17. Can you recommend anyone else for me to speak with?

*Adapted from the DePaul  
ASK Program Career Guide*

Sample Note: Thank You Note

*Dear Ms. Johnson,*

*Thank you for taking the time to meet with me, answer my questions and for providing insight about your career field. Our informational interview was beneficial to me because I now have more in-depth information about the opportunities available to me and I know the steps I need to take in order to move forward. I also feel more confident about my career goals thanks to your direction. I appreciate all your help and look forward to speaking with you in the future.*

*Sincerely,*

*Shannon L. Blackwood*

## **Bibliography**

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