

OPINION

The informational interview – your secret advantage for your next job

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Whether you're thinking about your next step in your current career, or have your sights set on new and exciting challenges elsewhere, informational interviews can be your secret advantage in the highly-competitive world of job searching. Part networking, part information-gathering, and part low-key self-promotion, an informational interview is a powerful way to position yourself as the prime candidate for your perfect job.

One very important point – informational interviews are not job applications, nor are they job interviews. Which is exactly the reason most people can't be bothered with them. Why waste time on informational interviews when you could be more productive applying for advertised jobs? Because some estimates suggest that up to 80 per cent of open positions are never advertised, they're filled through word-of-mouth.

When you take the time to conduct informational interviews, you separate yourself from the pack as someone who is not only qualified but has the business savvy to recognize and build meaningful professional connections. When the right jobs become available, the relationships you've built will pay dividends, because the people you've talked to will contact you directly to tell you about the opportunity. And because so many positions are never publicly advertised, you're no longer competing for the starring role among a cast of thousands.

SO HOW DOES ONE GO ABOUT GETTING AN INFORMATIONAL INTERVIEW? AND ONCE YOU GET IT, HOW DO YOU MAKE THE MOST OF IT? Keep reading.

CHOOSE THE RIGHT PEOPLE TO INTERVIEW

Think about the companies or the dream jobs you'd like. Ideally, seek out the manager of the job you're aspiring to. But be realistic within the context of the organization you're targeting. The higher the person is, the more likely he won't have the time to meet with you. Use LinkedIn as a research tool. If you can find a shared connection or common background, even better.

PERFECT THE ASK

A contact who can give you a warm handshake is always your best bet. But if not, send a short specific e-mail. Include three key items. Start with "I'd like your help". Then go right into why you'd like to meet with this person. Do you admire her career path? Are you impressed with his professional accomplishments? Perhaps your shared connection recommended that you talk to this person. The more you personalize your "ask", the more likely you will get a positive response, because most people are flattered to be asked about themselves. Finally, show that you're considerate: "I know you're busy which is why I'd appreciate even 20 minutes of your time."

BUT DON'T SOLICIT A JOB

Don't come across like you're looking for a job (even if you are). If you don't demonstrate genuine interest in this person's track record and insights, you'll just get shunted off to the HR department or company's website.

BE PLEASANTLY PERSISTENT

Don't give up after just one try, people are busy, and shifting priorities mean that they can't always get to your e-mail right away. So send a follow-up e-mail after a week, and again, personalize your "ask". Continue to politely reach out every two weeks or so until you get a response, one way or another. It can take four to seven "asks" before you finally hear back.

BE PREPARED AND PITHY

Once you've landed the meeting, make it count! Learn as much as you can about your interviewee before you get there. She'll be impressed and flattered that you made the effort. Ask about his career trajectory and challenges. Ask for her advice and insights. Keep your questions brief and succinct, and have a written list of "possible questions" in case you need them. Your goal is to have the other person do most of the talking. Remember, you're not the one being interviewed, so this is not the time to sell yourself.

SEAL THE DEAL

Keep an eye on the clock. Five minutes before you're supposed to end, acknowledge that you're mindful of the time. Ask if there's anyone else in his professional circle that would be valuable for you to talk to. If she offers a suggestion, ask if you could use her name, or even better if she could make an introduction. Get up, shake hands, express your appreciation and leave. Send a thank-you e-mail. Every couple of months, keep in touch via email or LinkedIn.

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