

Informational Interviewing

Reference Guide

Informational interviews are a simple and effective means of career exploration, allowing participants to gather meaningful information about different professions, roles, organisations and departments.

This document is designed to help Macquarie University staff members understand the purpose of informational interviewing and the actions they can take to get the most out of the interview experience.

What is an informational interview?

Informational interviewing is the process of spending time (usually about 20-30 minutes) with someone at a more advanced level in their career, in a focused conversation that provides information about their field, role, organisation and career path.

Unlike traditional interviews, informational interviews are not designed to assess candidate's suitability for a job vacancy; they are a form of research designed to help the interviewer learn about the ins-and-outs of a certain position, career path or area within the University, to inform decisions about their future career direction.

Informational interviews are a valuable development activity, allowing participants to:

- Explore career options and clarify goals;
- Gain meaningful career information and insights based on personal accounts of the work setting, role requirements, and workplace / industry trends and practices;
- Obtain valuable feedback and guidance on how to best prepare and position themselves for future opportunities;
- Uncover potential opportunities by learning about job roles, projects or teams that they may not have previously considered;
- Polish communication skills and build confidence when interacting with professionals within their area of interest; and
- Gain exposure and expand professional networks.

Who can participate?

An informational interview may be initiated by any Macquarie staff member wanting to explore other roles, functions or teams across the University.

These interviews may benefit people at any career stage, from early-career professionals wanting to research future career paths, to more experienced staff members looking to investigate opportunities for advancement or transition into different roles across the University.

There are two key parties involved in the interview process:

THE INTERVIEWEE

The interviewee is the person who is sharing their insights and experiences in relation to their job role, function and/or area of the University.

THE INTERVIEWER

The interviewer is the person seeking information about a new career path, role, team or function.

The interviewer has responsibility for managing the overall interview process.

***“During an informational interview, the focus isn't on employment but on information gathering.
Your real goal is to illuminate the path ahead of you”.***

David G. Jensen

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It is up to the interviewer to identify the person (or people) they want to meet with.

To identify potential interviewees, start by thinking about the type of questions you need answered and the individuals who may be able to provide you with honest and insightful responses and career advice.

Where possible, seek out people who are currently working in the specific roles or areas that you are considering, as these people will be able to share inside knowledge about the true nature of their work and environment.

When looking for potential interviewees:

- Start with your current network – people you know personally and professionally. They may be able to answer your questions, or introduce you to someone who could.
- Talk to your manager. They may be able to offer suggestions and guidance on possible interviewees and may even be able to make an introduction for you.
- Look across campus. Have you come across a person of interest at an event you've attended? Have you seen someone profiled online? Can you reach out to the author of a report or article that has inspired you?
- Think broadly. Tap into professional or industry associations in your field, or search LinkedIn to find people with whom you have some sort of connection.

The informational interview process

SETTING UP THE INTERVIEW

When requesting an informational interview, you may approach contacts via email or phone, or where the opportunity arises, in-person.

Your initial outreach should be professional and concise. Provide a brief introduction of who you are and where you work, and mention how you came to know the person.

Then, outline the purpose of your request and ask the recipient when they might be able to meet with you.

In your approach, consider using phrases such as:

- I work in [department] with [name] who has suggested that you may be able to answer a few questions I have regarding the role of [position title].
- I was inspired by your story about [subject] in [publication]. I am interested in pursuing a career in [field] and would like to ask a few questions about your career path and the factors that have led to your success. Would you be available to meet with me for 20 minutes to share your experiences?
- I am currently exploring my future career options and would really value the opportunity to talk with someone who can offer personal insights into [Faculty / Unit / Department]. Would it be possible to meet for coffee to discuss your role/team?

Where possible, plan to conduct the meeting in-person. By meeting face-to-face you are more likely to build rapport with the interviewee and they are more likely to remember you. Offer to meet the person at their office or somewhere close to where they work. Meeting for coffee or lunch is always a good option because it offers a relaxed, neutral environment.

If you can't meet in-person, meeting via phone or Skype is the next best option.

When arranging the appointment, remember that the interviewee is extending a courtesy to you. As such, you should be flexible about the meeting time and location and aim to accommodate the other person's preferences.

If you don't receive a response to your initial approach, send a brief follow-up email restating your request. If the person does not respond within another week, recognise that they may be too busy and move on to asking someone else.

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INTERVIEW PREPARATION

Making time to prepare for the interview will help you to make a favourable impression and learn what you need from the process.

By researching your area of interest in advance of the meeting, you will be able to ask targeted questions and engage in meaningful and informed conversation on the day.

