

# **The scoop on informational interviewing**

Informational interviewing is a highly effective, yet rarely used, career management tool. It involves talking in a structured way to people who currently work in a particular area of practice in order to gather information and advice. It's an essential part of networking and job hunting, especially in a tight job market. If you're simply exploring your career options, informational interviewing can help you learn more about different specialties to decide if any are right for you. If you're considering moving into a particular specialty, informational interviewing can help you gain more in-depth knowledge about that field. It can yield valuable advice for breaking into the specialty and help you create contacts and referrals. If you're currently unemployed and looking for work, whether as a new graduate or experienced nurse, this tool is essential.

## **How to get started**

Make a list of the people you'd like to talk to. If you already know people who work in a particular specialty, or for a particular company or hospital where you'd like to work, start with them. It's good to make new contacts, too. For example, if you'd like to learn more about psychiatric nursing, you could conduct informational interviews with the state or national president of the American Psychiatric Nurses Association, a nursing director or manager of a psychiatric facility or unit or anyone who works in the specialty.

It's ideal to conduct an informational interview in person, but if necessary, the telephone will do. Of course you can also use email, but it's so impersonal and you wouldn't have the opportunity for active dialogue that can yield even more information. Also, it may be more convenient for the person you contact to answer questions verbally, rather than typing and editing responses.

## **Setting up the appointment**

Initially contact the person you want to meet with by letter or telephone. Introduce yourself and mention why you're contacting him or her. If someone referred you or suggested you contact this person, mention that person's name up front.

After your introduction, say something like, "I'm exploring my career options and have always been interested in psychiatric nursing. I'd appreciate the opportunity to meet with you briefly to learn more about the field. I'd also like to learn more about how you got started. I'll only take 15 to 30 minutes of your time." If the person responds with "Can't we just do this by phone?" you can say, "We could, but I'd love the opportunity to meet you in person." It's worth a try.

## **The meeting**

Regardless of your objective, conduct yourself as if you were going on a job-finding interview. Dress in a business suit or your best outfit. Shake hands at the beginning and end of the meeting, use assertive body language and make good eye contact throughout. Be prepared with specific questions. Be concise and clear. Take a small notebook with you. You can have your own questions written down to keep you on track. Jot down information, resources, and referrals you pick up during the interview.

### **Some questions to ask:**

- Can you tell me a little bit about your current responsibilities?
- Could you describe a typical day?
- How long have you been doing this job?
- What skills are required for your job?
- What are common qualities of individuals who are successful in your position?
- What are 3 things that you enjoy most about working at your company/organization?
- What is the greatest challenge of this job? What are the 3 most challenging aspects of working at your company/organization?
- How would you describe the culture, management style and organization here?
- What kind of opportunities are there for advancement, and how would one qualify?
- What advice would you give to me in regard to my career direction? Or, if you had a chance to do it all over again, what would you have done differently?
- I have a copy of my resume, could you look at it and let me know your thoughts?
- Can you recommend anyone else who might be willing to talk with me about their career path?

Of course you can add your own questions or eliminate any of the above, depending on your objective. Tailor it to the situation.

Your major objective during this interview is to get information and advice. It would be inappropriate to ask for a job, even if that's what you're hoping for. However, job offers are sometimes a byproduct of informational interviewing. Another objective is to make industry contacts. That's why it's always best to meet with people in person and to ask for referrals. Bring your resume along and ask the person you're meeting with to review it at a later time for feedback on its content and format. Leave your business card. This creates another opportunity to interact. Also, be sure to get the business card of the person you're interviewing.

### **Follow-up**

Send a follow-up note right after the conversation thanking the person for the time spent and the information and insights he or she shared. The note should be typed or handwritten on a professional note card or good stationery. Use email for future correspondence, but not for this initial thank-you note.

Informational interviewing, like everything else, is something you become more comfortable with over time. Because you're asking the questions and don't feel the pressure of a traditional job-finding interview, the experience can be quite pleasant and informative. One thing is certain: You're guaranteed to be enlightened and energized by the experience, and you'll make some great new contacts.

Adapted from Donna Cardillo, RN, MA [Nurse.com](http://Nurse.com)

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