

Networking is simply the best way to tap into the hidden job market – an immense underground marketplace in which jobs open up and then are filled through word of mouth and personal referrals. The majority of jobs are filled that way because it saves employers time and recruiting fees - not to mention that most employers would prefer to hire a known quantity. Skillful networking reveals positions that have not yet been posted, discloses jobs that will never be advertised in the classifieds. Networking can get your foot in the door before a position is available. When the job opens up -- if you've established a relationship with the hiring manager -- he or she will remember you before looking at the heap of faceless resume from the human resource department. Whether you are entering the workforce for the first time or switching jobs mid-career, it pays to sharpen your networking skills and cultivate a network of contacts who can continue to yield benefits throughout your career.

Deciding whom to interview

Before selecting someone to interview, you need to decide which occupations you want to learn more about. If you are unclear about this, consider spending some time in the Career Center to help you clarify your skills, interests and values. Then identify individuals who are working in the industry or job title or company that you would like to explore. How do you find these people? Ask friends, family, teachers and co-workers. Get ideas from the Career Center, Alumni Office and professional associations.

Making Contact

For most people, this is the most difficult task of the process. Asking others for career assistance can be daunting, and some people wonder why anyone would agree to be interviewed. In fact, many people are willing to help students or career changers explore occupations.

Writing a letter or email of introduction is a common way to ask for an informational interview. When writing a letter, explain who you are, why you want to meet and how long you expect the meeting to take. Calling people directly is a faster way to arrange an informational interview - but often more stressful. To eliminate anxiety, script out what you are going to say prior to making contact. Make sure you are clear in your objective. Some people might think you are calling for a job. If a personal meeting is not possible, suggest a time for a telephone interview that is mutually convenient.

You may follow this sample phone script to frame your comments:

Sample Phone Script

Hello. My name is _____. Do you have a couple of minutes now, or is there a better time to call? [I obtained your name from the Career Network; or _____suggested I contact you.] I am a _____ [year] student in the _____ program at Highline Community College.

I am gathering information to help me make career decisions. I would like to see if I could set up an informational interview with you for approximately 20 minutes. Thank you for your time. I look forward to our conversation.

Just in case, be prepared with questions at this point. (see list of suggested questions later in this section)

TELEPHONE ETIQUETTE - GETTING THROUGH

While email and instant messaging are standard forms of office communication, the telephone still plays an important role in communicating with networking contacts and employers. Before you pick up the phone, review these guidelines:

Your Outbound Voicemail Message

If you currently have an answering machine or voice mail, now is the time to update your “unusual” or “unique” greeting or call back song. Ask yourself what your future employer will think of your message and how that message represents you.

- Make sure your message is polite, direct, and businesslike.
- Make sure your message can be understood clearly.
EXAMPLE: Hello, this is (phone number). I am sorry I am not available to take your call right now. Please leave your name, telephone number, a brief message, and the best time to reach you. I will get back to you as soon as possible.
- Avoid making crude comments or referencing social items in your message (i.e. I’m unable to answer my phone because I’m out partying).
- Avoid using multiple people to record the message.
- Avoid playing music in the background.

Leaving a voicemail message with someone

To leave a message for someone to return your telephone call, try to have the correct pronunciation of their name and make sure you state the following clearly:

- Your name
- Your telephone number
- Your message
- The best time to reach you
- Your name again
- Your telephone number again

Then hang up gently.

Some additional notes about using the phone in your search:

- Keep paper and pen by the telephone, as well as your resume, references, work history, questions.
- Make sure the other people in your household are prepared to take messages for you.
- Return telephone calls promptly.
- Under no circumstances should you put an employer on hold to answer call waiting.

With that said, you're ready to select your questions.

INFORMATIONAL INTERVIEW DAY

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.

You are leading this interview, so start by thanking your host for his or her time and briefly recounting why you have come. Mention your goals and interests and then ask questions and listen. The person you are interviewing should do most of the talking because you are trying to gather opinions and insights. Because you are the interviewer, it is up to you to monitor the time and end the interview when you said you would. Always end the interview by thanking your host and asking two important final questions: Can you suggest other people I could speak to? Can I use your name when I speak to them? The answers could be the starting point for your next informational interview. After the interview, show gratitude for your host’s generosity by writing a thank you note as soon as possible.

Reflection Afterward

Ideally, you'll leave every informational interview with new insights about the career you want. Try to answer the following questions:

- What did I learn in the interview?
- What did I like? What didn't I like?
- Did you uncover any new concerns or advantages to the occupation?
- What advice did you receive?
- Did you discover another occupation you might want to pursue?
- Do you think you would be happy in this type of job or in this type of organization?

When evaluating an informational interview, it is important not to make decisions on the opinions of one individual. Try and conduct several informational interviews to compare or confirm information. If you decide you like an occupation, the investigation doesn't have to end with interviews. You can do further research by job shadowing, having an internship or doing volunteer work. Early career exploration usually means a better fitting career later.

Quite simply, networking is the process of gathering helpful information from a network of contacts to assist you in planning your career and in looking for jobs. Contrary to what you may think, it does not require that you know scores of people or that these people are incredibly important. Anyone can network successfully. All it takes is preparation, a modest investment of your time, and enthusiasm.