

INFORMATIONAL INTERVIEWS

A. *What is an informational interview, and why should I do one?*

Certain information about what people do, how they pursue their goals, the competencies they develop, and the satisfactions they experience is only available through one-on-one conversations. Informational interviews are a terrific way to obtain this information. They are an important tool in expanding your knowledge about a particular career field, both substantively (what do people in this field do?) and strategically (what does it take to get involved with a certain type of work?). Informational interviews are also an excellent way to make contact with people who work in fields which interest you. When conducted properly, they can also help you learn how to prepare for an actual job interview. An informational interview can also be a chance for you to find out about different job opportunities (but be careful (as discussed below) not to confuse them with job interviews).

B. *How does an informational interview differ from a job interview?*

While the goal of a job interview is to seek employment, the purpose of an informational interview is to investigate and verify career interests. In an informational interview, you, rather than the employer, initiate contact with a professional in the field that interests you. Whereas in a job interview the potential employer conducts the interview and you provide most of the information, you are in charge of conducting the informational interview and the professional provides most of the information. Although the purpose is different and the process is less formal than a job interview, it is still a business meeting, and you must prepare for an informational interview, act professionally and dress appropriately.

C. *How do I arrange an informational interview?*

Your first step toward arranging an informational interview is to identify a practice area(s) or career field(s) which interests you. Think about classes you enjoyed, areas in which you thought you might want to practice before you came to law school, and fields in which you are just plain interested. Read professional journals and national newspapers, paying attention to the stories which attract your interest. Talk to your classmates, professors and the professionals in the CDO to help you generate ideas.

1. Identify someone to interview

Anyone among your existing acquaintances (family, friends, work and school contacts) who works in the area you are interested in is a possible informational interviewee, or might lead you to someone to interview. Talk with people and ask them if they know of anyone you might speak to in your area of interest. Contact local trade and professional associations, such as a state bar association. Consider asking professors whether they

know anyone in the field with whom you might speak. Talk to a counselor at the CDO; he or she will gladly assist you in developing your list of local practitioners or alumni for you to contact. You may wish to do some research online to identify firms or individuals who do the type of work you are interested in. Boalt alumni are often quite willing to share their experience with current students; the CDO can help you locate alumni in your area of interest. The people you choose need not have your exact “dream job;” they should just have information and experience which will help you clarify and achieve your goals.

2. Approach the potential interviewee

People are usually much happier to receive requests for information and advice than requests for a job, so do not be fearful about asking someone to grant you an informational interview. A well-written email is probably the most appropriate means of contacting a potential informational interviewee. (Remember that this is business correspondence, and that every communication with this person reflects on your skills and personality, so be sure that your writing is respectful, error-free, and demonstrates your preparation and interest.) The message should include a brief self-introduction and a statement of why you are interested in this practice area and/or location, and what it is you want to know. You may also want to tell the recipient why you believe he or she would be a good person with whom to meet. In the last paragraph, thank him or her and suggest a possible time to meet or speak. If there are similarities between you and the person to whom you are writing, such as common acquaintances or attendance at certain schools, be sure to mention them. In the alternative, you can call the person, but be prepared: they may answer the phone on your first try, and ask to hear your questions on the spot! (See below for suggested interview questions.)

Most likely you will need to follow up any initial contact with a telephone call, which should be made about a week to ten days after you send the email. If you get through to your contact, introduce yourself, confirm that your earlier message was received, and inquire as to whether he or she be willing to meet or speak with you sometime in the near future. Show that you are willing to meet at the contact's convenience, at his or her office, even outside the office for coffee. Do not ask for more than 15-20 minutes of time unless the interviewee offers more. Telephonic informational interviews are also a good option if you can't be in the contact's area when he or she can speak to you.

Should the contact indicate that he or she cannot meet with you, politely thank the person for his or her time. Before you get off the phone, if you are feeling extra confident, you may ask if he or she could possibly recommend someone else for you to speak with. If you do not hear back from the person, use your judgment on subsequent follow-up; one more phone call or email is usually the limit; after that it is probably time to move on. Record when you sent the initial email, when you followed up by phone, and the results of that contact.

3. Get Organized

Like a job interview, an informational interview requires preparation in order to make a good impression and make the best use of your own and the interviewee's time.

More research of your interviewee and his or her employer is needed at this stage; the CDO can help you with this if necessary. Then prepare your questions (many suggested questions are below.). Remember the purpose of this meeting is to gather more information to evaluate your own goals, strengths, and weaknesses, and to determine whether this is the career path for you.

Post-meeting organization is important, too. Once you meet with someone by phone or in person, write down when you met with them, what you discussed during the meeting, and when you sent a thank you note. Keeping records will allow you to evaluate your efforts, and to follow up on contacts and other suggestions. If you are doing more than a handful of informational interviews, it is an excellent idea to keep a chart of your efforts contacts and conversations.

D. How Do I Conduct an Informational Interview?

The etiquette of the informational interview is similar to that of a job interview. (If you haven't done a lot of job interviewing recently, refer to the CDO materials on interviewing.) Before the interview, refresh your memory about the person you are going to meet, including anything you learned since your initial research. Be prepared with plenty of specific questions to fill the allotted time. (See below for suggestions.) Keep in mind that you are the one with the primary burden to keep the conversation going and ask questions to gain the information you want. As in many other legal situations, you must try to cover your prepared questions, and at the same time be ready to depart from them and follow worthwhile new topics which arise.

