

Informational Interview

In his book, [The 2-Hour Job Search](#), Steve Dalton, Senior Career Consultant and Associate Director at [Duke University's Fuqua School of Business](#), provides job seekers expert advice and practical guidance to be more effective and efficient in today's dynamic job market. Dalton's innovative approach to the job search has been shared at universities and colleges across the globe.

The following excerpt on Informational Interviewing is shared with permission from the author.

What is an informational interview?

In its simplest form, the informational interview is a conversation between an information seeker (you) and an information keeper (an alumni, your contact at an organization or someone you were referred to). The information seeker leads the conversation to collect relevant information about the information keeper's career, organization, field of study/research or his/her path to their current employer. Informational interviews are not job interviews but rather, pre-arranged discussions with professionals within your desired field. Conducting informational interviews not only provides you with information about potential careers, it also builds your professional network. Think of it as relationship building

What is the history behind the informational interview?

The concept of informational interviewing was conceived by Richard Nelson Bolles, author of the best-selling career handbook, *What Color is Your Parachute?* Bolles describes the process as "trying on jobs to see if they fit you." He notes that most people choose a career path without taking the time to speak with professionals in their field of interest. As a result, they find themselves in careers that are not a true match for their skills, values, interests and abilities.

What are the benefits of conducting an informational interview?

The informational interview allows you to:

- Gather valuable information to aide in your career planning.
- Discover the 'realities' of a particular career field and what it's like to work in that area.
- Evaluate whether the career option is compatible with your skills, interests, lifestyle and goals.
- Receive suggestions on how and where to acquire the experience and knowledge required.
- Develop confidence in discussing your interests and goals.
- Gain access to the 'hidden job market' as over 80% of jobs are secured today through networking.
- Expand your network of contacts in your field of interest for future opportunities.
- Gain referrals to other professionals in the same field for additional networking.

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How do I find contacts for the informational interview?

Usually you will talk with a person whom you don't know personally but who has been referred to you through family, friends, colleagues, faculty/staff members or peers. Initiating the request for an informational interview can be done by calling, writing or emailing the person to whom you would like to speak. Make sure to introduce yourself, mention how you were put in touch with the person and provide a brief synopsis of your background and why you are seeking an informational interview. Request a short meeting (15-30 minutes) ideally face-to-face but phone or skype are also options if the individual is remote. While this may sound like a scary prospect, most people actually enjoy talking about themselves, their careers, their experiences and providing advice. One of the best sources for informational interview contacts is your University's Alumni Association. The Notre Dame Alumni Association and LinkedIn Group have literally thousands of alumni who are waiting and willing to help ND students. Another source for alumni are the Education links on LinkedIn where you can search for alumni from Notre Dame by where they live, where they work and what they do. Alumni connections are some of the strongest network connections a student can make either at the undergraduate or graduate level particularly if the alum has followed a similar career path that you envision. Their willingness to assist and be an advocate is typically quite strong.

What preparation do I need for the informational interview?

Preparation is the key to success in ensuring that you come across as confident, credible and capable in your quest for information and that you maximize the time you have with your contact. In advance of the meeting you will want to prepare as you would for a traditional interview:

- Conduct some basic research about your contact, their field and their employer.
- Prepare a list of questions or areas you would like to explore as part of the interview.
- Be prepared with responses to the standard 'Big Three' questions that frequently get asked during interviews, informational or otherwise.
 - Tell me about yourself (sometimes known as 'walk me through your resume').
 - Why do you want to work in this industry or field (say, telecommunications) and function (say, research)
 - Why are you interested in this organization? (less commonly asked in informational interviews, but they do appear)
- Know your own interests, skills, values and how they relate to the career field represented by the person you are interviewing.
- If you meet face-to-face, dress in appropriate attire to the situation (business professional or business casual), as you will want to ensure you give a good first impression.

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How do I conduct the informational interview?

