

Conducting Informational Interviews

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INFORMATIONAL INTERVIEWS are an under-utilized but effective strategy for networking and for exploring areas of technical communication into which you want to expand. You can use an informational interview at any point in your career.

With an informational interview, you get to put your journalism skills to work. Unlike a job interview, you are the one asking most of the questions. Your goal is to come out of the interview with a deeper understanding of the area you are researching and the person you are interviewing. You also want to end the interview by getting additional names of people to talk to and at least one resource for further research.

Here are the steps you need to take:

1. Identify an area you want to learn more about (subject area, company, job, etc.)
2. Review your network to find three people who are experts in the area in which you are interested.
3. Set up the interviews.
4. Prepare for the interviews.
5. Conduct the interviews.
6. Thank the people for their time.

Identify an Area You Are Interested In

Do you want to change industries? Are you thinking about joining a startup or becoming a consultant? Do you want to leverage your skills in a different area of technical communication and aren't sure how to get there (e.g., e-learning, content strategy, project management, team management, or usability research)?

An informational interview can help you decide if the change is right for you. In addition, your interviewee can often provide insight into how you should re-structure your résumé, tell you what keywords are important, and what skills to emphasize.

Once you know what you are interested in learning about, poke around on the Internet, read some books or articles, and identify people whose names appear frequently in association with the topic. This preliminary research will help you clarify your questions and refine your list of people to talk to.

Review Your Network

Chances are good that someone in your network either has expertise in the area you are interested in or knows

someone who does. If you don't know the person personally, but someone in your network does, ask for an introduction. Don't be shy! Most people in our profession are very open and willing to share their knowledge. If they can't help, ask them to point you to someone who might be able to.

Here's a sample email:

Dear _____,

My colleague, _____, suggested that I contact you about some research I'm conducting on _____.

[if in person] I would love to buy you lunch or coffee and learn more about your expertise in _____. When would be a good time?

[if on the phone] I would appreciate it if we could have a conference call to talk about _____. When would be a good time?

Thanks in advance for your help!

Regards,
[Your Name]
[your contact info]

Schedule the Interviews

Depending on whether you are meeting by phone or in person, you need to think about different things:

- ▶ If you are meeting in person, pick a restaurant or coffee shop convenient for them. Find somewhere that is relatively quiet and distraction-free. Arrive a few minutes early.
- ▶ If meeting on the phone, be sure to find out their time zone and accommodate it. Make sure that you arrive to the call a few minutes early.

Prepare for the Interviews

During your initial research, you probably identified some questions you have about your topic. Now, you need to refine them so that they fit with your interviewee's particular skills or experiences. The better your questions, the better the information and responses you will get, so take some time to really think about the question. *A More Beautiful Question* by Warren Berger talks about the importance of asking the right questions in the right way.

Write down your questions so that you can be sure to cover everything during the interviews.

Conduct the Interviews

Remember, most people love talking about what they do and about their experiences. Be prepared to listen and to take notes. Ask if you can record it so you can go back later if you need to (unless you are asking people to talk about their companies or about competitors).

Take (or send) your résumé. Depending on the topic you are discussing, you can often get feedback from the interviewee. In most cases, the people you are interviewing don't currently have jobs available in the area you are researching, but if you make a good impression, they might remember you later.

For example, early in my career, I conducted an informational interview with someone who worked at a medical device manufacturer. It sounded like my dream job, where I could use both my medical background and my master's degree in technical communication. A year later, he called and said that he finally had budget to hire me and asked if I still interested. I jumped at the chance, doubled my salary from the temp job I was working, and ended up working there for almost five years.

During the interviews, keep the following things in mind:

- ▶ Keep it positive.
- ▶ Ask questions that encourage a more detailed answer. (Avoid Yes/No questions.)
- ▶ Pause for 20 or 30 seconds after they seem to be done talking. People often think of more to say if you give them a little space.
- ▶ Ask follow-up questions.
- ▶ Don't be afraid to go off script. You don't have to ask all of the questions you prepared. Sometimes, you go in thinking you will learn one thing and discover something else. That's OK.
- ▶ End on time. Be respectful of the other person's time.
- ▶ Ask for three names to follow up with. Ask if you can use their name when introducing yourself.
- ▶ Ask for two resources that you can explore for more information.
- ▶ Ask if you can add them to your network.

Say Thank You

Always send a thank-you note to the person after the meeting. In the note, mention at least one thing that was helpful to you.

In addition, follow up with them periodically and let them know how you are doing and how you connected with their contacts. They invested some time in you.

Look for a way you can return the favor. Often, these end up being a "pay it forward" kind of thing rather than a straight transaction. That is OK. Many people who like mentoring do it because others mentored them when they were starting out or shifting gears.

Go forth and connect! ■

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