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Getting the Inside Scoop on Science Careers

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This is the eighth article in a series designed to help you create an individual development plan (IDP) using myIDP, a new Web-based career-planning tool created to help graduate students and postdocs in the sciences define and pursue their career goals. To learn more about myIDP and begin the career exploration and planning process, please visit: <http://myIDP.sciencecareers.org>

The concept of informational interviewing was introduced by Richard Bolles in his best-selling book, *What Color is Your Parachute*.¹ It is the process of gathering firsthand information from people who are already successful in a career that interests you. An informational interview provides an insider's view of a career path including, if you ask the right questions, the skills that are desired by employers, the day-to-day challenges, and the future of the field. You may also receive valuable tips for making a successful transition. An informational interview is the most effective way to get accurate and personally relevant information about a career path.

“ An informational interview is a powerful way to get information about a career that interests you. It can also help you build self-confidence and get more interviewing experience. ”

Interview whom?

Convinced? Then your first step is to find people to interview. Anyone who you believe could provide information about the field you are interested in is a candidate. The more people you talk to, the more complete your picture will be. This is where your efforts to develop a robust and diversified network will pay off.

Potential candidates for informational interviews include someone you met at a conference, an expert who gave a seminar on your campus, a friend from a recreational team or social club, a relative, or an alumnus who went through your program. You might be able to find contacts through the membership lists for professional organizations to which you belong. LinkedIn is a **useful tool** for identifying potential contacts. Using LinkedIn, you can join groups related to your career interest, search specific companies, and ask for an introduction to people who are linked to your primary connections.

As with all aspects of **networking**, you should be in it for the long haul. This is not a one-time exercise, but a long-term project of building a network of connections that will allow you to make the contributions you want to make in your chosen profession.

Arranging an informational interview

Once you have identified someone who works in a career path you have decided to explore, send a formal letter, an e-mail, or a LinkedIn private message in which you introduce yourself and tell your contact how you learned about him or her. (See **example correspondence** in myIDP.) Mention any common connections—friend, alumnus of same school—since that helps to create some rapport. Request a time to talk either in person or on the phone. Let your contact know that you are seeking information—not a job. Don't be afraid of being turned down: People are remarkably willing to share information about their careers, but not everyone feels they have time.

Preparing for the interview

Informational interviews typically last 30 minutes to an hour. This is not a lot of time so you should prepare carefully to take advantage of the time you have.



The box below provides a list of "starter" questions. As you prepare for the meeting, personalize this list to address the issues that are most important to you. This should include questions directly related to your personal values (see **Values Assessment in myIDP**). For example, if a family-friendly career is very important to you, you may want to ask about flexible work hours, on-site daycare, and so on.

General questions you might ask in an informational interview:

1. Would you tell me a little bit about your current responsibilities?
2. Would you describe a typical day?
3. How did you get into this field? What kinds of additional experience or training did you need to have in order to get a job in this field?
4. What are potential future career opportunities for someone in your position?
5. What types of skills and experiences are essential for succeeding in your position?
6. How would you describe the culture, management style, and organization of your company?
7. Would you talk about typical compensation packages within this career field, including salary range and other benefits, as well as work-life balance?
8. What advice would you give someone in my position who wants to be successful in the field?
9. Would you tell me anything about other firms involved in this activity or sector? Do you know of any companies that might be expanding or hiring in the next year?
10. Are there professional organizations that I should consider joining or Web sites that I should be looking at to get additional information?
11. Would you recommend anyone else to speak with in this field? May I have permission to use your name when I contact them?

The interview

The most important thing to remember about the actual interview is to be respectful. First of all, always be on time. During the interview, be personable but also professional. Make it clear that you do not intend to waste anyone's time.

Start with your elevator pitch: Your background, what you're currently doing, and what you hope to do next. ("I finished my Ph.D. last year in the laboratory of Dr. V, working on W, and currently I'm a postdoc in Dr. X's lab at the university of Y working on Z. Having done some career-related research, I'm thinking I might like to work in regulatory affairs. I'm seeking information about what it's like to work in that field.")

Go down your prepared list of questions, following up as needed to learn what you need to know. Remember: this is an informational interview, not a job interview, so it is not appropriate to ask about job openings in the company. (Sometimes an interviewee may volunteer this information; if that happens, feel free to pursue.)

It is a good idea to ask for contact information—or better still, an introduction—to other potential contacts. Let's say you're interviewing someone who works in the research and development division of a company, but you believe your skills and interests lean more toward a career in regulatory affairs. This is an opportunity for you to obtain contact information for someone who works in the regulatory affairs division of the same company. You can also use this as an opportunity to find out about other companies in the field. This could be of great benefit as you identify target companies for your job search.

The follow up

Keep notes about the things you learn from your informational interviews. The **"Talk to People" section of myIDP** provides a convenient way for you to keep track of the important things you gleaned from each informational interview. These notes will be helpful when you follow up later to share news about your progress.

It is important to recognize that the person you interviewed gave you their time, a precious commodity. Acknowledge this with a written "thank you" note. Whether accomplished with e-mail or with an old fashioned card, your note needs to show appreciation for the person's time, and report—very briefly—what you intend to do with what you learned. (See this **sample follow-up note**.) This action demonstrates your professionalism and helps solidify your connection to this new member of your network.

An informational interview is a powerful way to get information about a career that interests you. It can also help you build self-confidence and get more interviewing experience. And while an informational interview is not a direct attempt to find a job, it is a way of establishing relationships that may some day lead to new opportunities. This is one of the most valuable tools in your career toolbox. Use it.

¹R. N. Bolles, *What Color is Your Parachute?* (Ten Speed Press, New York, 2013).

Posted in: **myIDP, Advice, Graduate, Postdoc, Academic, Government, Other, Industry**
DOI: 10.1126/science.caredit.a1300173

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