

# **INFORMATIONAL INTERVIEWING & NETWORKING**

## **THE MOST EFFECTIVE JOB SEARCH TECHNIQUE**

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*Understanding how luck, caprice, and whimsy affect [your job search] is like playing a ball game. There are rules and boundaries to finding a job. It's the extra effort, the spirit, the way the ball bounces (and how you bounce back from disappointment) that judge your mettle and success. In good times and bad, there are good jobs. New firms are forming, new life is breathed into a thousand old-line endeavors. . . . Your job is to find them.*

Richard Irish, *Go Hire Yourself an Employer*

**Fact: 60-75% of jobs lie in the hidden job market.** The way to penetrate the hidden job market is through networking. Although you can find a job in the advertised job market, it often takes a lot longer, and you are much more likely to experience high competition and numerous rejections when you focus only on posted job announcements.

## **WHAT IS NETWORKING/INFORMATIONAL INTERVIEWING ?**

Networking means contacting people in a field or organization in which you wish to work, to *ask for information, not a job*. Networking, also known as informational interviewing, is the job seeker's equivalent of market research. It is essential in learning about a field and job functions which fit your talents, and in evaluating organizations that could be a good match for you. Networking is also a method of discovering jobs not publicly advertised. In a networking meeting, you meet with a person who works in the field you are exploring to:

- expand your knowledge of the job market in the field(s) you want to explore
- learn about opportunities which may interest you and the skills they require
- clarify what jobs are really like before you commit yourself
- shorten your job search time, find quality jobs, and target positions that best fit your particular mix of interests and skills
- learn about salary ranges, typical career paths, how specific organizations find new people, and which companies are hiring
- become a more impressive candidate and build your confidence for later job interviews
- build support for your job search by expanding the number of people who can help you

Informational interviews are NOT job interviews! Job interviews are formal meetings for the purpose of evaluating and screening job applicants. Informational interviews are informal meetings which can occur at conferences, meetings of professional associations, social events, or in one-on-one meetings at your contact's workplace. These conversations can help you uncover opportunities, learn about ways to enter a specific field, and research inside information about a particular organization's culture and expectations.

# EIGHT STEPS TO SUCCESSFUL NETWORKING

## 1) **Think About What Fields You Want to Explore**

Consider the content of the work you'd like to do and the environment in which you want to work. Books, guides and on-line publications describe specific fields, job functions and typical career paths, and list organizations. Look for a job that is a fit for you rather than trying to fit yourself into an available position.

## 2) **Develop a List of Possible Contacts**

To find these contacts, use people such as family, friends, former bosses, or professional association contacts. It is most useful to talk directly with people who are doing the job you're interested in, not to someone in human resources; although HR people play an important role in the hiring process, their job is to screen candidates, not provide advice and contacts.

## 3) **Ask For the Interview**

You can do this by phone, email, or by letter with a follow-up phone call. Assume that the person is very busy, but will enjoy giving you advice, and perhaps ask you for advice in the future.

## 4) **Prepare Yourself**

Read about your contact's field and organization so they will feel you are seriously interested and you will get the most out of your meeting. Building a target list of 5-10 organizations in which you are interested will demonstrate your focus.

## 5) **Conduct an Effective Meeting**

Keep to the time limit you requested. Remember that you are the one who initiated contact and it is your role to ask questions to learn what you need to know, with courtesy and appreciation for your contact's time and energy. It is also important to describe your background and interests in a clear, concise way. Your goals are fourfold:

- to learn more about the career path you're considering
- to present your background and interests clearly
- to learn more about the company itself
- to obtain referrals

## 6) **Ask for Further Referrals**

*Once you have developed a relationship*, ask for referrals. When you present your interests and needs in a concise and specific way, your contact will feel more confident in referring you to colleagues for similar information meetings.

## 7) **Follow Up**

Send a thank you note, which can be typed or handwritten on quality paper, including your address and phone. Thoughtful people tend to be remembered.