As a starting point, review the University's internet pages, search for references to the department or individual in Macquarie publications such as *This Week*, and check the interviewee's LinkedIn profile.

Prior to the interview, you should also prepare a list of questions that you want answered. Think about what you already know and what you hope to learn, and develop questions that will allow you to elicit the information you need. You will likely be restricted to asking four or five informed questions; be sure to prioritise the few that you most important to you.

Finally, be ready to talk about yourself during the meeting. You will need to briefly introduce yourself and may be asked a few questions by the interviewee, so have your 'elevator pitch' ready!

CONDUCTING THE INTERVIEW

Start the interview by making a good impression. Dress professionally and make sure you arrive on time. Greet the interviewee with good eye contact and a firm handshake, and immediately thank them for making time for you.

Begin the conversation by introducing yourself, providing a succinct overview of your background and what you're looking for. Remember, your meeting isn't about getting a job—it's about gaining knowledge and establishing a connection – so ensure you position yourself appropriately.

Highlight any common connections that you may have or, where appropriate, reference the interviewee's previous work or achievements.

When asking questions, make them open-ended and ask in a way that shows you're listening.

For example, instead of asking "what qualifications are required for this job?", you might say, "you mentioned that you possess a degree in Is this the standard qualification in this field?".

Although it's called an interview, your meeting should feel more like a friendly conversation. Show your enthusiasm by asking follow-up questions and actively engaging in the discussion throughout the meeting.

Take notes on key points and suggestions raised during the interview, but keep these brief – you don't want to spend the entire time writing.

Finally, don't overstay your welcome. Be respectful of the person's time and wrap-up the meeting within the allocated timeframe (unless you are invited to extend the conversation).

ASKING CURIOUS QUESTIONS

Your learning goals will determine the questions you ask the interviewee. Aim to ask a few thoughtful questions and then let the conversation flow naturally. The following suggestions may help you to get started:

- Could you describe a typical workday for this role? What do you spend most of your time doing?
- What is the most interesting project you have worked on?
- What is the biggest challenge that you currently face in your role / team?
- What personal characteristics or capabilities are most important for success in this area?
- What strengths set this team / department apart from others?
- What are the current trends in this industry / field? How do you see your job changing in the next 10 years?
- What do you wish you'd known before starting in this career?
- Based on my interest in this field / role / department, is there anyone else you recommend I speak with?

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FOLLOW-UP AND REFLECTION

Following the interview, send the interviewee a thank you note expressing your gratitude for their time and insights. Ask them to keep you in mind should they come across other information that might be helpful in your research and consider sending an invitation to connect via LinkedIn.

Soon after the interview, make time to record the information you have gathered, and reflect upon what you've learnt. Ask yourself questions such as:

- What did I learn from this interview?
- How does this role / team fit in with my own interests and goals?
- What actions do I need to take next to learn more or prepare for a future role?

Keep track of your informational interviews and networking activities by recording when your conversations took place, the suggestions your contact made, and any follow-up steps you took.

Be sure to email or phone your contacts periodically to update them on your career status, share news about mutual contacts, or forward interesting articles or links they may find useful.

Doing so will help you to maintain an ongoing relationship with interviewees, who may become a point of contact for future job openings, a resource for additional questions, and a connection to meet other professionals.

Getting the most out of an informational interview

The following tips will help you to maximise the interview experience.

DO:

- Be prepared: you'll get more out of the conversation if you've done your homework.
- Be respectful and courteous: you will create a negative impression if you appear rude or ungrateful.
- Stay in touch: recognise that the interviewee has now become a valuable member of your professional network.

DON'T:

- Be afraid to reach out. While it may feel uncomfortable to reach to out and ask to meet with someone, most people will be happy to accommodate your request. Remember, you are simply making a request; the recipient can choose to meet with you or not.
- Ask for a job. The interviewee has kindly agreed to make time to share their insights with you. Don't de-value this act of generosity by asking for a job or favour.
- Allow one negative interview to dissuade you from pursuing a role, team or career. Ensure you seek information from a variety of sources so that you are able to make informed career decisions.

Further Information

To learn more, go to:

- [How to get the most out of an informational interview](#); Rebecca Knight; Harvard Business Review; February 2016 (Article)
- [Designing Your Career: The Informational Interview](#); Stanford Life Design Lab; September 2017 (Video)
- [Informational Interviewing](#); Barbara Bruno; Lynda.com; August 2017 (Online course)

For further information on development opportunities at Macquarie University, visit the [Development](#) pages on the staff intranet.

References

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Yale University, USA, available at: https://your.yale.edu/sites/default/.../informational_interviewing_workbook_web.pdf, accessed 03 August 2018