The Value of Informational Interviewing

If you are exploring a new professional area of interest, you may want to set up an informational interview. You can speak with a professional to ask questions about the skills needed to succeed and day-to-day expectations. Informational interviewing is not about soliciting a job offer or interview, but about exploring options as you clarify your goals.

Setting Up an Informational Interview
Cold-calling companies in your new area of interest can be a little intimidating, so take advantage of your network of friends. Do you know anyone who knows anyone (who knows anyone) who is working in your target area and can facilitate an introduction? Think about all of your various networks: LinkedIn, Facebook, fellow alumni, people on your recreational soccer team. If you do not want particular colleagues in your current work environment to know that you are thinking about a career change, you may want to limit who you share your informational interview search with.

If you do need to start contacting companies and individuals without an introduction, identify a specific person doing the job you’re interested in and send him or her an email requesting an informational interview. Once secured, have an “elevator speech” ready that includes a brief explanation of who you are, your background and what you’re hoping to gain from this conversation.

Sample Informational Interview Questions
This is just a selection of broad question areas to get you started. Keep in mind your informational interview should last no longer than 30 minutes, unless the person you are interviewing welcomes you to continue the conversation.

1. How did you end up in your current position?
2. What does your average day look like? What do you like the most? The least?
3. What experiences, training or education do you feel best prepared you for your current position?
4. What are the entry-level opportunities in this field? What skills or training do you think I would need to begin in this field?
5. How do you balance work with your personal life?
6. What future trends do you anticipate in this field? What external factors affect your work?
7. Do you supervise a team or participate in any other team projects? Or are you expected to work fairly autonomously?
8. How do you measure your own success in your current position? What about those that supervise you?
9. What organizations or groups should I join to connect with others in this professional area?
10. Can you suggest anyone else doing this work who might be willing to talk with me about their experiences?
What’s Next
Record your initial thoughts as soon as the interview is over; you may have even taken notes during the discussion. What information was appealing to you? What didn’t sound as interesting? Does this seem like a pathway you’d like to pursue? If so, can you get into the entry-level positions with the training that you have, or will you need additional skills? Does this training require a new degree, a professional certificate or even just a targeted class? Be sure to carefully weigh what you are already bring to the table.

Always send a prompt thank you, preferably within 24 hours of the interview. This can be through traditional mail or email, whichever you’re most comfortable with.

Remember: You can never do too many informational interviews. Explore any position you think you think you might be interested in.

Resources
Getting From College to Career, Lindsey Pollak (Harper Business, 2012)  
The Encore Career Handbook, Marci Alboher (Civic Ventures, 2013)  