## 8) **Create a Tracking System**

Keep track of your contacts. You may want to recontact this person later, and it is a good idea to write them when you find a job. Networking is a 'two-way street,' and they may want to ask *you* for help in the future.

When done effectively, networking meetings will yield valuable perspectives which help you explore, develop more contacts, and eventually produce solid job leads.

# HOW TO SET UP NETWORKING MEETINGS

You can phone your contact directly, write an approach letter, or send an email asking for a meeting. Information meetings are far more effective when conducted in person rather than over the phone or by email. Phone meetings are necessary in long distance job searches, or when asking for a referral to someone more appropriate. However, people normally share referrals to their network only when they know you and have confidence in your abilities. This type of relationship is difficult to establish on-line or over the phone.

If initially you feel uncomfortable with the process, it is probably better to send a letter or email first, and then call to ask whether you can set up a meeting. Do not expect your contact to call or write back. You retain the initiative and call again. If you reach voicemail or a receptionist, leave a clear message with your name, number, and the name of the person who referred you, saying you will call back the next day. You can ask a receptionist the best time to call again.

## Sample Phone Conversation

Writing your own script out ahead of time will help you feel more comfortable and in control of the situation. Practice your script until it sounds natural and upbeat. Rehearse it with someone who can give you feedback. *Always check whether the person has time to talk to you, so you have their attention. Offer to call them back . . . don't expect them to call you.*

- Introduce yourself and explain how you got their name
- Ask if they are free to talk for a few minutes
- If they're not, ask for the best time to call back and be sure you actually call then
- Tell them you are RESEARCHING the \_\_\_\_\_ field, and asking for ADVICE, not a job
- Ask for a 20-30 minute meeting at their convenience, at their worksite, and assure them you know they are busy and you will be brief. OPTIONAL: You can offer to buy them a cup of coffee or take them to lunch, but this can be expensive; meeting them in their office is often more convenient for them and helpful for your research.
- Be sure to get clear directions to their workplace

## Sample Approach Letter

An approach letter (or email) is very different from a cover letter. An approach letter asks for advice and a meeting to exchange ideas. A cover letter asks directly for a job, and normally receives a 'yes-or-no' response. An approach letter is usually addressed to someone to whom you have been referred, to a Career Action Center Network contact, or to someone actually working in the field in which you are interested.

It is usually best not to enclose a resume with your approach letter, as it looks more like you are applying for a job. Describe your experience in your letter in a brief, natural way. If you do enclose your resume, mention in your letter: *"I have enclosed my resume so you will have some information on my background."* See **Sample Approach Letters**, p. 7.

## SAMPLE DIALOGUE FOR A NETWORKING MEETING

People tend to be very busy, so be sure you keep the meeting to the time you requested. Meetings in person, which are the most effective, should probably take no more than 30 minutes, phone meetings should only last 10-15 minutes. Meetings in person are *much* more effective.

### Introduction

"Hello. It's a pleasure to meet you, and I really appreciate your taking the time to see me or speak to me." (Always check whether the person has time to talk to you, so you have their attention. Offer to call them back . . . don't expect them to call you.)

## Purpose

"As I said in my letter, I am exploring different career fields and opportunities. I am especially interested in learning more about the \_\_\_\_\_ field. I am not looking for a job at this point, but am researching the field and would appreciate your perspective as someone involved in the field."

## Build Relationship (let them be the expert)

"What kinds of projects do you work on? What led you to this position?"

"What do you like most and least about your work?"

"What are the personal qualities of people who are successful in this field?"

"How would you describe a typical week in terms of the percentage of time you spend on the different parts of your job?"

"What kinds of backgrounds do people in this organization (field) have?"

"What are the most pressing needs and issues for your department within the overall organization?"

## Transition

"This has been very helpful to me. It's useful to hear about your experience."

