

Information Interviewing

Information Interviewing is an approach that I first found in Richard Bolles' *What Color is Your Parachute*. It is used widely as an excellent means of learning about the work that people do in any occupational field. It is also very effective in helping you make contacts in the field.

The concept is a simple one. The difficult part is getting yourself to do it. If you get nervous, one of the important things to remember is that *most people love to talk about what they do to someone who is interested*. You will not be imposing if you keep it brief. If the people you interview want to give you more time than you ask for (which happens a lot!) that is their choice. The other thing to remember is that Information Interviewing is one of the best ways to learn about fields of work. Information in print and on the Internet does not give you much detail about what people actually do and what they like and don't like.

Here are the recommended steps. As always, be polite and respectful. Try these steps, but modify them if your experience indicates that a little different approach would be better for you.

Find someone who will talk with you. One is all you need to start.

- Use your own contacts (family, friends, neighbours, your friends' families, anyone you know) to find one person who works in this field.
- Contact (telephone is probably best) a business or organization which employs people working in the field that interests you. You could start with the personnel department, but it might be easier to contact a department that works in that field (e.g. the engineering department for engineers, accounting or finance for accountants).
- Just walk into a business, store, office, etc. and ask to see someone who works in the field. (This works surprisingly well.)

Say something like this (to encourage them to talk with you or direct you to someone who can better answer your questions):

- "I'm not looking for work right now" (so they don't think you are job hunting and trying to go around their procedures);
- "I am thinking seriously about working in this field and would like to know more about it from someone who does this kind of work."
- "I know that you are busy, but could I please have 15 minutes of your time?" (Most people are willing to give 15 minutes unless they are rushing to meet a deadline.)

Once someone has agreed to talk with you...

Ask what a typical day is like for them.

- Some people will laugh and say that there is no such thing as a "typical day", but they will tell you about the kinds of tasks and activities that they do frequently.

Ask what they most like about their work, what is satisfying for them.

- Their answers will tell you more than most written information.

Ask what they would change about their work, if they could.

- Their answers will give you the downside of the work without asking them to be negative. Most kinds of work have a downside. You need to know what it is.

Ask what they would recommend you do in order to get into the field.

- They will suggest steps for you to take and may even suggest which education or training programs they think are good ones.

Ask who else they would recommend you speak with to learn more about the field.

Ask if you may use their name when you contact the person/people that they suggest.

- It is important to learn from a number of different people, since their experiences will be different. This process also gives you a number of contacts that you might want to have in the future.
- Having permission to use their name will greatly increase your chances that the next person will speak with you. (e.g. "I was speaking with _____ and he/she suggested that I contact you.")
- Use the same approach with the next person as you did with this one.

Thank the people who have shared their time and experience with you. That is very generous of them.

- Thank them as you leave.
- Get their contact information and send them a thank you note soon afterward. Sending the note has the added benefit that they are more likely to remember you and have a favourable impression when you contact them in the future.

Remember that you asked for 15 minutes of their time.

- Be careful not to abuse that agreement.
- Many people will want to go beyond that amount of time and that is their choice, but you should not be the reason that they go over time.
- One thing you can do at the beginning is to state that you have five questions you would like to ask. How long they want their answers to be is up to them.

What if people turn you down?

Some people may turn you down. Most people like to talk about their work, but some do not. Some who are interested are just too busy at that time. If it happens...

- Be positive that someone else will talk with you. The person who turned you down may even recommend someone for you to ask.
- Ask if there is another time when they would be available. There may be.
- If one line of search (your contacts, phoning or off the street) isn't working for you, try the others.
- Most of all, keep at it. Persistence and determination are qualities that employers look for. *Besides, you are worth it!*