

## Tips for Informational Interviewing

One of the most valuable things you can do as part of your career development, especially near its beginning, is to conduct informational interviews with professionals in your field. You can gain several important benefits from these:

- The, first, most obvious: information on how to get into the field; what to expect when you're working; what are the challenges and the rewards of a job in public relations or advertising or photography or video production, or whatever your field is.
- The beginnings of a network that can help you find out about jobs
- Perhaps an evaluation of your qualifications, your presentation, your resume

For this assignment, choose someone who has a job you think you'd like to have someday—say, in the next five years or beyond. Don't be shy about contacting someone you're interested in interviewing. Obviously, if you try to talk to John Graham, CEO of Fleishman-Hillard, you're going to have a tougher time than if you try to talk to someone who's a writer, but if you don't mind rejection, aren't afraid of being told "no," and you really want to talk to someone like Graham, call. When you're beginning your profession, keep in mind: **If someone tells you "no," you're no worse off than if you didn't ask ... and you can't get someone to say "yes" unless you ask.** Many people will be glad to talk to you, for a couple of reasons:

- Most people like to talk about what they do because most of them never get asked
- Nearly everyone who is anywhere on the professional ladder is where he or she is because someone helped them get there, and the best way to repay that kind of help is to help those who follow

**Before you contact them**, do some research on the company and on them. Check them out through <http://www.google.com>; do a Lexis/Nexis search through the Webster University library Web site (<http://library.webster.edu/>): it's free, as long as you have a student ID number. Check the company out through Sorkins-on-line, another database available through the University library Web site. **The more you know about them and their company, the better your interview will go, and the more you will impress them when you meet them.** Think about it: Someone comes to interview a photographer and asks the following questions:

1. What kind of photography do you do?
2. It seems you started out doing senior portraits for high schools in the area, but now most of your business is doing portraits of some of the most famous people in St. Louis—people like Marshall Faulk, Albert Pujols, Nelly and Mindy Berkowitz. How did you make that transition?

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Which question would impress you more? **If you impress your subject, you gain several advantages:**

- They will be more open to your questions when they're talking to you; the more interested you seem, the more interested they'll be when they meet with you.
- They will be more likely to be part of a network for you. If you had to decide between the person who asked question one and question two to help out: to be open to their contacting you in six months or a year for advice, or to pass on information about a possible job, which would it be?

### **Call them to set up an appointment.**

Tell them right away that you are contacting them for an informational interview, that you are a student in an internship at Webster University; **they will be more apt to talk to you than if they think you're just calling because you are looking for a job.** Tell them you'd like 20 minutes of their time: it's long enough for most interviews, and if you tell them upfront that you want 20 minutes, they'll be more open to talking to you than if they think it will require more of their time. Psychologically, 20 minutes seems less demanding than half an hour. Also, **outline briefly** what you want to discuss with them.

### **Dress professionally**

It's better to wear a business suit in an environment where people don't wear business suits than it is to wear jeans and your "I've Got McPheever" T-shirt in an environment where people wear suits. **You want to dress to impress.** It's an old and sometimes tired saying, but there's truth to it:

"You only have one chance to make a first impression."

### **All right, so what do you want to discuss with them?**

First, **take notes.**

Second, essentially, a good informational interview covers several topics: how the person you're interviewing got to where they are; what they do in their job; what they like about it; what challenges them; what they wish they'd known when they were starting out, but which no one had told them. More specifically, you want to ask about

- Their background: how they got to where they are today; what sort of education and training did they have, what jobs helped prepare them for the job they have now
- What's a typical day/week/month like for them
- What do they enjoy most about their work
- What are their greatest challenges
- Aside from the skills they need for their job (writing, or photography, or graphics—whatever it is they do), what are the aspects of their job outside the professional/technical requirements
- What do they wish someone had told them when they were starting out that no one did
- What recommendations do they have for someone starting out

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Lastly, at the end of the interview, ask them if they can name two or three other people they would recommend you might also talk to for insight into the field. This will help you build your network.

### **They decide when the interview is over.**

If they say, after five minutes, that's all the time they have, say "thank you" and leave. Remember, they're doing you a favor, and you want to leave them with a favorable impression.

### **Bring your resume**

At the end of the interview, ask them if they could take a minute to give you feedback on your resume. **Do not ask them if you can leave your resume with them, because they may feel that you were not interested in the informational interview, after all, but were just using it as a ruse to ask about a job.** Ask them if they can give you a few, brief comments about the effectiveness of your resume. They may ask you to leave it; they may take it from you, give you a comment, and hand it back. They may say no.

### **After the interview**

Write them a thank you note, telling them that you appreciated their time and advice and commenting specifically on something they said that you found most interesting or useful. **Send the thank you within a day of your interview.** Be sure to proof it; be sure there are no spelling errors or grammatical errors in it. The form of the letter depends on a number of factors, but you will have to judge, based on your impression of the subject and their work environment, whether you should type the letter, send a handwritten note (but even then I'd avoid the My Little Pony stationery), or whether an e-mail might be appropriate.

### **Writing up the Interview**

When you write the interview (it's due at our final seminar), do not just provide a transcript of questions and answers, but summarize what the person told you, giving **direct quotes** where you think it's appropriate. Reflect on the interview: what was surprising to you, what was useful to you, how did it affect your notions of working in the field?