

Networking & Informational Interviewing



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What is networking?

Networking is the process of discovering and utilizing existing connections between people. This term also implies moving beyond your immediate network and tapping into other people's networks, perhaps far-removed from your own. Everyone knows other people and thus already has a network. Genuine networks often stem from friendships or business relationships.

Networking is a planned process. In formal and informal settings, you will interact with and become known to people who can provide information about the world of work, job openings, leads, personal contacts, and employers who are hiring. Networking is about talking with people and obtaining referrals so that every contact you make is based on a referral from a person you know on some level. You may feel a bit awkward asking for help this way in the beginning. It takes skill to network effectively. Networking is a must to uncover job opportunities in the "hidden" job market, which may constitute over 80% of jobs.

The fact is—**direct one-to-one contact with people, preferably face to face, is by far the most effective way to get a job or internship.**

How do I network?

Talk about yourself and your goals – the more you talk about your skills and interests, what you have done, what you would like to do and where you'd like to do it, the more likely people will begin to see links between themselves and you. They will begin to share information about their own backgrounds and who they know and where they have been.

Ask questions! Most people are flattered if you ask questions about what they do and how they got there, and if you ask for their opinions and advice.

Remember that everyone knows of other people in their own field, but also in other fields and often in other geographic locations, so often people you already know can connect you to other valuable contacts.

Plan for networking! Anticipate when you will be in a position to network and plan what you want to ask, what you want to communicate about yourself and how. For example, you might plan to take resumes to a job fair, but it would be awkward to take resumes to a social or sporting event. If you want to build your network in a particular field or area, one of the most effective strategies for doing so is informational interviewing.

What is informational interviewing?

It is the process of gathering career information from people who are already working in target occupations, organizations, or geographic locations. Both the content of the information and the process of gathering it will help you to refine your goals and possibly discover some new ones.

Informational interviews can happen in person, over the phone, or through e-mail. In-person informational interviews usually last about 20 minutes.

Why do informational interviewing?

To Gain Information

The main goal of informational interviewing is to obtain information and advice on career fields or job search strategies through one-to-one, comfortable conversations with persons already working in a particular career. Informational interviews are initiated and by you.

More specific purposes of informational interviewing include:

- ❖ To validate the choice of career by investigating the day-to-day experiences of someone working in the field;
- ❖ To narrow the list of potential employers, developed from reviewing background literature, to those who form the most likely market for your qualifications;
- ❖ To make contacts and obtain current information;
- ❖ To get additional leads to additional informational interviews;
- ❖ To develop a knowledge of the vocabulary of the field;
- ❖ To gather information that will make a positive impression on employers in a cover letter or a job interview; and

- ❖ To build confidence in your ability to discuss your career interests and goals.

To Develop Networks

One important benefit of informational interviewing is to build your career network. Networking is the process of discovering and utilizing connections between people. Genuine networks stem from friendships or business relationships. Everyone knows other people, and thus has a network. But "networking" involves movement beyond one's immediate network and tapping into other people's networks, perhaps far removed from one's own.

Networks prove very helpful for both exploring career fields and actually finding jobs.

Identifying People to Interview

Start with lists of people you already know: extended family members, faculty, fellow students, previous or current supervisors, neighbors, etc. You may also want to research (and join) the major professional organizations for your field of interest. The yellow pages from the phone book and staff directories on company websites are also good sources. Lastly, you may also call any organization and ask for the name of the person who holds the job title you would like to have one day. There's no one in the world who you can't try interviewing!

Often the most solid networks stem from a community of people with a shared experience, such as having attended the same college/university. The **University Career Assistance Network (UCAN)** is a tool designed by the Alumni Association to help you connect with UVA graduates. By registering for an account on Hoosonline, you will have the ability to contact any of the ~25,000 alumni who have agreed to help fellow alumni and current UVA students in their career planning.

You may benefit from networking with an alum because the alum may be able to:

- ❖ give you a better understanding about a particular field of work
- ❖ give you a job or internship lead
- ❖ give you information about a specific job or about a specific employer
- ❖ give you advice on how to apply for a particular position
- ❖ give you suggestions of other people to talk to in the field or organization

Alumni may benefit from talking with you because:

- ❖ you can give them an update on what's happening at their alma mater
- ❖ you can give them a chance to share their opinions about their work and field (something that they may rarely get to do)
- ❖ you may be a great candidate for their employer and they may be valued for referring you for employment (some employers even provide monetary rewards to employees who refer candidates that become employees)

How to get started using UCAN:

1. Visit <http://www.hoosonline.virginia.edu> and register as a new user. Someone in the Alumni Office will verify that you are a current student and will send you an access code via email within 2-3 business days.