Similar to your earlier preparation, you will want to have developed a list of questions to guide the conversation and elicit helpful information from your contact. You are seeking lively conversation topics that show your genuine interest in the individual as well as the field or industry. You do not want to ‘stump your contact’ with questions that might make them uncomfortable or that they cannot answer, which could leave them feeling embarrassed. In general, there are 3 phases to the informational interview: Phase 1-Small Talk, Phase 2-Questions and Answers and Phase 3-Next Steps.

Phase 1: Small Talk (3-5 minutes)

Small talk comes more naturally to some people than to others. It is an important skill to develop as it shows genuine interest in another individual, sets both parties at ease and gives the other person a chance to talk about whatever they want initially. Questions to consider for opening with small talk can include:

1. How is your day going so far?
2. What projects are you working on right now?
3. Can you tell me about your background and how you came to work for your employer?

Responses to these questions will give you a sense of whether the contact is ‘all business’ or more ‘conversational’. Demonstrating active listening will provide potential content for follow-up questions. Transition into the next phase by thanking the contact again for their time and telling them that you have prepared some questions and whether it would be okay to ask them now.

Phase 2: Questions and Answers (15-20 minutes)

One of the most critical areas of the informational interview is to know what questions to ask. Having a framework, such as TIARA, to follow is not necessary but it can prove to be extremely helpful in structuring your thoughts and being more effective in facilitating the conversation. Knowing that you have a format and sequence to follow in your questioning will greatly reduce your anxiety and will give you more confidence in this phase of the informational interview.

TIARA Framework

TIARA is an acronym for the 5 topics you will cover during the Q&A phase of the informational interview: Trends, Insights, Advice, Resources and Assignments. This structure maximizes the likelihood of having a successful informational interview that not only builds rapport with your contact but also elicits usable information. The fundamental thesis of TIARA is that you begin the conversation by treating your contact as an expert. Over the course of the informational interview, your questions will shift in tone and depth so you frame your contact more personally as a mentor or coach, maximizing the chance that you’ll turn them into an advocate.

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Trends

- What trends are most impacting your business/field right now?
- How has your business or field changed most since you started?
- How do you think your business or field will change most dramatically in the next several years?

Insights

- What surprises you most about your job/your field, employer?
- What's the best lesson you've learned on the job?
- What's been your most valuable experience at your employer so far, and why?
- If you had to attribute your success to one skill or trait, what would it be?
- Is that trait shared by many across the organization or is it unique and you've adapted it to your advantage?

Advice

- What can I be doing right now to prepare myself for a career in this field?
- If I got hired, what should I be sure to do within the first thirty days to ensure I get off to the fastest start possible?
- What do you know now that you wished you'd known when you were in my position?
- If you were me, what would you be doing right now to maximize your change of breaking into this industry/field/function?

Resources

- What resources should I be sure to look into next?
- What next steps would you recommend for someone in my situation?

Assignments

- What project (s) have you done that you felt added the most value?
- Have any projects increased in popularity recently at your organization?
- Have you had interns/new graduates in the past? If so, what sort of projects have they done?

Phase 3: Next Steps (3-5 minutes)

In an ideal state, if the informational interview has gone well, your contact will be ready to volunteer to pass you on to relevant colleagues or other connections within their network or organization. Your next step is to not only follow up on these new connections and suggestions, but also to stay in touch with

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your contact, letting them know the results of your further actions. To bring closure to the informational interview, thank them aloud for spending the time with you, and then send them a thank-you note via email the next day. Your note should include: thanks again, recap of advice given in conversation, summary of benefits derived, actions and commitments to follow-up on and any request for further suggestions.

What do I do after the informational interview?

Remember to follow back up with the person to whom you received the contact referral, letting them know the results of the conversation. You will also want to ensure you stay in touch with the person you interviewed. You can keep in touch by sending them an article on a related topic, offering to assist them in some way with their work or research, or connecting with them via social media channels such as LinkedIn. Remember, informational interviewing is a two-way street: it only works if you give as well as receive information and advice.