



Networking & Informational Interviewing

123 Murray-Herrick Campus Center – Saint Paul, Minnesota • (651) 962-6761 • career@stthomas.edu • www.stthomas.edu/careerdevelopment

First, let's differentiate informational interviews from networking interviews. Though the terms are sometimes used interchangeably, they are different from each other, and it helps to understand those differences before beginning. However keep in mind that reaching out to professionals in any particular industry is a form of Networking, as you will be making an impression and possible future networking contact. Remember to be professional and prepared.

Informational

Informational interviews are for gathering information and reaching tentative decisions about how who you are may fit into what's out there...

Think of informational interviewing as an essential part of a Reality Check, which builds on work done during your Self-Assessment of your values, interests, and experiences.

Networking

Networking interviews occur after you have a fairly clear focus and target- i.e., you have identified and can articulate the direction in which you are headed.

Networking is probably the most effective tool you can use during the Implementation phase of career development.

A valuable feature of informational interviewing is that it's OK to openly acknowledge the gaps in your knowledge about the field you're investigating. This openness is generally not advisable for people actively involved in their job search campaign. Though you'll want to present yourself as courteous, professional and mature, to put "I'm-looking-for-a-job" pressure on yourself before you've decided what you want to do won't be helpful for your information gathering and will confuse your informational interview contact.

(Once you've acquired sufficient information about who you are and have decided what type of work you'll be seeking, informational interview contacts may be people that you'll want to return to as networking contacts. More on that later.)

Informational Interviewing

What Is It?

- An effective method for gathering first-hand information that will assist in your choice of academic major, occupational field or employer.
- A way of generating new, previously unconsidered, options.
- A short (20-30 minute) meeting, ideally at the work location of your informational interview contact.
- An opportunity to experience the type of environment where people work in the field(s) you're considering.

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 field in which you're interested.
- People who can tell you more about an organization that you are interested in working for.

These do not have to be "high level" people. Simply put, anyone who is doing or has done something that you're interested in learning more about is a potential source for an informational interview.

How to Set Up Interviews

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.

A personal referral (e.g., "My faculty advisor suggested that you would be a good source of information about the range of possibilities in the social service area.") is ideal. Sometimes, however, we may have to go outside of our immediate circle. When this happens, you might try calling an organization and asking to speak with a person in the area you're interested in. This type of "cold-call" can be a bit intimidating, and sometimes several calls and dead-ends may precede reaching the person you're seeking. However, with a bit of tenacity you may be surprised at how helpful people like being, and how much many people enjoy talking about what they do for a living.

The St. Thomas Career Development Center has developed the 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 informational interviews.

Be prepared when you phone a person for an informational interview. If you feel a bit anxious, writing a loose "script" might be a good idea. Things you'll want to be sure and cover include:

- Your name
- Why you're calling (e.g., "I got your name from the Career Information Network at St. Thomas, and I see that you've had several jobs in marketing. Since that's what I'm thinking of majoring in, I'm hoping you might be able to tell me more about the field.")
- Request an in-person meeting (e.g., "I was hopeful that you might have a half an hour or so available sometime next week when I could visit with you at your office.")

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 and time before ending the conversation. Also, if the meeting is scheduled more than a week away from your initial conversation, it's advisable to call a day or two before the meeting to remind and re-confirm.

Conducting the Interview

This is not a job interview. Nevertheless, you'll want to make a positive first impression, and some of the basics of job interviewing apply for informational interviews as well.

Remember: The purpose of the informational interview is to explore the link between “Who am I?” and “What’s out there? With that in mind, the overriding questions- the essence of what you’re trying to get at through your informational interviews- are:

- What’s this really like?
- Would I like this?
- Is this a good fit for me?

There is no 100% “right answer.” But, by being curious, by asking good questions, by really hearing the answers and considering how they fit (or don’t fit) for you, you’ll be in the best place possible for making good decisions about what your next step will be and what options you’ll want to explore further.

Though the function of the informational interview is to find out more, having some knowledge in advance will assist you in asking more meaningful questions. Read and gather, via printed materials or the Internet, some preliminary information if you’re researching an occupation or organization.

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. If in doubt, the general rule is that it’s better to be dressed too formally than too casually.

Send a follow-up or thank you note or e-mail to everyone who meets with you for an informational interview.

Sample Informational Interview Questions

Simple, open-ended conversation starters such as “Please tell me about what you do,” or “How was it that you came to be in this job?” will often get the ball rolling in such a way that many of the questions below will be answered as a matter of course. Have some questions prepared, however, to assure you get everything you want covered.

What is a typical workday like for you?

What is your position title?

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?

Your undergraduate major was _____. Is that typical for people in this position?

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?

Are there some types of people more likely to find success than others?

What are typical entry level salaries?

How did you enter this field?

Is your career path typical?

How competitive is this field?

How does (current employer) compare to other places where you’ve worked?

Are there other types of organizations that hire people in this field?

What are the emerging trends or challenges you’re facing?

What professional associations do people in this field belong to?

Are there certain professional publications or web-sights you’d recommend?

Are there other occupations/organizations that you might suggest I look into?

The previous questions were suggested. The following are an essential part of informational interviewing.

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 information?

Would you mind if I called you again if I think of any other questions?