2. Once registration is complete, log into your new account. From the HoosOnline Tools menu, select the "Career Resources" option.
3. Under the Career Tools section, select the "Search the UCAN Network" link to get started. Find alumni who share your major, career field or geographic location of interest, and/or University affiliations.
4. A maximum of 500 results will be displayed. Narrow your search criteria if you have too many results.
5. Once you have found someone of interest, click on their last name. This will take you to a new page.
6. From this new page, click "Add to UCAN folder."
7. As you add contacts to your folder, you can click on full names to review alumni contact information, such as email address, phone number, and mailing address.
8. Draft a message and initiate contact! You may wish to use the following as a template:
"Hi (Career Resource Contact name). My name is ____, and I am a student at the University of Virginia. Thank you [this reminds them that they agreed to do it AND when you say "Thank You", people are more inclined to want to help you] for being a Career Resource Contact for UVA students and alumni. I'm very interested in the field of ____ (or "doing a job search in the field of ____") and am looking for more information on the field. I'd like to do a brief informational interview with you (15-20 minutes) to ask a few questions about your opinions and experiences in the field. Would you prefer that I call you, email you (or visit in person)?"

Setting up the informational interview

Having done your research on organizations and having identified the people with whom you wish to speak, you are now ready to arrange your informational interviews. Contact each person to ask for a time when you can meet to discuss his/her career field and/or organization and, in particular, what he/she person does on the job. Be sure to make it clear that you are interested in gathering information and advice—not a job. Be prepared to explain the kind of information you want.

If you feel a bit nervous or anxious about arranging your first few "interviews," here are some ways to overcome your reticence:

1. practice what to say before you call, perhaps even jotting down the important points you want to mention;
2. begin your interviews with people who are likely to respond to your inquiry—family, friends, previous employers;
3. practice the process with a lower priority organization or in an area where you feel you have nothing to lose (e.g., talk to someone working in a hobby area of yours).

If your nervousness is compounded by wondering why any busy professional would be willing to take time to grant you such an interview, keep in mind that:

- (1) people enjoy helping others—information and advice are free to give—jobs aren't;
- (2) people enjoy talking about themselves, their ideas, and their opinions;
- (3) people enjoy a break in routine; and finally

- (4) very few people are actually so busy that they don't have a free half-hour during a week.

Example of an initial phone conversation:

You: “Mr. Adams, my name is _____. I was given your name by _____. I'm very much interested in advertising, but don't feel I have enough current information on the field. I thought that if I could talk to someone knowledgeable in advertising, like you, I would have a clearer picture of the profession.

I've heard that your department has been doing some very creative things, particularly with your recent radio-TV campaign. I would like very much to get your personal opinion about corporate advertising and would enjoy the opportunity of coming to your office to discuss your views.”

(Note: If he or she cannot see you, ask to talk for a few minutes on the phone. Also ask for names of others you might contact in the same career field.)

In summary, there are four major strategies for contacting the individual with whom you want to meet. Use whatever approach feels most comfortable and appropriate for you.

1. Send an e-mail (remember to proofread all your correspondence so that it is error-free), and follow it up with a phone call. Introduce yourself, explain your interest in the individual's organization and job, and propose a meeting. Also, mention that you will follow-up to confirm a date and time. You will be hard to ignore.
2. Telephone the person directly. The response will be quicker, whether yes or no. If no, always ask who would be an appropriate person for you to contact. You should then begin again with that person.
3. Drop in on the person in hopes of meeting right away without an appointment. This approach is more risky, yet the spontaneity may be impressive and generate a favorable response. If you do this, make sure to communicate how appreciative you are for whatever amount of time they can spend with you.
4. Have one of your contacts (e.g., a parent, friend, sibling) arrange an appointment for you.

Preparing for the informational interview

This is a critical step! Too many students set up interviews, then "drop in" for their appointments without doing any homework. Career contacts are often frustrated when they talk with a student who knows nothing about their field.

Also, the more you know about an area or an organization, the more intelligent and productive your questions can be – plus your interviewees will be impressed by this knowledge and preparation on your part.

You can research for your informational interview in some of the following ways:

- ❖ Go to the U.Va. library and research recent magazine or newspaper articles written about the organization;
- ❖ Search for and read about the company or organization on their website, or if they do not have one, contact someone in the organization and request a prospectus, an annual report or other printed information about the organization;
- ❖ Read literature on the specific career field and utilize CareerSearch to research specific companies in the UCS Career Resource Library;
- ❖ Talk to someone (a friend, neighbor, parent, alumnus, a person who knows this field or organization) – and ask him or her about the career or company.