Just as with a job interview, arrive 5-10 minutes early and be courteous to the receptionist or assistant. Your appearance should be neat and professional. Bring your questions, a pen, and some notepaper. (Unlike a job interview, it is appropriate in this setting to take notes.) Bring a few copies of your resume, but do not offer it to the interviewee unless he or she asks for it. You may show your resume to the person for review, but only if he or she seems genuinely willing to review it, and you are genuinely interested in having him or her provide you with feedback. Make it clear that you understand you are not there to solicit for employment.

Even if you are not explicitly looking for job opportunities, the contact is a potential source of employment-- directly or indirectly, now or in the future-- so make sure that you present yourself and your credentials in a way that leaves the contact with a good memory of you. For the same reason, be prepared to discuss your experience and background. Prepare and practice a two-minute summary introducing yourself and stating why you are interested in the area in which your interviewee works. In general, be ready to address any publications you have written, job experiences, and your interest in the practice area. Always present yourself as positive, confident and self-assured, not negative or needy, even if you are actively looking for work or are feeling discouraged about the process.

When the interviewee greets you, remind him or her who you are and why you are there. Express your appreciation for the opportunity to meet with him or her. When the

interview begins, ask your questions and listen to the answers; your contact should do most of the talking. Pay close attention to the time; if your time has elapsed, let the person know. You can stay longer if the interviewee offers you that opportunity. Even if, before the interview is over, you determine that this particular career field no longer appeals to you, maintain your professional and polite demeanor through the conclusion of the interview. The last question you should always ask is who else the interviewee thinks you should contact for information. Never ask questions about the interviewee's salary or whether or not the firm is presently hiring

Be prepared to meet others in the firm. The interviewee may want you to meet someone in the office or building or he or she may take you around the office to introduce you to others in the organization. At the end of the interview, reiterate your appreciation for the interviewee's time.

E. Follow-up

Always send a thank you note (letter or email) to the person you interviewed. If others helped you arrange the interview, write to thank them, also. In the note you should express your gratitude and inform your contact that you intend to follow up on the leads given to you. It is also a good idea to periodically apprise your contacts of your career development progress (use your judgment as to the frequency and level of detail that shows continued interest without being intrusive).

Take the time to analyze your interviews afterwards. Reevaluate your interest in the career field based on what you know now. Reflect on the information you gathered and consider issues such as: your reaction to the number of hours and type of schedule described? What would you need to do follow a path similar to your interviewee's? Are you willing to do this? Would you be satisfied with the situation your contact described? What is your reaction to the conditions (stress/anxieties) of this occupation? Do you want to deal with them? Did you change your opinion of the occupation as a result of your interview? What are the most important new facts and understandings that you have acquired? What misconceptions did you correct?

Keep careful records of your informational interviews and what you have learned. In addition to the basic facts (name, position, contact information, date and location of the interview), try to capture those things that will help you connect with this person again in the future. Follow up on the leads you received from the informational interview, both personal contacts and any other resources suggested in the course of your conversation.

SAMPLE QUESTIONS

What do you do?

What is your title? (Most relevant for attorneys not working in law firms)

What do you do in a typical day? Week? Month? Year?

What are your major job responsibilities?

What skills do you use most in the course of your work?

What is the most interesting case or transaction you have worked on lately?

What percentage of your day is spent dealing with people? With paper?

Who are your clients? How do your clients or cases come to you?

How much does your work vary from day to day or week to week?

How predictable or variable is your schedule?

What professional publications do you read, and why?

How did you get to where you are?

Why did you choose this particular field of law (or nonlegal position)?

How did your interest in this area develop?

How did you get started in this career?

Did you take any courses or do any internships that helped you get started in this area?

What work experience did you have prior to your current position?

Was your pathway similar to other people who do the same kind of work?

What do you know now that you wish you'd known before you entered this field?

How do you like what you do?

What do you most enjoy or find satisfying about your work?

What would you change about your work if you could?

What are the greatest pressures, frustrations or anxieties in the work?

Do you think your satisfactions/frustrations are typical of people working in this field?

What are the advantages and disadvantages of work with this type of firm, agency or corporation? This type of practice?

How does your organization function? How about the field in general?

Is your practice typical of others in the field?

How would you describe the atmosphere/culture of the work place?

Who do you report to? Do you also supervise other people?

How much autonomy do you have in what you work on and how you go about your work?

What are the chances for advancement in the field?

What do you see as the future of your type of organization/your field?

What steps might I take to obtain similar work?

What skills are necessary for a successful career in this field?

What are the main or most important personal characteristics for success in the field?

What educational program is recommended as preparation for work in your field?

What kind of work/internship experience would employers look for in a job applicant?

How can a person obtain this work experience?

How might one determine that one has the ability or potential to be successful in this specific occupation?

Do you know of any resources (e.g., websites, books, journals, etc.) which might lead me to learn of job or internship opportunities in this field?

Is there anyone at such organizations that you know who I could contact?

May I use your name when contacting others?

May I call on you again in the future?

May I leave my resume with you in case you learn of opportunities you think I might be interested in? (Only ask this if you believe the person will not feel you are overstepping the limits of the informational interview.)

Are there other people to whom you would be willing to refer me for further information?

Is there any other information that would be helpful to you in learning more about this field?

Did I leave out any important questions that would be helpful in learning about the job or occupation?

Further Suggestions

What might I do to make myself more attractive as a potential employee (including suggestions on upgrading your resume; interviewing techniques; educational and experiential qualifications to pursue)?

What is your advice for someone with my experience, or who is just beginning or trying to enter your practice field?

Where could I find further information about this particular area of practice or work setting?

Do you know of anyone who might be looking for an employee with my background and interests?

Do you know of any specific job openings I should consider?

Where might job listings be found?