## Your Background in Brief, Conversational Terms (Practice this 'thumbnail sketch' beforehand.)

"I'd like to tell you a little more about my background, so you can give me advice on how I might plan my next steps . . ."

"I have taken some time to think about my experience and education to this point, and feel my particular skills involve analysis (using my econ background and interest in solving complex strategic problems), communicating verbally and thinking on my feet, a good sense of teamwork, working with a team to meet deadlines, and being a clear writer."

## Optional

If you have a significant amount of experience in this or related fields, you may want to ask if they would be willing to look over your resume and comment on its clarity or appropriateness for this field. However, if you have limited work experience it probably isn't helpful, and may take too much time away from more useful questions. It's easy to spend a lot of time on resume critiques!

## Suggested Questions if You are Exploring a Career Field

"What are typical career paths in this field?"

"I've built a target list of organizations in this field to research. Would you be willing to look at my list and give me any suggestions you might have?"

"What other kinds of organizations do (health educators) work in?"

"Given my background and interests, are there other organizations you might suggest I explore?"

"How would you advise me to get started in building experience in this field?"

"Do you have an idea how I might target younger, growing companies?"

"What organizations hire entry level people in (advertising)?"

"How do you see the next few years in terms of job prospects in this field?"

"I understand more and more organizations are outsourcing and using contract staff. Is this a factor in this field? Is contract or temp work a way to get started?"

"Are there conferences which might be useful for newcomers to attend? Or a professional association?"

"If you were me, to whom would you be talking?"

## Suggested Questions if You are Exploring a Specific Job Function

- "What is a typical day/week like for you?"
- "Can you manage your own workflow, or does the nature of the work dictate the pace?"
- "What kinds of colleague or client interactions predominate in this type of position?"
- "What traits have led to your success in this kind of job?"
- "What kind of background or training is desirable for (event planners)?"
- "Which positions offer the opportunity to build the kinds of skills and background I might need?"
- "Are there certain classes or training programs you would recommend for building experience for this type of position?"
- "If you were me and looking for this type of work in an organization such as yours, how would you be proceeding?"
- "What single factor would most improve your capacity to provide quality service to your organization?"
- "I found an opening in \_\_\_\_ as a \_\_\_\_\_. In your opinion, would this type of position lead to \_\_\_\_\_, or are they 'dead-end' jobs?"

## Suggested Questions if You are Evaluating Organizations as Potential Employers

- "Why did you choose this organization?"
- "What do you like about this organization? Dislike?"
- "What kind of training is provided for new staff?"
- "What traits tend to lead to success in this organization?"
- "How is performance evaluated? What is rewarded?"
- "Have layoffs occurred recently? Do you feel alternatives were explored?"
- "Is this organization in a growth mode? What future trends do you foresee?"
- "What is the work environment like in terms of pressure, deadlines, new projects, teamwork vs. independent work, etc.?"
- "Is this a place where collaboration or independent work is more common?"
- "Is there encouragement for innovation here?"
- "What are typical work schedules here? Is it common to work nights/weekends?"
- "To what extent do you feel office politics make it difficult for you to do your work? How well do departments work together?"
- "Do new teams form, or do people tend to work in the same groups long term?"
- "Is it possible to balance career and personal life reasonably well here?"
- "Is there employer childcare?"
- "How is job-sharing or part-time work regarded here?"
- "Are there significant numbers of women in management? People of color?"
- "Is there an effort to conserve/recycle?"
- "Is working on the leading edge or producing a high quality product more important here?"

## Ask for Referrals

"You've been very generous with your time, and you've given me several new ideas to explore. I have a final request: "

## Important!

"The jobs you thought might be appropriate for someone with my skills and background sound interesting, and I'd like to find out more about these possibilities. Do you know anyone in these kinds of jobs who would be willing, like yourself, to provide me with additional advice and information?"

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"Do you know anyone in (market research) at (Ajax Enterprises) who could give me advice or would be willing to share their knowledge and give me ideas for further contacts?"

