

Informational Interviews

People use informational interviews throughout their careers to gain valuable insights and connections. Reaching out to others and conducting informational interviews can be nerve-wracking, but it is a skill you can develop that can lead to fantastic conversations, connections, and opportunities.

In this tipsheet, you will learn:

- The purpose and benefits of informational interviews
- The steps for successful informational interviews
- Additional tips for making the most of your informational interviews

For more on networking, find our Networking Tipsheet here: <https://careers.queensu.ca/jobs-experience/career-support-tips>

Purpose of Informational Interviews

Informational interviews are structured conversations to gather knowledge and advice from working professionals. They are one of many networking techniques and can be the starting point to building more lasting relationships. People often use the term “coffee chat” to suggest a less formal, more conversational style of informational interview.

While informational interviews can inform your job search process, they aren’t about asking for a job. Some purposes for meeting with a professional can be to:

- Explore career paths.
- Seek advice.
- Establish a professional (perhaps mentoring) relationship.
- Research companies.
- Gain insights into a career field, industry, or organization.

The primary focus of an informational interview or coffee chat should be about the interviewee sharing their knowledge rather than talking about yourself.

Benefits for Students

Informational interviews are especially useful for students exploring their career options. Whether early on in your university career or a recent graduate, connecting with professionals can help you:

- Understand yourself better (e.g. would you like to work in certain jobs).
- Understand a particular field, job, or employer.
- Make educational decisions (e.g. which courses you will take or if you need additional education).
- Gain key knowledge and vocabulary to help in your job search and in communicating your skills to future employers.
- Understand the key skills you need to develop for your future career and how to gain those skills.

Steps for Successful Informational Interviews

1. **Understand your goals:** Clarify what you hope to achieve from the informational interview, whether it is gaining a specific understanding of a workplace, making a new contact, or simply practicing the interview process.
2. **Find people:** Ask current connections to suggest people you might talk to. Use online resources (e.g. LinkedIn or company websites) to find professionals you are curious about or who might be able to answer your questions.
3. **Reach out:** Send a polite and professional message. In the message, briefly introduce yourself, establish a shared connection (if relevant), be specific about why you are reaching out to them, and ask to arrange a time for a conversation. Be responsible for organizing the meeting.
4. **Prepare:** Research the person and/or company. Prepare some thoughtful questions.
5. **Have the interview/conversation:** Ask your questions but allow the conversation to flow. Be curious and engaged while being an active listener. Value their time and be aware of the prearranged time limit. Express your appreciation at the end of the meeting.
6. **Follow up:** Send a polite thank-you message that shows you value their time and knowledge. Provide at least one specific highlight from the conversation that helped you.
7. **Maintain contact:** Periodically update your new contact on your progress, sharing relevant news or achievements to build your professional relationship over time.

Final Tips

Informational interviews can be a great tool to expand your network, learn, and explore career opportunities. However, it is a skill that is developed through experience. As you start connecting with people, consider these final tips.

- **Start with close connections:** It is often easier to practice your informational interview skills with someone you feel comfortable with and who knows a little about you before you start.
- **Dress appropriately:** Business-casual is usually appropriate, but consider the type of workplace the interviewee represents and dress appropriately for the context.
- **Arrive five minutes early and be fully prepared** before the start of the meeting, whether in person or online (if online, tidy up the background, let your housemates know you should not be disturbed, etc.).
- **Be persistent** in your search: Not everyone will respond so it is important to reach out to several people.
- Be a participant in the conversation but focus on what the interviewee has to share.
- At the end of the interview, **ask for referrals** to other possible connections (“who else might I speak with about x topic?”)
- **Remember that most people genuinely enjoy sharing** their experience and advice. Informational interviews are often a positive experience for both you and the person you interview.

SAMPLES

Reaching Out to a New Contact

Dear Alex Watson,

Who you are: My name is David Smith and I am a third-year Queen's University student studying psychology with a certificate in business

Why you are reaching out to this person: I saw from your LinkedIn profile that you are also a psychology graduate from Queen's and that you have several years of experience working in business and marketing. I would like to learn more about this field as well as the skills and education I need to gain to get into business and marketing.

What you are asking for: I would appreciate your knowledge and advice. If you have time, I would like to arrange a brief (20 minute) Zoom meeting with you. If you are willing, is there time over the next few weeks that would be convenient for us to meet?

Thank you,

David

Thank-you Message

Hi Kate,

Thank you for taking the time to share a bit about your career with me earlier today. I appreciate your insight and advice on how to continue learning more about roles in urban transit.

I plan to check out the online project management course you mentioned, and I will also reach out to Catherine. Is it okay if I mention your name in my email to them?

I hope you enjoy your time at the conference you are attending next week. Feel free to reach out any time if there is something I can help you with.

Best,

Gonzague

Sample Questions to Ask

About the person:

- How did you get into this field of work?
- What do you find meaningful about your work?
- How does this work connect to your values?
- What do you like most about your work? What is most challenging?
- What does a typical day/week/month/project look like?
- What has surprised you most in your career?

About a field/industry:

- What skills are essential for this work?
- What would be an entry-level job?
- What additional training or education is required to advance in this industry?
- Where do you foresee growth or change in the field over the next few years?
- What trends are impacting your industry right now?
- Is there a typical career path in this field? What does it look like?

About an organization:

- What is your work-life balance like?
- What kind of training does the organization provide to support employees?
- What do you like about working at your organization?
- Does your organization support equity, diversity, and inclusion? How do they support it?

About advice:

- What professional associations do you rely on to keep up to date in your field?
- What are some things you know now that you wish you had known in university?
- What personal qualities or skills do you think I should develop to be successful in this field?
- What other advice might you give me?
- Is there someone else you recommend I speak with? May I say that you referred me?

For more samples, please see our Networking Module in the Career Prep OnQ course.