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5 Tips On How To Prepare For An Informational Interview With An Industry Professional

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Written By Cathy Sorbara, Ph.D.

I thought I was finally on the right track to finding my

first industry position.

I had put in the time to perfect my [LinkedIn profile](#) and was attending one new [networking event](#) each week.

I realized an amazing opportunity to gain insight and connections in the industry I was targeting...

Informational interviews.

I carefully crafted scripts and emailed industry professionals to set up meetings to learn more about their careers.

First up, the CEO of a start-up company.

Impressive start.

We met at a café.

I paid, of course, and we sat down for an enlightening conversation that would inevitably lead to a new job.

Except that never happened.

Instead, the interview was incredibly awkward.

I fumbled over questions and forgot all the facts I learned about his industry and his background.

He became disinterested and I nervously filled the awkward silences with my own anecdotes and previous work experience.

A 15-minute coffee break turned into a 30-minute disaster.

We parted ways—he was annoyed I wasted his time

and I was simply relieved it was over.

I felt so awkward that I never bothered to [follow up](#) as I assumed he wanted nothing to do with me.

The interview was an utter failure.

That's when I realized that setting up an informational interview was just half the battle.

The other half was knowing what to say during an informational interview (and what not to say).

Over time, I realized that I needed to approach informational interviews with the same tact, preparedness and professionalism that I would for an [industry interview](#).

After all, every informational interview was the first step to getting [an industry referral](#).

The next interview I set up, I jotted down notes to jog my memory in case I became nervous.

I kept the interview short and kept the focus on the interviewee, never myself.

The more interviews I did, the more my confidence grew.

I found out which companies I would enjoy working for and which positions best suited my interests.

I found out the type of expertise and [transferable skills](#) these companies were seeking.

Finally, I cemented the connection by following up and then, when I least expected it, one of the professionals I interviewed offered to forward my resume to their company's hiring manager.

This was the break I was hoping for.

Why PhDs Need To Do Their Due Diligence

Due diligence simply means taking reasonable steps to prepare for something.

It means getting informed.

In industry, due diligence refers to gathering information in order to make an informed decision prior to a merger, acquisition, job hiring, or any other important event.

As a PhD, you hold yourself to the same standard.

In other words, you should do your own due diligence before choosing a career where you will spend the majority of your daily time and efforts.

When it comes to a job search, the most effective way to do your due diligence is by setting up informational interviews with industry professionals.

The key is to not only use informational interviews as part of your due diligence efforts, but to also do your due diligence on how to successfully host an informational interview.

This means preparing for each and every informational interview.

It means getting informed on the person you're interviewing and informed on their company.

It also means mapping out exactly how the interview will go and, most importantly, mapping out how to make the other party feel as comfortable as possible.

Informational interviews are a powerful way to gain industry insights.

[A report by Fast Company](#) interviewed Harvard Business School lecturer Bob Pozen, who said that the best way to determine whether or not you would enjoy a particular industry job is to simply “talk to the people who do it.”

In other words, by setting up informational interviews, you will learn what an industry professional’s daily life looks like.

From here, you’ll be able to infer whether or not that lifestyle (and that company) is a good fit for you.

Informational interviews are also a very effective way to build up your industry network.

The data doesn’t lie...

[According to a report by ABC News](#), 80% of today’s jobs are obtained through networking.

[According to a report by Business Insider](#), while only 1 in 100 job applicants will secure a position, 1 in 7 referrals will land that same job.

That’s right, by setting up informational interviews and getting referrals, you increase your odds of getting a job from 1 in 100 to 1 in 7.



How To Prepare For and Perfect Your Informational Interview

Once you have secured an industry interview, it's time to do your due diligence.

It's time to seize this opportunity.

It's time to pave the way for an industry job referral.

The problem is that too many PhDs blow these opportunities by attempting to 'wing it'.

You must prepare for your informational interviews.

You must do your due diligence.

Not preparing for an informational interview [is career suicide](#).

On the other hand, preparing and expressing yourself well during an informational interview can be the difference between a 6-figure a year position and unemployment.

Here are 5 ways to prepare for an informational interview to ensure you get the most out of it...

