

# Informational interviewing for postgraduate students

To learn more about a potential area of work or study, build contacts and access unadvertised opportunities, try informational interviewing: a valuable career skill.

## What is informational interviewing?

Informational interviewing is when you speak to individuals who work in an area that you are interested in, asking questions to learn more about their work.

It's a valuable addition to desk-based research. It can:

- Give you a more detailed and realistic picture of what it is like to work in this particular area or organisation, without the necessary generalisations of a careers resource, or the reputational bias of an employer/university website.
- Allow you the opportunity to ask questions that are uniquely important to you, such as particular details of the typical day-to-day, work environment or culture.
- Give you advice on getting into the area, from useful resources, recommended reading, introductions to people worth talking to, tips to improve the chances of application success, or even an invitation to try out for an unadvertised opportunity.

## Is informational interviewing used in academia?

Absolutely! It's a form of academic networking. Asking someone if you could meet to ask them more about what they do is a great way to:

- Learn more about a potential change in research direction or field.

- Conduct basic research to inform a potential collaboration or interdisciplinary project.
- Gain insight to help enhance your career, such as talking to a course director for their thoughts on building your teaching experience, or a successful vlogger about how to use media for outreach.
- Help you make decisions about longer term career goals, perhaps interviewing those who are more established in their role.

## How to do informational interviewing: the 5-step guide

### 1. Decide what you want to know

So, you just ask vague questions about the job, right? Wrong! It's really important to spend some time reflecting on what you really want to know. Vague questions can often produce vague answers which aren't very helpful. Write a list of what you want to find out or assumptions you're keen to test.

Try asking open question rather than those with yes/no answers. For example, if you're keen to find out how varied a role is, asking 'is this role varied?', might just elicit a one-word answer of 'Yes' or 'No'. Instead, asking 'What kind of variety is present in this role?' or even using a statement 'I'd love to know more about the level of variety in this role' might give you far more detail.

See the list of example informational interview questions at the end of this helpsheet.

## 2. Decide who to ask

Research to find individuals who work in areas that would be well-placed to answer your questions and share their insights.

In some cases, talking with a decision-maker (such as the manager of the team, rather than just a recent team member) could be advantageous, as they may well have the authority to offer you any unadvertised opportunity.

In other cases, you might find it helpful to speak to someone who was recently where you are now, who is more likely to have recent knowledge of application processes and be able to speak to what a typical early role might be like in at the moment.

Bear in mind that individuals in sought after fields which do not generally advertise are the least likely to respond. Build a list of specific individuals with a range of prominence or status to increase the likelihood of at least a few responses.

To find people to ask try using:

- LinkedIn – as well as a general search, the alumni tool can identify those you went to your university or perhaps had a similar subject background
- Your wider network of friends of family and family of friends.
- Your supervisor/tutor or other academic contacts, as appropriate
  - 'About us' or 'Meet the team' sections on the websites of organisations you're interested in
  - Social media with a messaging function
  - Attending relevant events or conferences (virtually or in person), checking a 'delegate list' or chatting to people directly.

You may also want to interview more than one individual from the same career area, such as two different lawyers or three different individuals working in museums, as multiple perspectives will help enrich your understanding of the wider sector, rather than just rely on one person's experience.

## 3. Ask for the meeting

Building rapport is better done face-to-face where possible, or over video call. If not possible, a telephone call would be the next best thing, and finally email would be a back-up plan if necessary (although this doesn't allow dialogue in the same way, and communication is likely to be more guarded).

A brief email to request an informational interview is likely to be more successful if the recipient can clearly see your credibility, that you've done your homework about their work, and where there's a clear ask to respond to.

Example email:

*Dear ...*

*I'm a final year PhD student studying language and dialect in the Ukrainian diaspora, and came across [your organisation] during the course of my research. I'm currently thinking about career options after my doctorate, and after noticing that you have a policy research department with a focus on European migration, I wondered if it would be possible to have a conversation so that I can learn more about how I could potentially move into work like this. I wonder if you'd have a time for a short meeting, perhaps via Zoom?*

*I appreciate that you may be busy, so please don't worry if it's not possible right now. Any advice you can give would be very gratefully received!*

*Many thanks,*

...

## 4. Meet!

Dress as you would for the first day of work if you were working for/with them. You want them to see you with that potential for the future.

Thank them for their time, and that you've done some preparation (this will help them to see that you're not wasting their time!). Agree with them how to proceed – an informal chat is fine if they're not pressed for time. If it's just a 15-minute video call, you might suggest working through your list of questions more systematically?

Respect their time, and don't overrun the end of the meeting time if you've agreed one. Thank them again at the end for their time.

## 5. Evaluate and follow up

Once you've completed your informational interviews make sure you genuinely evaluate the responses that you received. Did they confirm your expectations or surprise you in some way? Decide what you want to do next:

- Further research?
- Talk to a careers adviser?
- Pursue a particular option?
- Address a skills/experience gap?

Whatever the outcome, don't forget to send your interviewee a thank you email. If you're keen to work with/for them in the future, you might want to mention this, and that you'd be keen to hear about any opportunities that may arise. Perhaps they'd be willing to keep your details or CV on file?

If anything came up in the informational interview where you feel you could contribute, you could also offer this here more specifically. For example, perhaps you've encountered some recent research which relates to their work goals at the moment? Share the link to help create a mutually beneficial encounter.

If you haven't already, keep details of the contact, or add them to LinkedIn or equivalent. Perhaps in a few months, if you're still keen to work with them, you could send them a follow up email, to thank them again, let them know what you've been doing, and that you're still looking in case they hear of anything.

## Sample questions for informational interviewing: general careers

- Can you tell me a bit about your career path and what led you to the role you're in today?
- What were some of your early roles in the field?
- What does a typical day look like for you?
- What are some big projects you're working on now or that you've finished up in the last few months?
- What do you enjoy most about the work you do? / What are you most excited about right now?
- What do you enjoy the least? Or, is there something that surprised you about the role when you first started?
- What are some of the challenges you face day-to-day?
- What about the biggest rewards?
- What do you wish you'd known when you were starting out in this career/role?
- When you hire into this area, what's the hardest thing to find in candidates? What do candidates often do wrong?
- What is the route that most people take to move into this area? What other routes do you know of?
- Do you have any recommendations for other people I should talk to or other resources I should explore?
- Are there any questions I'm not asking that I should be?!
- Thank you for your time today. Would it be alright for us to stay in touch?

## Extra questions for academic information interviewing networking

- I've read your recent work; can you tell me more about what you're working on now/next?
- I'm keen to do [...]. Are there any initiatives / funding sources / support structures / collaborators / project partners that come to mind?
- Do you know anyone who's working on a similar area / who's made a similar move? Could you introduce us?
- What do you believe makes the biggest difference in terms of the likelihood of achieving [*this academic goal*]?
- Are there any questions I'm not asking that I should be?!
- Thank you for your time today. Would it be alright for us to stay in touch?