Before your informational interview, plan open-ended questions that will stimulate discussion and enable both of you to learn about each other. See the list of sample questions on the following pages.

Plan ahead what you want to communicate about yourself: skills, traits, and goals. Think about ways to get these attributes across by means of the questions you ask and the way in which you conduct the interview.

Focus on the interviewee's views, opinions, thoughts, and feelings rather than cold facts. Your interviewee will enjoy the interview more, and will feel more positive about you as a result.

Questions to ask in the informational interview

Again, *you* are conducting the interview. Often you will find, however, that one or two prepared questions on your part will naturally lead to a free-flowing conversation in which you will learn a great deal.

However, remember also that it is easy to let the conversation get off the track, and then you leave without gaining the information you wanted. Listed in this handout are sample questions. You are encouraged to think of others that meet your needs more specifically.

Questions regarding the occupational field

Preparation:

- ❖ What credentials or degrees are required for entry into this kind of work?
- ❖ What types of prior experience are absolutely essential?
- ❖ How did you prepare yourself for this work?
- ❖ What are the best informational resources for conducting research on this field?

Present Job:

- ❖ Describe how you occupy your time during a typical workweek.
- ❖ What skills or talents are most essential for effective job performance in this job?
- ❖ What are the toughest problems you must deal with?

- ❖ Apart from external motivators such as salary or fringe benefits, what do you find most rewarding about your job?
- ❖ If you were to leave this kind of work, what factors would probably contribute to your decision?

Lifestyle:

- ❖ What obligation does your work place upon your personal time?
- ❖ How much flexibility do you have in terms of dress, hours of work, vacation schedule, place of residence?
- ❖ How often do people in your line of work change jobs?

Career Future/Alternatives:

- ❖ If things develop, as you'd like, what sort of career goals do you see for yourself?
- ❖ How would you describe your job outlook?
- ❖ If the work you do was suddenly eliminated, what different types of work do you feel that you could do?
- ❖ What types of employers hire people with your background; what are some representative job titles?
- ❖ Which related fields are you exploring?

Job Hunting:

- ❖ How did you get your first job in this field?
- ❖ What job search strategies do you think are most effective to get jobs in this field (e.g., internet posting, newspaper ads, networking, employment agencies/headhunters)?
- ❖ If you were in my shoes, which search methods would you spend most of your time on?
- ❖ In your experience, how long would a job search in this field take?
- ❖ I've brought along a copy of my resume. As a professional in this field, what aspects do you think are strong? What aspects need work?
- ❖ If this were a real job interview, would I be dressed appropriately?
- ❖ What professional associations or publications are there in this field that include jobs or contacts?

Advice to Me:

- ❖ How well suited is my background for this type of work?
- ❖ Can you suggest other related fields?
- ❖ What educational preparation do you feel would be best?
- ❖ What types of experiences, paid employment or otherwise, would you most strongly recommend?
- ❖ If you were a college student and had it to do over again, what would you do differently to prepare for this occupation?

Referral to Others:

- ❖ Based on our conversation today, can you suggest other people who may be able to provide additional information?
- ❖ Would you suggest a few of these people who might be willing to see me?

- ❖ May I have permission to use your name when I contact them?

Questions regarding the employer

- ❖ What is the size of the organization/geographic locations?
- ❖ What is the organizational structure?
- ❖ How does the size and structure of your organization compare to that of others in your field (in this city and/or nationally?)
- ❖ How does the work of your division or office fit into the work of the organization as a whole?
- ❖ What is the organization's commitment to diversity?
- ❖ What is the average length of time employees stay with the organization?
- ❖ How much freedom is given to new people?
- ❖ What types of formal or on-the-job training does the organization provide?
- ❖ How often are performance reviews given?
- ❖ What are the arrangements for transferring from one division to another?
- ❖ How much decision-making authority is given after one year?
- ❖ What new product lines or services are being developed?
- ❖ Where is the organization expanding? How does it compare with its competitors?

Follow up!

Remember to send thank-you notes! A few lines thanking them for their time and help will indicate your appreciation and will keep you in their memory. **Be specific about information you learned during the interview.**

Additionally, you should keep a record of your interviews for your own information. Names, titles, addresses, dates, and major points of discussion will enable you to remember who told you what, and how to get back in touch with your contacts.