1. Prepare by setting up mock interviews.

Prepare for an informational interview like you would [prepare for a job interview](#).

Do background research on the company and position you are targeting, and on your interviewee.

Come prepared with questions.

Desperately trying to keep the conversation afloat with no agenda in mind will make you look bad and will frustrate your interviewee.

Dress and act professionally.

Remember, making a good first impression is imperative.

This person may provide additional leads or referrals that could lead to a job.

Bring your resume but only hand it over if asked by your interviewee.

If you are shy by nature and the thought of interviewing a complete stranger feels uncomfortable, keep in mind that you are flattering this person by asking for their expert advice.

You're not there to sell yourself.

You're simply there to ask questions and create a dialogue.

To that end, you must practice your questions.

This is best done by asking the questions you've prepared to a friend or current labmate until you feel confident and until your voice sounds conversational.

2. Keep the focus on them, not you.

You always want the focus to be on the interviewee.

During informational interviews, you are the interviewer, not the interviewee.

As such, your goal is to make the other person feel important.

Your goal is to make the other person feel valued by complimenting them on their accomplishments and by being curious about their career and their experiences.

The more you talk about yourself, the less likely the other party will feel inclined to help you.

The less likely you will be to get a referral too.

Instead of appearing professional, you will appear self-centered and arrogant.

Aim to gather as much information as possible.

That being said, don't interrogate the other person.

Firing off questions without engaging with your interviewee will create a cold and unfriendly atmosphere.

You want to keep the tone casual and conversational.

The best way to do this is by actively listening to the other person's stories.

Don't be afraid to go with the flow of the conversation either.

If the other person veers off on a tangent, it's a good thing.

It means you've hit on a topic that is of particular interest to your interviewee.

If the other person becomes disengaged with structured questions like, "What is a typical day at work like?" try asking less conventional questions like, "What are you passionate about?"

You should constantly be gauging their interest levels and moving the conversation to what they are passionate about.

Finally, keep the entire interview time to a minimum.

Be respectful of their busy schedule and ensure you are not taking up too much of their time, even if the conversation is flowing well.

3. Frame your questions like a journalist.

A journalist is a storyteller who engages readers and builds relationships by telling memorable narratives.

The best way to approach an informational interview is to be like a journalist.

In order to think like a journalist, you must engage your interviewee, adapt to their personality, and ensure you take away all the necessary 'newsworthy' facts from the interview.

Here are the 'newsworthy' facts you should take away from your interview...

- Preparation—How did they learn about the position they are currently in and what was the application process like?
- Present job—What are their current responsibilities?
- Lifestyle—What are the pros and cons of their position? Do they have a lot of free time outside of work and was this an important reason for them taking the position?
- Career future alternatives—What is the career trajectory for people in this role? Can they move up the 'corporate ladder'?
- Job hunting strategies—What advice can they give PhDs wanting to secure this type of position? Is additional training required? What qualities should you focus on?
- Nature of organization—What is company culture like? Is there a constant turnover of employees? Is job satisfaction high?
- Matching your expertise with the organization/position—What suggestions can they offer for a PhD looking to be successful in their field?

Pay close attention to what's been said and ask questions when something is not clear.

At the end of the interview, try to gather names of other individuals you can interview next.

4. Follow up with gratitude, not requests.

Always send a note of thanks after an informational interview.

Refusing to follow up is a deal breaker.

Remember, [following up](#) is an effective way to keep in touch, be remembered and show you are grateful for someone else's time.

Neglecting to follow up, on the other hand, will unravel any meaningful conversations that you previously had.

If you have communicated solely by email prior to meeting, an email thank-you note can suffice.

However, a 'hard-copy' thank-you note sent through the post is preferred, as it leaves a lasting impact on the receiver.

Importantly, be specific in your message by quoting something that you spoke about during your interview or including a link relating to a topic that was discussed.

Let the other person know they made a significant impression on you.

This will keep the door open to developing the relationship further and to them returning the favor in the future with a referral.

Here is a short follow-up message you could send after an informational interview:

Hi [Professional Name],

Thank you for meeting with me today.

