Networking & the Informational Interview

What is Networking?

Networking is nothing more than a fancy way of saying, “talk to people”. It involves making a list of contacts who may be able to give you advice and information on your career goals. Despite the emphasis placed on it, networking remains a misunderstood concept. Basically, it is an efficient method of information exchange - an informational interview which is a brief meeting or phone call that usually lasts 20 to 30 minutes for the purpose of career exploration or job search.

Want to know what a career is really like? Ask someone with first-hand experience.

Many people wonder anxiously about which kind of job they will like or what they can do within a particular field. Surprisingly, very few people ever take advantage of the best ways to answer questions about careers: ask the professionals who are already doing the job. It can be as simple as striking up conversations with friends and others about their occupations. But to take full advantage of this career exploration tool, requires time, commitment and being organized for a more methodical approach. Benefits include:

- Enables you to get advice and guidance & focus your career goals
- To learn more about the realities of working in a particular environment
- Allows you to gather marketplace information
- Gain the perspective of how to break into a particular field
- Uncover the hidden job market (80% of the jobs); identify internships to gain related work experience
- Generates referrals that further build your network; Locate possible mentors
- Develops long term relationships with those who may help you later

Developing a Network

Developing a network is easy. In fact you already have one! Anyone you have ever met is a potential contact.

- Family and relatives, friends, neighbors
- Faculty
- Previous employers, co-workers
- Memberships of organizations (professional associations or social clubs)
- School alumni

How to Initiate Contact to Network

Write a letter/email message in which you introduce yourself as student/graduate/alumni whose background is ________________. Indicate how you identified them as a source of information and that you are looking for career related guidance and information. Do not include your resume. Request a convenient time to conduct an informational interview.

How to Conduct an Informational Interview

An Informational Interview is more casual than a job interview but you should still be professional in your dress and behavior. Making a positive first impression shows you care about your career. As for all business meetings, arrive on time but no more than 15 minutes early.

In networking with others, you should always be prepared to present short “sound bite” or “30 second commercial” about who you are and what you are kind of information you are seeking.
Open ended questions are the most useful to gather the information you need. It is appropriate to take notes of important facts and impressions.

- Begin the conversation by thanking the individual for his or her time.
- Summarize your background.
- Highlight any previous related work experience.
- Articulate your agenda (the purpose of the meeting- exploring a specific career or looking for a job)
- Describe the kinds of positions you are interested in, along with specific target organizations or companies.
- Ask questions and monitor the time.
- Ask for referrals or introductions to other professionals in the field, and/or at organizations on your target list of companies.
- Thank the contact for taking the time to speak with you.
- Indicate your interest in maintaining a networking relationship. Ask for their permission to follow up with them in specified amount of time.

Follow up…….. Reflection Afterward

Keep detailed records concerning who you have spoken with, date of the meeting, what transpired and any additional contact names. Write a thank you note within 24 hours. If a person directed you to call someone else, follow up and let him or her know what resulted. Many people have expressed frustration in never hearing back from an individual they have tried to help.

Hopefully, you'll leave every informational interview or networking meeting with new insights about the career you want or the job you are pursuing. Try to answer the following questions:

- What did I learn in the interview?
- What advice did I receive?
- What did I like? What didn’t I like?
- Did I uncover any new concerns or advantages to my goals?
- What are my next steps?

When evaluating an informational interview, it is important not to make career decisions on the opinions of one individual. Try and conduct several informational interviews to compare or confirm information about future career goals.

Sample Questions for Career Exploration

- Can you tell me about your job?
  - Can you describe a typical day?
  - What are the duties/responsibilities/functions of your job?
  - What issues do you deal with?
  - What kinds of decisions do you make?
  - What percentage of your time is doing what?
- How did this type of work interest you and how did you get started?
- What jobs and experience led up to your present position?
- Can you suggest some ways a student could obtain this necessary experience?
- What are the most important personal satisfactions/dissatisfactions connected with your occupation?
- What do you find most satisfying? Most challenging?
- What were the keys to your career advancement?
- What are the skills that are most important for a position in this field?
- What work-related values are strongest in this type of work (security, high income, variety, independence)?
- How has your job affected your lifestyle?
- What interests you the least about the job or creates the most stress?
• If you could do things all over again, would you choose the same path for yourself? Why?
  What would you change?
• What abilities or personal qualities do you believe contribute most to success in this
  field/job?
• Which professional journals and organizations would help me learn more about the field?
• Would you mind taking a look at my resume?

Sample Questions for Job Search

• Based on my background, what sort of employer do you think would be most interested in
  skills and experience like mine?
• Do you think my prospects would be better with a bigger vs. smaller; start-up vs.
  establishes; mature vs. rapid growth/entrepreneurial organization?
• If you were to hire someone to work with you today, which of the following factors would
  be most important in your hiring decision and why? Educational credentials; Past work
  experience; specific skills, talents; applicant's knowledge of your organization, your
  department etc.

Questions to Gain Perspective about an Industry

• What general economic, operational and employment trends do you see in the industry?
• What are the professional organizations in the industry?
• What do you see as long term trends or prospects in the industry?
• Are there other industry leaders I should be aware of?

Questions about a Target Company/Organization

• What is the size of the organization/geographic locations?
• What is the organizational structure?
• How would you describe the work climate?
• What is the average length of time employees stay with the organization?
• What types of formal or on-the-job training does the organization provide?
• What are the arrangements for transferring from one division to another?
• Is the company planning to expand, maintain or downsize?
• How does it compare with its competitors?
• What new product lines/services are being developed?

Note: The key to successful networking is to ask for referrals.

The information you provided me today was extremely helpful…..
• Can you suggest other people who maybe able to provide additional information or
  perspective to me?
• May I have permission to use your name when I contact them?
• Can you suggest other related fields?
• Have you heard of any events or developments that suggest a particular
  company/organization might have a need for someone like me?

Write a thank you note after your meeting. It will leave a favorable impression and begin a
valuable relationship.