



GEORGETOWN UNIVERSITY
The Graduate School of Arts & Sciences
Master of Arts in Language and Communication

This document is the basis of a chapter draft on Informational Interviewing for an upcoming book on *Career Diversity for Linguists* (Wiley). Please do not cite without permission of the author.

However you can COMMENT and ask QUESTIONS freely! This will help make sure the chapter is comprehensive for my audience—which would be readers like you (I hope 😊)!

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Guide to Informational Interviewing Best Practices

Why set up an Informational Interview?

- It is a known, accepted practice in the United States among working professionals
 - Professionals in the US do this often as part of networking and building relationships as well as to learn about changes in their professional space, specific organizations, and areas of inquiry
 - It's not an undue burden to ask a professional (especially close to your sphere or or someone who was referred to you or introduced to you) for a 20-minute interview or to exchange Q&A over email. Those professionals likely found resources that led to their current position via similar interviews or continue to hold these interviews as a way to stay updated in their fields or to plan a transition to a new position or industry by gathering information
 - **However, the function of these interviews is *not* for you to ask for or apply to a job**
- Explore potential fields and organizations of interest (and to rule some out!)

- Gather information that is NOT available on an organization's website or other public source
- Expand your professional network
- Develop your interviewing skills so you can interview more comfortably

How to Request an Informational Interview

- Use email, LinkedIn messaging, phone call, introduction by another person
- In your communication:
 - Let them know how you met them or found out about their work: Did you hear them speak at an event? Did you find them in a LinkedIn search? Did someone recommend their work to you? Did someone recently introduce you to them in person or by e-introduction?
 - If referred by someone else, mention that person's name at the outset
- Briefly mention what is *relevant* in terms of your experience and goals
- Be clear about your areas of interest within the organization to show that you've done your initial research
- Suggest a brief 20-minute meeting or conversation by medium of their choice (in-person when we do that again, by phone or a videochat platform they prefer).
 - Later, during the interaction, remember to *keep to the agreed-to time*, unless your contact person offers to extend
- If they don't have the time to interact synchronously, see if they can answer a couple (well-formed, specific) questions by email/LinkedIn messaging
- If they decline, ask if they might recommend someone else you could speak to or conferences/publications that could give you more info about the org or the professional "space"
 -*And don't take it personally* if they decline; they may just be in a busy period

How to Prepare

- Be ready with your "elevator pitch" or "You in 15 seconds" (Trester p. 46) related to the person/organization/industry you're interested in
 - This means: Your name, title, occupation, field of interest and/or desired position in that field, and something about yourself that shows your value: talents, experience or approach.
- Write out bullet points but practice your introduction orally several times beforehand so you can edit and condense as needed.

- Research publicly available information about the organization on their website and social media or through other contacts you know
- Make a list of questions you have about the organization or field and **prioritize** them so you can come away with answers to the most important ones. Make sure you ask the most important ones!
- Revise your resume to have it ready if requested or if it seems relevant. You can also send your resume to your contact person in advance of your meeting as a way of allowing them to have a better understanding of your background

Questions to Ask

Rapport building questions

- Remind them of who connected you
- Create a co-membership link (Erickson & Shultz 1982)! Draw a connection with them in some way: You're both Georgetown / MLC alumni, both fluent in Arabic, went to the same undergraduate institution, "I saw on your LinkedIn that you were a Peace Corps volunteer—I'm a returned Peace Corps volunteer and did a project on recovering antiquities in Jordan."
- How did you find your first job in this field/area/organization?
- How did your career path lead you here?
- Were there any moments in which your career path took an unexpected turn?
- What skills are required in your position on a daily basis?

What is work Like?

- Be wary about "Could you describe a typical work day for me?". It's often better to be more specific with something like the following:
 - What parts of your job do you find most rewarding? Most challenging?
 - What's something you're working on right now that you're excited about?
- How does your division fit within the overall organization?
- What challenges should I be aware of?
- Is there work load relatively constant or are there different parts of the business cycle that are busier than others?

State of the industry

- Are there too many or too few people entering this profession?
- What developments on the horizon could affect future opportunities?
- The industry has changed dramatically in the past X years. What have you seen from inside your company?

- Which companies have the best track record for promoting women and underrepresented minorities?
- Are there opportunities for self-employment in your field? Where?
- How do most people find their way into [this industry]? Through internships, skills training, a feeder company...?
- Is it necessary to get an internship (paid or unpaid) to enter this industry?

Skills and Expertise

- What education / training / skills would you recommend for someone to advance in the field?
- What skills and qualifications do you seek in a new hire?
- How do most people enter the profession?
- Which of my skills are strong compared to job hunters in this field?
- Where should I seek to develop my skills?
- What do you think of the experience I've had so far? For what positions would I qualify?
- What do you think of my resume? How would you suggest that I change it?
- Can you recommend any additional courses I should take?
- Is an advanced degree (Masters/PhD) necessary in this organization/sector? Nice to have? Doesn't make a difference?
- What companies might be interested in hiring someone with my background?