It was great to discuss [topic] with you. I really appreciate the insight you provided and will be [action to take] just as you suggested. I'll be sure to let you know what happens and please let me know if I can repay the favor in any way.

Thanks again for your time.

Yours sincerely,

[Your name]

P.S. I've attached a link to the article on the [topic] we discussed. Let me know what you think about [specific point].

5. Play the long game, not the short game.

Continue to foster the relationship with your new connection well after your interview is over.

If you have not done so already, connect with them through LinkedIn, endorse their skills, and follow their achievements online.

Act as though you are peer sponsoring them, not a fan kissing up to them.

Find as many ways as possible to add value professionally.

Congratulate them for a promotion, pass along an article or conference of interest, or simply write to them to discuss current events in the field.

Now, when a position opens up at their company, you are in a good position to ask them for a referral.

This can be in the form of asking for the name of the hiring manager or simply asking to mention their name as a reference in a cover letter.

When it comes to hosting an informational interview, it's important to have this kind of long-term strategy in place.

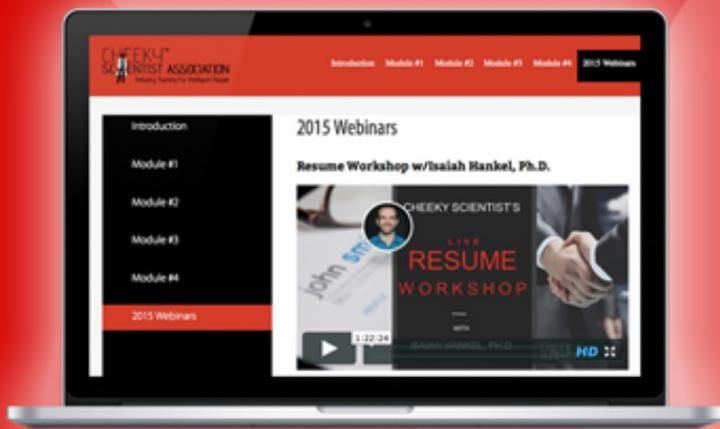
Your goal is to build a lasting professional relationship that you can add value to and turn to for help over and over again.

Your goal is NOT to ask for a quick favor and drop the other person forever.

By staying focused on your overall career, your informational interviews will lead to more referrals and will give you the due diligence you need to make an informed decision on which [industry position is right for you](#).

Informational interviews are a valuable addition to your career transition. The key is to be prepared. Research the interviewee, their industry, and their background beforehand. Prepare important questions to ask in advance while setting reminders to keep the tone of the conversation light and friendly. Never ask for a job during the interview and always send a thank-you letter following your meeting. By continuing to follow up after the meeting, you will ensure the relationship does not lose momentum and you'll be one step closer to getting a referral and getting your first job in industry.

To learn more about transitioning into industry, including instant access to our exclusive training videos, case studies, industry insider documents, transition plan, and private online network, get on the wait list for the [Cheeky Scientist Association](#).



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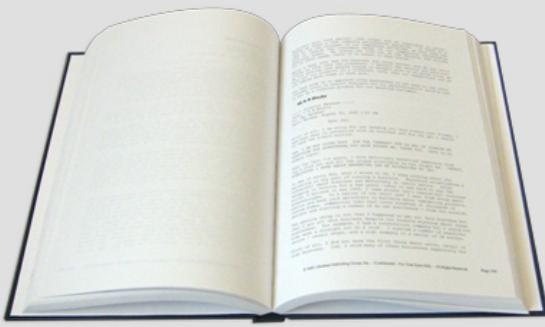
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Cathy has a PhD in Medical Life Science and Technology and currently works as a publishing editor in Cambridge, England where she is involved in peer review of scientific literature as well as writing and public speaking. Cathy is passionate about science communication including translating science to lay audiences and allowing access of scientific research to the public. She is also a steering member in the Cambridge AWiSE, a regional network for women in science, engineering and technology in both industry and academia.

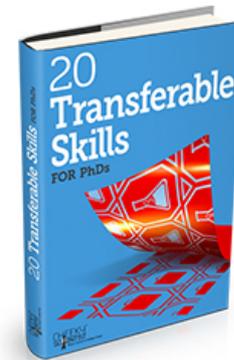


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