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Networking and Informational Interviewing

What is networking? What are the goals of networking?

Networking is a useful technique that creates a system of contacts for information and support as well as cultivates working relationships for mutual benefit. It requires several basic skills: meeting and talking to people, asking questions, organizing information, and following up on references. Networking can take place in informal settings, such as talking to a colleague as you both wait for the train, or in formal settings, such as writing a letter to a professional in your community. Networking fulfills the following goals:

- Spread the word of your availability and the type of work you are seeking
- See different points of view about a career or company
- Gather information about what qualities and qualifications the jobs require
- Obtain knowledge about a job, company, or career field
- Locate a company or organizational authority to whom you should address your cover letter
- Find mentors who can provide advice and support

Networking Guidelines

Make a Master Contact List. Write down the contact information for everyone you know—relatives, professors, colleagues, friends, doctors and other professionals, religious leaders, and fellow members of any community service group or club. This initial brainstorming step is crucial! Everyone you know has the potential to know someone who can help you land your ideal internship or job!

Organize your contact information. Devise a system of notecards or start a spreadsheet on your computer to store and maintain the information on all your contact people, what they do, and who they know.

Actively expand your network. Join a professional or special interest group, attend mixers and functions where you can meet people, write to authors and experts in your field, compose articles for group newsletters, or subscribe to email discussion groups.

Write down your objectives and develop questions to ask your networking contacts. Go into a conversation knowing what you want to get out of it, whether that is acquiring some references or finding out how your contact feels about her or his occupation. Have a few questions ready to facilitate the dialogue.

Decide how to connect with your contacts. Depending on the person and your relationship, you might call, write a letter, or simply chat with her or him the next time you run into one another. Whenever possible, face-to-face meetings are preferable.

Use your communication skills! Be assertive, but not obnoxious. You are asking for help and advice, so listen intently. Demonstrate your knowledge by using people's names or field terminology. If your contact seems to be giving you no references or information, suggest that you will call another time so he or she can take time to consider possible referrals.

What is an Informational Interview? Why should you do one?

An informational interview is an in-person research method that serves a variety of purposes. It is an effective career exploration technique that helps you find the right job, build a professional network, and market yourself. An additional benefit is that it could lead you to jobs that are not publicly advertised. An informational interview is not a job interview, rather it is a time to collect information and gain contacts. Here are some valuable rewards of conducting informational interviews:

- Increase your knowledge about the job market by getting first-hand current information
- Discover, on some occasions, jobs and career opportunities that you did not know existed
- Learn about professional associations and other resources
- Enhance your candidacy by having done your homework
- Build your confidence for job interviews by developing your listening and social skills
- Gain self-knowledge; define and modify your goals as you obtain information about the career
- Allow potential employers to meet you and witness your analytical and interpersonal skills
- Meet new people; establish or expand your professional network

Informational interviewing is similar to pre-season training in sports; it makes you better prepared for the season and thus more competitive.

Informational Interview Request Letter Guidelines

When you write your request letter, be clear and concise. Use a Standard or Indented Block Style layout. As always, make sure your letter is well written and free of grammatical errors.

1st Paragraph: Introduce yourself by stating your educational background and career goals. Reveal how you got their name and contact information. Explain your intentions for writing and indicate you are requesting an informational interview.

2nd Paragraph: Outline the issues and questions you have and wish to discuss with him or her at your meeting. If you are enclosing a resume, state that it is for informational purposes only.

Closing Paragraph: Indicate assertively that you will call at a specific day and time to schedule an appointment. Inform her or him of your contact information, unless you enclosed a resume. Type and sign your name.

Informational Interview Guidelines

Establish rapport. Spend some time chatting about common interests or background, or the person who referred you.

Set the agenda. Take control of the meeting. State your objectives at the beginning.

Do your “60-second commercial.” Give them brief summary of your educational and personal background, significant skills and strengths, and your career and work environment goals.

Ask open-ended questions. Go into the conversation with prepared inquiries to help focus on the information you hope to get. Ask who, what, when, where, why, and how questions, because these tend to extract more substance. Start by asking the person about her or his own career and job.

Ask for referrals. Mention the type of people you are looking to contact, for example, managers or department chairs. Request names by asking, “who do you know in...?”

Close the meeting. Thank them for their time, and ask for their business card so you can send a thank you note.

Informational Interview Etiquette: the Do's and Don'ts

DO as much research in your field of interest as you can before calling or writing so the interviewer understands that your interests are serious

DO check out anything available from the relevant professional association

DO think carefully about how this field would fit with your interests and strengths

DO be sincere and enthusiastic when you ask about the company or career field. It will help impress your contact person, who has the power to refer or recommend you when a job comes up in that company

DO be punctual to the interview and presentable in appearance

DO be assertive and highlight your strengths and accomplishments

DO bring a resume in case your contact wants to pass it along. Ask him or her for a specific name so you can follow up directly

DON'T ask for a job. Only ask for information and advice

After the Informational Interview:

Always send a thank you letter to the networking contact within 2-3 days after your visit. Share what parts of your visit you enjoyed, what advice you found particularly helpful, and what you plan to do with the information and advice you received. For example, if you received the name of someone in her or his field to contact, then you might mention that you have made the call for an informational interview. Proofread your letter for grammatical or spelling mistakes, and make sure it is polite and well written. The thank you letter is an important component of the networking contact's impression of you.

Potential Questions for Your Informational Interview:

Ask those questions that reflect where you are in your career exploration.

Job and Career Questions:

- What are the duties/responsibilities in this job?
- What is a typical day/week?
- What knowledge, skills, abilities, and other qualifications are desirable for this job?
- What do you view as the critical skills for a position in this field?
- What are the frustrations and drawbacks?
- What are the typical salary ranges for someone doing this type of work?
- What does it take to be successful in this field?

Career Future Questions:

- What is the typical pattern of career development in this field?
- What is the future outlook in this field? Is it growing, declining or holding steady?

Lifestyle Questions:

- What obligations do your work place on you, outside of the ordinary workweek?
- What are your working hours and schedule like?

- How much flexibility do you have in terms of dress, schedule, vacation, etc.?

Career Preparation Advice:

- How did your undergraduate work prepare you for this career?
- What kind of background is necessary to enter this field?
- How can I acquire the required skills?
- Are there courses or experiences, paid or otherwise, that you would recommend?
- Is a graduate degree preferred?
- If so, are there specific programs that are valued in this field?
- What are the books and periodicals I should be reading to understand the field?
- Do you have regular reading you find useful?

Job Search Advice:

- How can I find a job related to this field?
- What types of employers hire people in this line of work?
- How could I overcome a potential employer's objections to me?
- How can I identify both advertised and unadvertised vacancies?
- What is the best way to approach prospective employers? When is the best time?
- Any advice on developing new job leads?

Resume Review Questions:

- Is this an appropriate resume for the jobs I will be seeking?
- What about length, paper quality, layout, print-type?
- If an employer received this resume, how do you think she or he would react to it?
- How might I best improve the form and content of the resume?

Asking for Referrals:

- Do you know any other people doing this type of work (or related work that was suggested) who might be willing to talk with me, as you have?