Information Interviews

Over the course of your work life, networking will be the single most effective method of advancing your career. Networking plays a role in the majority of hiring decisions. Many job vacancies are never advertised, but instead filled through personal or professional referrals. Employers prefer to hire candidates they have met, or those referred by a trusted source.

Among Cornell bachelor’s degree recipients seeking a first position, personal contact has proven extremely important; for example, almost a fifth of job seekers responding to the Class of 2013 postgraduate activities survey found their jobs through networking.

What Is Networking?
• Networking is talking with people who will learn about you and your interests, and then help you gain insight into your career options and goals.
• It is a two-way process that involves developing and maintaining connections with individuals, and mutually benefitting from the relationships when seeking leads or internships.
• Networking requires ongoing time and attention; it is not something you do only when you are looking for a job.

What Is Information Interviewing?
Information interviewing is a specific networking tool for learning firsthand about a career path, employer, industry, or other career information. It is the process of conducting exploratory conversations with those in your network who can give you career advice and introduce you to others who can help you define your goals. Information interviews provide the means to: Gather information; Make a lasting impression; Obtain referrals to other contacts or opportunities.

Build a Contact List
Family members, friends, faculty, staff, and alumni are all potential contacts. Identify other contacts through:
• LinkedIn—create a professional profile and begin to make connections and join groups of interest to you.
• On-campus events—career fairs, alumni panels and speakers, employer information sessions, and class presentations.
• Affiliations—professional and community-based organizations, fraternities and sororities, IvyLife and other memberships.
• Research—LexisNexis, industry/trade publications, employer websites, alumni magazines, and library resources, which can help identify potential contacts.
• Job-shadowing (external) programs, internships, and summer jobs—opportunities to conduct information interviews while you’re in the workplace and obtain referrals from your supervisors and co-workers.

How Do I Ask Someone to Speak/Meet With Me?
Call or e-mail to arrange a conversation with your contact. If you set up a meeting by phone, prepare a brief script introducing yourself and explaining how you got the person’s name and why you are calling. Here is a sample phone introduction:

“Hello, Mr. Smith. My name is Patricia Jones, and I am a classmate of your son Mike, who suggested I give you a call. I am considering public relations as a career, and I’m trying to learn more about the field and the types of opportunities that may be available. Mike told me that you work for the public relations firm Ezra and White and have considerable PR experience. Might you have 20–30 minutes to meet with me at your convenience?”

Caution: Be prepared to ask your questions when you call, as your contact may want to talk then. When writing, offer the same explanations and suggest that you will call to arrange a meeting.
• Schedule an appointment. This elevates your conversation to a business-level priority and helps eliminate interruptions.
• Research your contact, the organization, and the field in advance. Prepare questions that demonstrate you have done your homework.
• Plan an agenda for a 30-minute discussion.
• Assume you will lead the conversation.
• Send a resume in advance only if requested, but be prepared to provide a copy at the meeting.

What Information Interview Questions Should I Ask?
There are numerous resources on the Internet and on the next page to help you develop appropriate questions. Here are basic questions we recommend for all networking encounters:
• What do you do? How did you get there? How does your position “fit” within the department, division, or company?
• What general advice do you have based on what I’ve told you about my experience and goals?
• Is there anyone else you’d recommend that I contact? These questions should lead to a good understanding of your contact’s career and add new contacts to your network. Reach out to your new contacts as soon as possible; use the power of those “second-degree connections.”

After an Information Interview or Networking Event
Networking is an ongoing process, so plan to keep in touch with established contacts and reach out continually to new ones.
• Prepare a brief thank-you letter soon after your meeting, mentioning several specific points covered during the discussion.
• Make sure you follow through with any commitments you make.

Information Interview Questions
Before the meeting, develop a list of questions based on the information and advice you hope to obtain. During the interview, create a friendly rapport and ask questions about the person’s career or position before asking for advice concerning your own career

You may want to ask some of the questions below. You will probably have more specific questions as well.

Career Field:
• How did you decide to enter this field?
• What do you like most about your work? Least?
• What education or training is necessary for this type of work?
• Do you have an advanced degree? Is one required in this field?
• What challenges did you face in transitioning from graduate school into this position?
• How has the field changed since you entered it?
• What are the greatest challenges you face in your job/organization?
• Are internships, volunteering, or other experiences helpful to getting a job in this field?
• What are the entry-level opportunities in this field? How can I learn about openings?
• What do you consider to be the growth areas in the field?
• What are some related careers I might consider?

Organization:
• What is the typical career path in your line of work in this organization?
• What formal or on-the-job training does your organization provide?
• Considering my skills, interests, and academic background, where might you see me fitting into this organization or a similar one?

Lifestyle and Work Environment:
• Generally, what is the work environment like here?
• How many hours do people work in a typical week?
• What obligations does your job place upon you outside the normal work week?
• How much flexibility do you have in terms of dress, hours of work, and vacation schedule?

General Questions:
• If you were back in school, would you do anything differently in terms of coursework, activities, or summer experiences?
• If you were just graduating and looking for this kind of work, how would you conduct your job search?
• Can you suggest others whom I could speak with about this field? May I use your name when I contact them? Should I make contact by e-mail, phone, or letter?
• Does your employer typically sponsor visas for international students? If not, do you know of similar organizations that might?