Follow-Up After the Informational Interview

- You have just had a meeting that can be invaluable, both for what you've learned and for a new relationship begun.
- Immediately make notes for yourself on the content of the interview for future reference.
- As soon as possible, 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.

Networking Basics

Numerous entire books have been written on the topic of effective networking. For our purposes, we'll discuss some of the most basic rules about how networking can work as you begin to move into your job search.

Networking as a job-search tool 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?

Though networking feels riskier to many people (i.e., fear of immediate and definitive "no") than "traditional" methods of seeking work (e. g. newspaper ads, web postings, job boards), it is, in fact, the most effective job search strategy.

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.

This is similar to the work you did when you were compiling the group of people who might make good informational interview contacts. In, addition if you've done some informational interviewing, you now have additional people in the list of people you have a relationship with and who will probably help you if they can.

Make contact.

Let the people in your network know:

- That you're looking for work.
- What specific type of work you're looking for.
- Ask if they know of any place that is hiring or might be hiring.
- Ask if they can think of any specific person that you should talk with, given your target.

Follow up on leads.

Call people as suggested, letting your people know who suggested that you call them. Sometimes it turns out that they are not, in fact, the people you want to ask for interviews with, but- due to the benefits of networking, these people will also often be willing to assist you. ("Oh, Susan suggested you call? Well. Actually, I think you really want to talk with Tina in marketing. Let me put you through to her...")

Follow-up and keep your network active.

Call or email key network contacts with your progress. Let them know how your search is going. They'll appreciate the updates. Also, by developing the relationship in this way your allies are more likely to remember that you're looking as they become aware of future leads and openings.

Networking Online

What is Online Networking?

Online Networking combines the traditional networking you do as part of your career search, with the power of the Internet. It allows you to create a community of virtual contacts who can provide critical information on job leads, industry trends and possible openings. These are people whom you would never have met in any other way.

How Do I Network Using the Internet, and Why?

The Internet can be a great way to begin those casual relationships that turn into wonderful networking opportunities. Since we aren't face-to-face with the other person, the stress of making these new connections is greatly alleviated, but don't think that it's an easy market out there. It is very important that we begin these relationships in the right way. Since we can't use our voices or body language to express ourselves, we are limited to making sure the words we use and the ways in which they are presented properly represent our intentions.

Advantages of Online Networking

- There are thousands of discussion groups and community forums covering hundreds of subjects.
- You can "break the ice" before meeting someone in person.
- You can listen, engage, or be engaged as you wish. No one can see you sweat, and you don't have to feel like a wallflower since no one can see you standing off by yourself.
- Many recruiters are lurking the lists to find potential candidates.

Disadvantages

- Networking online is just as difficult as networking in person! In fact, it may be harder because you can't really establish a true personal relationship online.
- First impressions count even more. Be very careful with your first public posting.
- Your online behavior matters more than you think.

Online Networking Etiquette

Initiate widely; continue selectively. It is important to cast a wide net when you are networking on the web, simply because you do not have a personal introduction to pave the way for you. Sometimes it is difficult to tell, by the information that is first available to you, if someone will be useful as a networking partner. So do make your initial efforts large, and then scale back.

Identify yourself and use common sense. You are in this for a purely business reason - to augment your job search efforts. Therefore do not use an alias or any other pretense that would make someone uncomfortable networking with you. People who are also networking for business will recognize that and respond accordingly.

Follow standard business courtesy. Email sometimes lulls us into being more casual with strangers than we would normally be. Please remember this is business, and it is your job search. Therefore, it is important to strike a tone somewhere in between a formal business letter and a casual note to a good friend. Make your communications friendly but respectful. Do not use any acronyms or commonly used symbols (e.g. lol, J, L, etc.) in any of your business correspondence.

Bookmark, or select favorites, early and often. When you are searching for that next great site, it is all too easy to get lost. It is essential, therefore, that you bookmark favorite sites immediately and make a habit out of frequently editing your selections. That way you are never hunting for that wonderful link you discovered at two a.m. the night before.

Public participation in discussions is necessary to get networking contacts. You will also need to provide your own credentials at some point to make connections with others. This may include your name, current employer, a vague (yet correct) job title, and email address.

Making Contact

How do you know who to connect with online?

Look for postings by someone who seems to be knowledgeable about the topic being discussed. Note their email address at the top, and look for signature information citing their organizational affiliation, position in the organization, and more complete contact information.

Once you have identified some mailing list participants you want to contact, prepare your email letter very carefully. Be professional and especially polite, and double-check for grammar and spelling errors before sending your message.

Be sure to contact the person directly and not through the list. Do not post a general message to the list or newsgroup asking if anyone is willing to talk to you.

Be concise. Identify yourself, state why you are contacting this person, and list some of your interests and where you noticed some correlation with his or her interests as noted in the postings you've read.

Do NOT send this person a copy of your resume. You are networking, trying to establish a relationship that extends far beyond just "please help me find a job." A resume will blow everything to bits at this point. Just relax and let the relationship build to a point where a resume will be requested or you feel comfortable asking for advice on preparation.

Request a follow-up to this email, via phone or email. Give your contact the choice of how to continue.

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 anyone else on LinkedIn, and gives you ways to connect to them. To get started, simply establish an account and profile at: <http://www.linkedin.com>