Fitting in

- Considering my background, how well do you think I would fit in with this company and/or profession?
- What lifestyle adjustments does this work require (frequent travel ? A lot of overtime? Being on call? Remote or on-site? Flexibility for remote work?)
- Considering all the people you've met in your line of work, what personal attributes are essential for success?
- Taking into account my skills, education and experience, what other career paths / organizations would you suggest that I explore?

Money and Advancement

- What are the earnings potential if I enter this field?
- What are some salary ranges for entry-level positions? (may not be known or appropriate, depending on position of your interviewee)
- Are frequent moves among organizations necessary to move up the ladder?
- What is the typical hiring cycle in this field?
- If you could start all over, would you change your career path in any way?

- How long does it take to advance beyond entry level? What does it take?

Seeking more information and action steps beyond the interview

- Where should I look to get current information on salaries / employers / industry issues?
- What professional journals / organizations / conferences should I know about?
- What else do you think I should know about this organization/sector/position?
- **Who else would you recommend I speak with? → this will help build your network**
- **When I connect with them, may I use your name? → this is courtesy :)**

Adapted in part from Stoodley, Martha. 1996. "Information Interviewing: How to Tap Your Hidden Job Market"

During the interview (virtual or in-person)

- Dress in the manner common to that sector and remember that you are "on stage" and being observed. Even though you're not "asking" for a job now, you never know where this may lead: you might be asked to apply for an opening in the future or you might be referred to a person who has an opening, etc.
- Be observant: take in the culture, environment, what is said and unsaid
- **Keep track of the time and "steer" the interaction** to make sure you get the answers you need in the time you've agreed to. YOU can direct the conversation based on your prioritized list of questions.
- Take opportunities to *briefly* interject some features of your biography and experience that are 'selling' points when relevant ("that reminds me of the time that I was managing a project in Mali and...")
- Listen and take notes
- Conclude *on time*: You can cue the end by saying, "My last question for our time today..." or "I can see we have just a couple minutes left, so I have one last question..."). Let them take the lead in extending the time, if they want
- Summarize action steps on both sides ("I'll make sure to connect with X, thank you for mentioning them", "I'll send my resume")
- Thank them for their time

Following up

- Follow up with a **thank you** of some sort. Please. Use whatever mode of communication you've managed so far: email, LinkedIn messaging, text

- Follow up on leads they provide and report back on results
- Keep in touch! Let them know what happens to you and how it is linked to their advice or assistance. People *love* to know that something they said or did helped someone in some way. It's not bothering them to send them a positive follow up that you met someone they connected you with and that led to a job offer

“Words that don't come out of your mouth”: (*adapted from Basalla & Debelius 2007*)

- “There are no academic jobs for linguists so I'm seeing what else is out there.”
(translation: this is a poor second choice to what I really want to do)
- “I haven't been able to get an academic job so I'm exploring my options.”
- “I don't have any experience.” (you do. Do the work ahead of time to identify skills and experience that are transferable and marketable)
- “I don't really know what I want.”
- “Can I pick your brain about...” (this is a personal peeve, but I've *never* met anyone who loved this phrase :)
- [10 minutes of explanation about your dissertation] or
- [5 minutes of explanation about your dissertation]
- Keep the dissertation talk (=personal project talk) brief and monitor for interest and understanding. See what questions they have, if any. Focus on **deliverables and impact** of your projects

Your attitude is:

- Positive and enthusiastic, yet “sufficiently vague” (Basalla & Debelius 2007: 86)
 - That is, you don't want to *feign* enthusiasm for work or organizations you come to realize you'd loathe...you may get unwanted offers of help that you'll then have to navigate.
- Open minded
- Free of negative judgment, criticism or hostility
 - Don't give off the impression that you're realizing you may loathe the work, the organization, or organizational values that are being described to you.
 - Don't denigrate any type of work (ie: a disdain for “admin” or organizational work)

Be persistent! Keep it up!

- Build the habit of engaging in career conversations / doing informational interviews

- Anna Marie Trester estimates in *Employing Linguistics* that approx. every 25 networking interactions leads to 1 opportunity, so 50 conversations a year gets you 2 opportunities

Sample email (long):

Reaching out to an institutional alum your advisor suggested you talk with

Dear Dr./Ms./Mr./first name (depending on convention in the field) _____: ¹

I'm a junior at Georgetown University majoring in Linguistics with a focus/interest in XYZ. My advisor, Dr. _____, gave me your contact information because I'm interested in learning about how you developed your career in healthcare market research after graduating from the Georgetown MA in Language & Communication program. I would greatly appreciate the opportunity to talk with you for about 15 minutes to ask some questions that I have prepared and obtain some career advice.

Should you wish to know more about my background, I've attached my resume. [Alternatively, something like 'here's an explanation of my background in case that influences how you answer my questions'] I am available to [meet/call/videochat] between 9:00-3:00 pm on Mondays and between 1:00-5:00 pm on Tuesdays and Thursdays. Would any of these times be convenient for you? I would be grateful for any career advice you could share with me and look forward to hearing from you.

Thank you,

¹ Try not to use first names with senior people in academia you don't know on first contact. This differs by industry: tech tends towards first name on first use.