

BENNINGTON

Networking Guide

Research shows that job-hunters tend to apply for jobs in the opposite way in which employers tend to fill them. In other words, whereas job-hunters tend to start by sending out unsolicited resumes and answering advertisements online or in newspapers, employers prefer to promote internally or hire someone who is referred through a colleague or trusted friend. **Experts estimate that 80% of all job vacancies are never listed; employers fill them in their own quiet way.** This means that job search strategies emphasizing personal connection and networking are by far the most effective. Because of this, it is important to start building your network of contacts early on. An incredible way to do this—while learning more about your desired career in the process—is informational interviewing.

Informational interviews are focused conversations that provide you with key information you may use to launch or redirect your career. They are a great way to assess what direction you want to move towards after graduation. Although informational interviews are NOT intended as conversations in which you ask for a job, if handled skillfully, they are perhaps your most efficient path to a job. Statistics show that only one out of every two hundred unsolicited resumes (some studies put the number as high as 1,500 resumes) leads to a job offer. **Alternatively, one out of every 12 informational interviews results in a job offer** (QuintessentialCareers.com).

Guidelines for informational interviewing

- **Inventory your network**

Reach out to friends, family, fellow students, present and former co-workers, professors, and the Alumni Network to find companies, organizations, or other institutions that you'd like to work for. You should also review your online social networks including Facebook friends, LinkedIn contacts, and Twitter followers. You might send a brief email, LinkedIn or Facebook message to people in your network describing your interests and explaining that you want to learn more about work in that field. Then, ask if they might know of any people or organizations who would be interesting for you to talk to.

- **Reach out to the person you'd like to interview**

Send a short, proof-read email to your contact highlighting how you know of them, what your interest in their work or profession is, and asking if it would be possible to connect with them at their convenience. For example, you might say:

Dear (Ms./Mr. Last Name),

I am writing to you on the suggestion of Bennington College's Alumni Relations Office, with a request for a 30-minute informational interview about your work at a time that is convenient for you. As background, I am a graduating Senior studying (insert concentration area) and I found your LinkedIn profile to reflect my professional interests in (insert specific interests as they relate to your contact's work). Specifically, I am interested in your work in (insert note about their work) and I would like to ask you some questions about this. Recognizing that you may be very busy, could you let me know if you would be open to a conversation and when would be the most convenient timing for you? I appreciate your time.

*Sincerely,
(Your Name)*

- **Prepare ahead of time**

Research the organization and person you'll be speaking with ahead of time and take notes. Research your contact's background on LinkedIn or elsewhere online. Read any articles they've published or projects they've worked on. The more knowledge you have, the more confident you will feel about your ability to communicate effectively. Prepare questions to ask that are not ones you could find answers to online. Some potential question types might be:

- Day to day work
 - What is a typical day at your job like?
 - What kinds of problems do you solve?
 - What percentage of your time is spent doing various tasks?

- How this person came to their job
 - Why did this type of work interest you and how did you get started?
 - What jobs and experience have led you to your present position?
 - Can you suggest some ways a recent graduate might obtain the necessary experience to do your job?
 - What are the most important personal satisfactions and dissatisfactions connected with your occupation?
 - How did your college experience prepare you for this job?
- Company specifics
 - What do you like most about this company? How do you feel it differs from its competitors?
 - What does the company do to contribute to its employees' professional development?
 - How does the company make use of technology for internal communication and outside marketing?
 - How would you describe the working atmosphere and the people with whom you work?
- Industry specifics
 - What sorts of changes are occurring in your industry?
 - How does a person progress in your field?
 - What are the major qualifications for success in this industry?
 - What particular skills or talents are most essential to be effective in your job?
 - If your work were suddenly eliminated, what kinds of work do you feel prepared to do?
 - How is the economy affecting your industry?
 - What can you tell me about the employment outlook in your field? How much demand is there for people in this occupation? Can you estimate the industry wide job openings in the future?
 - What are the typical entry-level job titles and functions? What entry-level jobs are best for learning as much as possible?
 - How has your job affected your lifestyle?
- Advice
 - Do you have any advice for someone interested in this field/job? Are there any written materials you suggest I read?
 - What special advice do you have for a recent graduate seeking to qualify for this position?
 - Do you have any words of warning or encouragement as a result of your experience?
 - These are my strongest assets (skills, areas of knowledge, personality traits and values):_____. Where would they fit in this field?
 - How would you assess the experience I've had so far in terms of entering this field?

- **Dress as you would for a job interview**

Be prepared to make a good first impression and to be remembered by the employer. You never know what job openings they might have or what might come up in the future.

- **Open the conversation**

When conducting an informational interview, you want to be gracious and express your genuine curiosity about your contact's work. You can open the conversation by saying something like, *"Thank you so much for sitting down with me today. I appreciate you taking the time to do this. I have read about your background on LinkedIn and your organization's website and I have some questions that I'd like to ask about your work and the path that lead you to it. Also, I'm eager to hear anything you think is relevant for a recent graduate hoping to break into this field."*

Important: Although you may want a job, informational interviewing is not an appropriate context to directly ask for a job or internship. Employers will grant informational interviews when they trust that you won't be following up by asking for employment. If you do ask for a job, it could turn the employer off and they could feel misled. Follow the timing and lead of your contact/interviewee. If you let them take the lead, you are likely to be directed to contact(s) that will, in fact, lead to a job offer.

- **Take Notes**
You don't need to write down everything, but you may encounter names, phone numbers or other information that you may want to remember.
- **Balance sharing and listening**
Share about yourself, but do not dominate the interview by talking about you. Practice with an FWT Staff Member or a family friend who works in your desired field so you are prepared to share about your background in a succinct and professional way. You can book an appointment with a Career Advisor on Genbook to role play how the interview might go. Listen attentively, and be sure to reflect back the key information that you hear. For example, *"I think I hear you saying that your field places a high value on self-motivated workers. Is that right?"*
- **Go over your resume if it feels right**
Ask your contact about specific qualifications that employers in the field seek when hiring. If you feel comfortable doing so, you may ask the person you are interviewing to critique your resume or digital portfolio.
- **Ask for referrals**
Before leaving the informational interview, ask your contact to suggest names of other who might be helpful to you. Be sure to ask permission to use your contact's name.
- **Close the conversation**
Graciousness and tact are key here. Assuming that the conversation went well and you feel comfortable, you might say something like, *"Thank you again for talking with me today. I appreciate your time, and you have helped me to understand many aspects of your field. If you are open to it, I would enjoy staying in touch over email periodically, and I would appreciate any thoughts about contacts or opportunities that might be a good fit for me going forward."* Again, be cautious: you want to be sure that your interviewee doesn't feel like they're being asked for a job.
- **Send a thank you**
Be sure to send a thank you email within 24 hours of the interview.
- **Keep in touch**
Stay in touch with your contact over email, Facebook, LinkedIn, etc. Look for reasons to reach out to your contact every 6 months or so. This kind of informal follow up helps to keep you fresh in your contact's mind, and could even lead to a job if your timing is right. For example, if you see on LinkedIn that your contact has started a new project, you could send a brief InMail saying that the project sounds interesting and you would enjoy hearing more.