## Thank Them

"Thanks again for taking the time to talk with me. I've enjoyed our meeting. You've been very helpful, and I appreciate it. I will let you know how I'm doing." POSSIBLY: "This meeting has been so helpful; may I contact you in a few months when I have progressed further in my search?"

## Optional

You might ask if they would like a copy of your resume. However, you need to use your judgement at this point, since it may seem like you are suddenly asking for a job, and you want to leave on a positive note, having built a new relationship which you could perhaps follow up with in a few months.\* The *relationship* is more important to you than getting a resume into their hands.

\*Idea for reconnecting with your contact: "I wanted to thank you again for your help, and let you know how my meeting with \_\_\_\_\_ went. At this point, I am pursuing \_\_\_\_\_ direction, and wanted to ask your opinion about this."

## THANK YOU LETTERS

Your letter can be typed or handwritten, on good quality, 5"x7" or smaller paper, with a matching envelope. Be sure to include your address and phone and email, so that your contact can get back in touch with you if they remember more information for you.

## COMMON MYTHS ABOUT NETWORKING

### Myth # 1

"Networking is an extroverted, aggressive, "hard-shell approach" which involves deceiving and using people by asking for information and advice to get job interviews." If you are to use networking to its maximum advantage, you will avoid this hard-sell approach, and be honest and natural with others. You are much more likely to find a job which is a good match for you if you assess your own skills and interests and research fields and organizations before you start applying directly for a job. Having honest, relaxed information meetings will help you find a place in which you can feel comfortable and do your best work.

### Myth # 2

"I prefer doing this by phone. I'm too busy (or shy) to see people in person." Face-to-face meetings are far more effective in helping you experience the environments in which you might work and in developing the understanding and confidence that your contact needs to entrust you with referrals to his/her network. Of course, if the perfect contact is in New York, you will probably have to talk by phone (and perhaps meet later).

### Myth # 3

"I know enough about my field. I don't need information, I need a job. I am going to send cover letters and resumes to personnel directors of 20 targeted companies." You may land a job this way, especially if your degree and skills exactly match what an organization is seeking. Most managers in large companies, owners of small companies, and personnel directors all prefer referrals to applications from strangers.

### Myth # 4

"I'll ask for advice. Then when I meet with them, I'll ask for a job, because that's what I really need." The goals and rules of networking and interviewing are completely different. You cannot successfully do both at the same time. To directly solicit jobs from networking contacts in information interviews is to undermine the basis of your relationship: the relaxed exchange of information.

## Myth # 5

"I got into college and found summer jobs by applying to a few places and deciding on the best offer. The job market can't be that different. It is not easy to find a job or build a career given the current structure of the job market, which is relatively disorganized, although it projects the illusion of coherence and structure. Most of the systems organized to help you find a job do not provide the information you need to land a job that is most related to your skills and interests. Many employers bypass time-consuming and risky organized systems (such as newspaper ads) and prefer to ask current employees for referrals. Research has shown that this method most often leads to a successful match. Therefore, the more direct contact you have with people working in your target field, the more you can see where opportunities lie that fit your interests, and be the one they refer when openings arise.

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- *Work with Passion*, Anderson
- *Network Your Way to Job and Career Success*, Krannich & Krannich
- *The Smart Women's Guide to Networking*, Hadley and Sheldon

## Sample Approach Letter 1

From: jane@stanford.edu  
To: lee@industry.com  
Subject: request for advice

Dear Ms. Lee:

I read an article you wrote in *Money* magazine on Japanese money market funds. As I am doing personal research on the Japanese stock market, I was especially interested in your article, and thought you would be a good person to ask for career advice.

Would it be possible for us to set up a short 20 minute meeting? Over the next few months I will be conducting a job search, and I am certain your advice would be helpful as I begin looking for opportunities.

I understand you are very busy, and appreciate your time.

Sincerely,

Jane Summers