

Effective Networking and Informational Interviews

What is Networking?

Networking is simply making connections with others. The most effective networking involves making meaningful connections and staying in regular contact. Networking is a lifelong process that takes time and continual development to bring results.

Why is Networking Important?

According to a recent survey by the U.S. Department of Labor, networking accounts for at least 69% of all annual hires. Networking is an essential component of every job search. Throughout your life, you will make networking contacts that develop into relationships including friends, colleagues, and professional prospects. If you inform all of your contacts that you are looking for a job, they can help you find one faster!

How Do I Start?

Be Yourself

It is completely natural to feel nervous talking with professionals you have never met. Have confidence in the communication skills you have gained in the classroom and from additional life experiences, and remember that most people enjoy the chance to help a college student. Consider networking an opportunity to gain even more communication skills, learn about your field of interest, and meet area professionals. Be respectful and remember that you have much to learn from each person you meet.

The Art of Small Talk

Most networking begins through casual everyday conversation. Strike up a conversation with the people you meet in your normal routine, you never know who may have an aunt, brother, or friend in your field. Small talk is an art that anyone can perfect:

- Look for people standing alone or eager for conversation
- Have an agenda; be focused and prepared
- Keep aware of current events and hot topics in your field
- Listen well and ask meaningful questions
- Be confident, concise, and respectful
- Ask open-ended questions

Places to Network

- Professional or trade association meetings
- Campus events, alumni, and professors
- Parents, friends, neighbors, supervisors, previous employers, and classmates
- Community volunteer organizations
- Social groups and church
- Sporting, music or recreation events

The First Impression: How to Structure a Networking Conversation

- Introduce yourself and establish rapport
- Ask questions to learn about the person you are meeting
- Create a connection between the two of you (“It sounds like we’ve got a lot of the same ideas about our field of interest,” etc.)
- Suggest a future meeting
- Wrap-up the conversation and offer your assistance to the person you have just met (mention that you enjoy babysitting, etc.)
- Obtain their business card and write down notes on the back to remember facts and key details

Adapted from <http://www.hope.edu/student/career/resources/Networking.pdf>

The Importance of Follow-Up

The number one rule of networking is to stay in touch!

- Write a brief thank you note to those you meet
- Mention that you will update each person periodically
- Follow-up when you say you will. Opportunities for follow up include:
 - Send a revised resume and politely ask for their opinion
 - Send them an article or artifact that reflects their interests
- Keep track of your correspondence with each person in your network, including dates and details of messages and telephone conversations, questions and answers from informational interviews, notes from office visits, dates you have agreed to follow-up, etc.

Networking Do’s and Don’ts

Do’s

- Keep in touch with the individuals you meet
- Develop lasting relationships, not just contacts
- Use networking skills in both your personal and professional life
- Keep learning and developing networking skills
- Always look for ways to help the people in your networking circle
- Be prepared for your networking conversations
- Be open and inquisitive about the information your network partners share with you
- Spread out informational interviews and networking events so you have enough time to adequately prepare

Don’ts

- Brag or exaggerate the truth in your conversations
- Spend too much time in unfocused conversation; you should appreciate your partner’s time
- Try to develop network connections with everyone you meet
- Forget to thank your network partners and keep in touch with them
- Gossip or share inappropriately with network partners; stay professional and relevant
- Allow your networking relationship to become one-sided
- Ask personal questions or questions about money
- Even think about asking for a job; keep the focus on gathering information and advice

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How is networking different from informational interviewing?

Informational interviewing is a piece of the networking process. In an informational interview you have the opportunity to explore your field of interest through a structured conversation with someone already working in that field.

What is an Informational Interview?

An informational interview is an interview that **you** initiate - you ask the questions. The purpose is to obtain information, not to get a job. You may be researching a career, researching a company or attempting to network with someone in a particular field.

Reasons to Conduct an Informational Interview

- Networking, which can lead to potential jobs/internships
- Gain experience and self-confidence when interviewing
- Learn about a particular organization, field or career
- Access the most up-to-date career information
- Ask for other referrals: “who else do you know that may be helpful to me in my search?”

What Steps to Take?

1. Identify who you want to talk to

Contrary to what you may think, top level managers are not necessarily the best sources of information to contact early in your process. Individuals who hold positions similar to the ones you plan to seek are your best contacts when you begin to conduct informational interviews.

2. Set up the interview

Begin by assessing your own personal network of family, friends, and co-workers. Ask each person you know for possible contacts in your field(s) of choice. A personal referral is the ideal referral, but cold calls to individuals you may have read or heard about can also be effective.

Access the UWRF Mentor Network, housed in the Hire-a-Falcon system, to locate friends and alumni who are willing to conduct informational interviews and assist you in your research. Access the Hire-a-Falcon system online at: www.uwrf.edu/jobs.

Tip: What to say when calling or emailing to set up the interview:

- A brief introduction about yourself
- Why you are writing or calling this individual
- A brief statement of your interests or experiences in the person's profession or career
- Why you would like to meet with them. Be straightforward; tell him/her you are asking for information and advice
- Then ask for a date to schedule the informational interview

3. Treat the informational interview as a professional point of contact

Dress professionally, arrive early, send a thank you note (as soon as possible after the interview).

4. Prepare

Have your informational interview questions prepared ahead of time (there are examples in this handout). Research as much as you can about the company/organization for which the interviewee works.

Reminder: The informational interview is not a time for you to ask for a job
However: Many people are offered internships or possible positions as a result of making this contact

Conducting an Informational Interview

Again, do your research. Read information on the occupation and/or company so that you can ask meaningful questions. You will want to develop a list of questions prior to the interview; remain flexible though, and respond to the information presented, which may be even more valuable! Remember to consider your own values and preferences in preparing these questions. Your objective is to see if this occupation would be the type of career that you would enjoy or if the organization would provide what you are looking for in a company or job. You also must be ready to talk about yourself, interests, academic strengths, and career goals. The following questions are some you may consider asking:

The Positions/Career Path

- What is a typical work day like for you?
- What is your position/title? What are your responsibilities?
- Why does this field of work interest you and how did you get started?
- How did you get your job? What experiences have led you to this career/occupation?
- What skills are most important in doing this job well? What personal traits are needed?
- What does the company do to contribute to the employees' overall professional development?
- What interests you least about your current job? What causes the most stress for you on the job?
- How would you describe the working conditions/climate?
- How did your college experience prepare you for this job? (only if relevant)
- What kinds of experience (paid or unpaid) would you suggest for someone wanting to enter this field?

The Company/Industry

- What sorts of changes are occurring in this profession or within your company/organization?
- What is the average length of time for an employee to stay in the job you hold? Are there incentives or disincentives for staying in the same job?
- Is there flexibility related to dress, work hours, vacation schedule, place of residence, etc.?
- What are the new trends or issues in this industry?
- Can you suggest some publications I might read? What professional associations are common in this field?
- Are there certain types of employees who are more successful than others in this profession?

Next Step Questions

- Can you think of anything else I should know about this field?
- Could you suggest one or two other people I might contact for further information?
- Would you mind if I called you again if I think of any other questions?
- Would you mind reviewing my resume and making any suggestions? (Give resume and self-addressed, stamped envelope).
- Don't forget the business card. Add this to your business card file!

After the Interview

- Make notes to yourself on the content of the interview for future reference.
- Follow-up on any suggestions made-reading, meetings, contacts.
- Immediately send a thank you letter stating your appreciation for their time and information.
- Mention specific points or suggestions that were particularly helpful and state your plans to follow through.
- Keep in touch with the individual(s)!