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Informational Interviewing: Getting Information You Can Use

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Scientists have a head start on many other job searchers because they have been trained in scientific research methods, and looking for a job is much like seeking the solution to a scientific or technical question. It takes planning, background research, experimentation, and data analysis to refine the questions and find the answers. This article will take you through a quasi-scientific methodology intended to help you uncover information that will help you in your job search. The methodology is called informational interviewing.

Informational interviewing shares some features with [networking](#), but unlike most networking activities, an informational interview is planned with the goal of gaining information--specific information. As with your scientific research, you're likely to get other useful information as you go through this process, information you didn't anticipate getting. Nevertheless, it's important to start out with a particular objective--or set of objectives--in mind. And although the key objective of informational interviewing isn't networking, informational interviewing is networking, in that the contacts you make may end up helping you find a job.

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Where Do You Start?

Start by designing the experiment. Before you can decide who to talk to, you should design the structure for the ideal informational interview, while keeping in mind that not every interview subject will be able to answer every question. This is one area in which your technical training should be of assistance.

Ask yourself key questions: What ultimate outcome are you hoping for? (What kind of job are you looking for?) What information do you need to achieve this outcome? Do you need to know who is hiring? What credentials they are looking for? How you can help yourself stand out from a crowded field of potential job applicants?

Informational interviews can uncover a variety of career- or job-related information. Common areas include matching up your general career goals to specific jobs (or types of jobs), discovering unadvertised jobs, and identifying your professional strengths and weakness as they relate to your particular career choices. These are just a few of many possibilities. Every job search is different.

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As in scientific research, you should begin with clear objectives in mind, but these objectives may change as the experiment progresses. Research, after all, is as much about refining questions as it is about finding answers. It's an incremental process.

Once you have an idea of what kind of information you're looking for, it's time to find people to talk to. Who is likely to have the information you need? Which of them are likely to be willing to talk to you? The answers to these questions will depend on what sort of job you're seeking and what kind of information you need. It will also depend on what position you're in. Use all available resources--telephone books, alumni associations, career offices, friends, colleagues ... anyone or anything you can think of.

Because people's time is precious, you must be sure to make the most of it by being prepared. Prepare for each interview individually. Which of the questions on your master list is a particular interviewee likely to be able to answer? Respect people's time and, unless you're invited to hang around for a while, plan on keeping the interviews short.

Experimentation Time

After you have defined the problem and established the design, you need to collect the data. Call the people on your list and make appointments. Be prepared to tell them the precise purpose of the proposed meeting. Then go out there and do the interviews.

It is important to do several informational interviews. It not only expands your network, it also validates your data: If your questions draw a consistent response it will be that much easier to draw conclusions and you'll have that much more confidence in your conclusions.

This process involves experimentation not only in the sense that you need to do experiments to collect data, but also in the sense that you need to do experiments in order to refine your experimental technique. As with your lab work, the more times you repeat an experiment, the more you will learn about doing the experiment, the better you will get at it, and the better your results will become. With experience comes confidence. With confidence comes precision.

Expect to alter your interview design as you learn from the interviews you conduct. You can also use these first interviews to identify other people who might be helpful; you can then set up and conduct additional interviews--new experiments. With this incremental approach you're likely to learn a lot about the job market you're entering, which will be a great help in your job search. You'll get a lot of interviewing experience, which will make you more comfortable in employment interviews. You'll also be presenting a human face to people who are already in the industry and who might soon be called upon to make a recommendation or a hiring decision. This, too, is a major plus.

Insider Tip #1: Learn From Others

You can better prepare yourself in your job search if you learn what helped others land their jobs and what may have hindered them in getting their jobs.

I should point out there is a simple difference between informational interviewing and job interviewing. In the latter, you are pursuing a known specific job opening. With informational interviewing you are seeking information that can provide an inside track on a job or improve your odds of being selected. One way you can tell the difference is that in informational interviewing you are listening almost 80% of the time, but in job interviewing you should be talking almost 80% of the time. But do not forget that the person you are talking with might end up hiring you or recommending to someone else that you be hired. Even as they fulfill your need for information, they might be sizing you up. So be sure to follow proper [networking etiquette](#).

Again, as with experimental science you should observe to see what works and what does not work each time you conduct an informational interview and modify your subsequent sessions accordingly.

Analyze the Data and Draw Conclusions

When you begin your job search, you may know little more than what's given in the job ads in the back of *Science*. It can seem as though there's nothing you can do to help yourself besides going through cycles of application and rejection. Informational interviewing is a way out of that unpleasant cycle, a side step that can make the journey more pleasant and productive. The more you search, the more you'll learn--and the more effective you'll become in your search. There *is* something more that you can do.

Now that you have the insider's edge, your informational interviewing experiments should yield good findings.

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