

# The Informational Interview: A Job-Hunter's Secret Weapon

This article originally appeared at [I Will Teach You to Be Rich](#) in a slightly different format.

Finding a job can be tough. Competition is fierce, and even if you've got the skills, it's a challenge to make yourself known to the right people. According to Michael Hampton, Director of Career Development at [Western Oregon University](#), **informational interviews are a valuable networking technique that can give you an edge on your competition.**



*The informational interview is designed to help you choose or refine a career path. You can learn how to break in and find out if you have what it takes to succeed. Spending time with one of your network contacts in a highly focused conversation will provide you with key information you need to launch or boost your career.*

An informational interview is *not* the same as a job interview. It's an opportunity to find out more about a particular career or company. These sorts of interviews can be valuable for anyone, not just those looking for a new job. You might consider this approach if:

- You're a recent graduate exploring possible career opportunities.
- You have an established career, but would like to discover what it might be like to work for another company.
- You feel as if you've done as much as you can in your current job and are interested in changing fields.

By meeting with somebody experienced in the field you're considering, you can find out more about what the work is *really* like, about how much it pays, and about the drawbacks.

## ***The first rule***

Before you begin seeking informational interviews, it's important to understand a couple of rules:

1. The first rule of informational interviews is: *do not ask for a job.*
2. The second rule of informational interviews is: *do not ask for a job.*

If you meet with somebody under the pretenses of gathering information and you attempt to turn the encounter into a job application, you're just going to make her angry. If, after the interview is finished, she thinks you're promising and she has a position available, she'll contact you. **Do not ask for a job.**

## ***Conducting the informational interview***

Your first step is to find people with jobs that look intriguing. Once you've identified some likely candidates, prepare a simple phone script to make sure you get everything you need in your initial contact. It can be helpful to approach the informational interview as if you were a reporter. Pretend you're gathering information for a news story. This can help calm your nerves. Make sure to adhere to the following guidelines:

- **Ask politely.** If the person declines the interview, respect her boundaries. If she accepts, select a time and location that works for both of you. (Phone interviews are fine.) Confirm the time and location.

- **Be prepared.** Dress appropriately. Be punctual. Do your homework — learn what you can about the company from trade magazines, press releases, and past (and present) employees. Research will allow you to skip questions that could have been easily answered via another source. You want to use this opportunity to ask more intelligent, relevant questions.
- **Listen.** Be ready with a list of open-ended questions. Let the interviewee talk about herself. Good questions include:
  - “What is your typical day like?”
  - “What do you like most (and least) about your job?”
  - “How does your company differ from its competitors?”
  - “What is the future like for this industry?”
- **Take notes.** Remember that you’re conducting this interview to gain insight into a possible career. Write down anything that might be important. Ask follow-up questions.
- **Be brief.** Keep track of time. Don’t rush the interview, but don’t overstay your welcome, either. If you’ve done your homework, you know which questions to ask. Get the information you need in a timely fashion, and then let the person return to her workday. Pay attention to signals that it’s time to leave.

Don’t forget to send e-mail or a brief hand-written note to thank the person for taking time out of her day to meet with you.

Informational interviews aren’t just for job seekers. You can use them to locate mentors or to pick the brains of experts on a favorite subject. I’m preparing to write a book, for example, and have been fortunate to find half a dozen authors who have been willing to take time to describe their experience with the publishing process.

### **Further reading**

If you’d like more information on this subject, follow this inter-related web conversation:

- Waypoint: [Informational interviews](#)
- *The New York Times*: [Mastering the informational interview](#)
- Publishing Careers: [Don’t become an informational interview pet peeve statistic](#)
- *The New York Times*: [Pet peeves about informational interviews](#)

Although the primary rule of the informational interview is to never ask for a job, there *is* an exception. Says Western Oregon University’s Michael Hampton:



*If you discover a job that you want to apply for during the interview, wait. The next day, call the employer and tell your contact that the informational interview not only confirmed your interest in the field, but made you aware of a position that you would like to formally apply for.*

The best part about the informational interview? Few people use them. Add this weapon to your arsenal, and you’ll have an advantage on everyone else who’s out there looking for a job.