What Is Informational Interviewing?

The purpose of an informational interview is to learn about career fields or employers from professionals in different stages of their careers. Asking good questions about the day to day of a job, about the variety of careers, and for specific advice about how to become a professional, will help you to make a confident decision about your own career path.

Who to Talk With

Depending upon where you are in the process, you may want to speak with:

- People who majored in an academic field that you are considering
- People who can tell you more about a profession in which you’re interested
- People who can tell you more about an industry or organization that interests you

Anyone who is doing or has done something that you’re interested in learning more about is a potential source for an informational interview.

Begin by thinking about people that you already know: family, instructors, friends, co-workers, classmates. Though they may not be in or have a background in the area that you’re considering, they may know people who do.

The St. Thomas Career Development Center has developed the University of St. Thomas: Alumni Sharing Knowledge (ASK) group on LinkedIn consisting of St. Thomas alumni and students (from both graduate and undergraduate programs), as well as other professionals, who have agreed to make themselves available for answering questions online and face to face.

Join St. Thomas Connect through the St. Thomas Alumni Association to gain exclusive access to alumni who are ready and eager to help you with career questions.

How to Set Up Interviews

Contact people by email, phone, or online via LinkedIn, St. Thomas Connect, etc. Be prepared when you phone a person for an informational interview in case they are able to chat at that moment. If you feel a bit anxious, writing a loose “script” and questions to ask is a good idea.

Things you’ll want to be sure and cover include your name, how you were referred to the person, your reason for connecting, and a request for an in-person meeting.
If for some reason the person cannot see you, request a later date or ask if there’s another person that he/she might suggest you contact.

Be sure and confirm the date, time and location before ending the conversation. Also, if the meeting is scheduled more than a week away from your initial conversation, get in touch a day or two before the meeting to remind and re-confirm.

**Conducting the Interview**

This is not a job interview, but you’ll want to make a positive first impression, and some of the basics of job interviewing apply for informational interviews as well. Dress appropriately for the place you’re visiting. “Business casual,” may be sufficient for most informational interviews. A quick check of a company’s website may assist you in determining appropriate attire.

Research the person, occupation or organization in advance. Though the function of the informational interview is to find out more, having some knowledge ahead of time will assist you in asking more meaningful questions.

Let the person know a bit about you and your background and be ready to lead the conversation, but also be open to letting it flow naturally.

**Sample Informational Interview Questions**

What is a typical workday like for you?
What are your responsibilities?
What experiences, skills and education are necessary for a person who wants to do this job?
Do you feel your academic background was a good preparation for the work you’re doing?
What do you like most about your position? Least?
I notice you have a Master’s degree. Is that essential for career success in this field/company?
What are the pressures, problems and challenges for a person entering this career?
The skills I’m most interested in developing are _______ and _______. Is this a good field/company to be in for someone with interests in those areas?
What are typical entry level salaries?
Are there other types of organizations that hire people in this field?
What professional associations do people in this field belong to?
Are there certain professional publications or websites you’d recommend?
Are there other occupations/organizations that you might suggest I look into?
Can you think of anything else I really should know about this field/company?
Could you suggest one or two other people I might want to contact for additional information?
Follow-Up After the Informational Interview

Immediately make notes for yourself on the content of the interview for future reference.

Send a note or e-mail stating your appreciation for the time and information shared. Mention specific points or suggestions that were particularly helpful, and state your next-step plans for follow through.

Every informational interview contact has the potential to become a future networking contact. By expressing your appreciation and establishing your professionalism, you’re laying the groundwork for the possibility of ongoing advice and assistance in your career development.

What is Networking?

Though networking feels riskier to many people than “traditional” methods of seeking work (uploading your resume) it is an effective job search strategy and an activity that you are already doing in other areas of your life. Anytime you ask for a recommendation from friends or family (where to travel for Spring Break, what class to take), you are networking.

Networking can be used to explore careers (with an informational interview) and as a job-search tool. Networking for a job or internships begins when you:

- Have a fairly precise sense of where you’re headed
- Can articulate why you’re headed there
- Have enough confidence in your direction that you’re willing to ask for assistance in finding the work you want to do.

Why Networking?

The advantages of networking include:

- Less competition. When there is a job waiting, why not be in a candidate pool of one, rather than dozens or more?
- You may find new or unadvertised positions, or, at least, get the early word on advertised positions before they go out to the general public.
- When looking for good candidates, many employers rely on direct contact as a more reliable and less expensive method than advertising or recruiting.
- When you bring yourself to the employer’s attention you may help them think about needs they were developing an awareness they had, but had not gotten active about filling yet. In other words, you essentially create opportunities, instead of waiting for them to happen.
**Key Steps In Networking**

**Identify your network**

Create a list of people you already know: friends, family, friends of the family, instructors, co-workers or any other acquaintances who may be able to assist you. Contact these people and:

- Let them know you’re looking for a job/internship and specific type of job/internship
- Ask if they know of any employer that is hiring or might be hiring soon
- If you are interested in specific employers, ask if they have connections with these organizations
- Ask if they can think of any specific person that you should talk with, given your goals

**Connect In Person**

It’s important to step outside of your comfort zone in order to connect with people.

- Go to employer information sessions on campus and introduce yourself to the employer or ask a question, go on tours of a company (Career Treks)
- Attend Job Fairs and speak with recruiters (Government and Non-Profit Job Fair, MN Private Colleges Job and Internship Fair, MN Education Job Fair)
- Join a student club or professional association in your area of interest and attend events or volunteer
- Volunteer and meet others with similar interests

**Connect Online**

- Join St. Thomas Connect through the University of St. Thomas Alumni Association to connect with alumni in career fields or employers of interest
- Join the Career Development Center’s ASK (Alumni Sharing Knowledge) Group on LinkedIn
- Use the Alumni Tool on LinkedIn to research career paths and connect with alumni

LinkedIn can be a valuable tool for networking. It is a place where professionals from all backgrounds can maintain a profile, and where individuals can connect with one another directly or through introductions made via colleagues and/or associates shared in common. It’s a site that allows you to connect to people you know. It also allows you to see profiles of others on LinkedIn, and gives you ways to connect to them. To get started, simply establish an account and profile at: [http://www.linkedin.com](http://www.linkedin.com)

**Follow-up and keep your network active**

Get in touch with your network contacts periodically to let them know about your job or internship search progress. They’ll appreciate the updates. Also, by developing the relationship in this way, your connections are more likely to remember that you’re looking as they become aware of future leads and openings.