Information Interview

What is an “information interview”? In the 1970s, Richard Bolles introduced the idea of conducting information interviews in his book What Color Is Your Parachute? Since then, many career planners have successfully used it to gather information and locate job leads. The basic idea of the information interview is that if you want to know what it is like to be a graphic artist, you should ask a graphic artist. As well, current employees or students at a certain organization or institution can tell you what it is like to work or study there.

An information interview does not have to be a “formal” interview. For example, if your friend’s Mom works in a job similar to one that interests you, ask her if she would be able to go for coffee sometime. Take advantage of the network of your friends and relatives. Ask for referrals from your acquaintances to expand your network further.

Why is information interviewing important in the career planning process? You need solid information to build a firm foundation for any career decision. Sometimes, you will not be able to find the information you need in print materials. Interviewing people may be the only way to get it. Information interviews are a great way to start building your professional network that will come in handy in your work search process later on. Here are a few tips to get you started:

1. **Do your homework.** Before you contact anyone, read all of the relevant print materials available to you. Then develop a list of questions. Decide which questions are the most important and plan to ask them first.

2. **Start by interviewing someone you know or are comfortable with.** This helps you to practice and build up your confidence for following interviews. End the interview by asking the interviewee if they can refer you to someone for further information.

3. **Call or email the people you are referred to.** Make sure to introduce yourself, explain who referred you and what information you are looking for. Ask for a meeting but be prepared for the following answers:
   a. **“Yes”:** Arrange a time and place to meet. Make sure to get there on time and bring your list of questions. Do not monopolize the person’s time beyond the period you originally asked for. Do not ask obvious questions that you could have found out with little research.
   b. **“No, I’m sorry...”:** Do not take it personally. The person could be too busy or have had bad experiences with information interviews.
   c. **“Let’s talk over the phone right now”:** Always have your list of questions ready and available for this scenario. Ask your most important questions first as people are generally willing to talk for a shorter period over the phone than they would in person.
Tips:

- Persevere until you have interviewed several people. Do not base your career decision on one person’s advice or information as it might be biased.
- If you get nervous about cold calling someone, ask yourself “What have I got to lose?” The worst-case scenario is if the person says no. In that case, you have not made any progress but you have not lost anything either. Think of the benefits you will receive in the long-term (assurance of your career choice, insightful information, potential contact for your network and sometimes employment opportunities).
- Send a thank-you note or email after each interview. Follow up with promises that you made during the interview.

Sample Questions:
The following is a list of questions you may want to ask people in the occupation you are exploring. Ask about things that are important to you and let the conversation flow naturally, while making sure you get the information you want.

- How did you get started in this occupation?
- Knowing what you know now, would you pursue the same occupation again? Why or why not?
- What do you like most/least about your job? What do you find most rewarding/challenging?
- What skills/personal qualities do you feel are necessary in order to be successful in this field?
- What do you do in a typical day? Is one day pretty much the same as another?
- What type of people do you work with? How much contact do you have with them?
- Would you advise others to enter this occupation? Why or why not?
- What is the employment outlook in this field? What factors will affect its growth/decline?
- What is the reason most people give when they leave the occupation/field?
- What do you think of the experience I have gained so far? What suggestions can you give me about how to gain more skills in this area?
- What should I do to prepare myself for a job in this field?
- Are there any related occupations or careers that I should consider?
- Do you know anyone else I could speak to for more information about working in this field?
- If you could leave me with one piece of advice, what would it be?