

Discovery and Informational Interviews

Discovery and Informational Interviews are powerful career tools. They provide opportunities to build relationships, explore potential careers, and open doors. Generally, they are one-on-one meetings with professionals that are designed to help you learn more and move forward in your vocational path. While the concept of an *informational interview* is more widely known, the idea of a *discovery interview* is slightly different and not as commonly taught. The main distinction between the two is a matter of focus; *informational interviews* have a professional context, while *discovery interviews* are more personal. In both types of interviews, you are always looking to build great relationships and expand your personal or professional network.

The approach you take depends on where you are in your life and career. See below:

Discovery Interviews Broad, exploratory, and more personal	Informational Interviews Targeted, focused and more field specific
Best suited for young people discerning career possibilities, who are still in their own discovery process “I’m still trying to figure out what I want to do” You invite people to tell you their personal stories, and get to know someone and potentially involve them in your life and discovery process Driven by getting to know someone more personally and how they have become successful—their education and career path You might share your personal hopes, dreams and fears—this person could become a personal trusted advisor or mentor	Best suited for people who are further along in their career search and narrowing down options You know what you want to do or have gotten your search narrowed down to a few options You’re seeking information about a specific field, career track, or job position by focusing the conversation on that profession Driven by the task of learning about a profession and the landscape of a particular field, and how to enter that field and be successful (specific credentials or needed education) You might share your career goals and professional aspirations—this person could become a strong professional advisor or ally

Know Your Objective

First, understand your objectives in conducting such interviews and how they fit into your career search process. Your objectives will determine when it’s appropriate to employ each type of interview and with whom. The two meeting types are not mutually exclusive; you may blend elements from each type, depending on where you are in your career process.

- What are you trying to accomplish by interviewing people?
- What type of people do you want to meet?

Conducting the Interviews

The mechanics of how you conduct each type of interview are very similar, including the way you secure the meetings and follow up afterward. While the information you are trying to gather may differ, in either situation you are trying to build good relationships. You have to factor in the reality that you just won't connect with everyone; therefore, the more interviews you do, the greater your opportunities are to establish good relationships. Lastly, it's worth noting that you don't need to tell people you are conducting informational or discovery interviews; these are just terms for your own use. Review how to conduct each type of interview and determine how to apply some of the ideas to your own situation.

Discovery Interviews

In discovery interviews, you are looking to meet someone older whom you admire and respect (successful by your measure) to ask them about themselves and truly get to know them. You are interviewing them to discover who they are. Conducted properly, discovery interviews can potentially help you discover who you are by hearing others' experiences. In a discovery interview, you're essentially asking someone to share their story with you to the extent they are willing to share: How did they get to where they are? What do they value? What's important to them? How did they find their vocation? How have they made decisions and what can you learn from them?

You might think that busy people might not have the time to share their story with you, but if you become a very good listener and keep asking questions, you might be surprised by how much someone will open up. Sometimes busy people don't have the space to sit and reflect on their own lives and they may find their time with you refreshing. As they narrate, you want to keep them somewhat focused because you are the one conducting the meeting. Additionally, if you're meeting someone in a career in which you are interested, could you envision yourself in their career or working to get there? Is what they do (or did) something you would like to aspire to?

You have to feel out each meeting as far as what people are willing to share; with some people, you'll just immediately connect, while others may not be so willing to open up. If that's the case, stick to a more informational interview protocol. Also, it goes without saying, if someone is opening up to you about their successes and failures, honor this growing relationship with your trust.

Because of the relational nature of discovery interviews, they can take many different forms depending on how the conversation flows. Below are some general guidelines on how to begin and keep the discussion moving in a productive direction:

After asking how much time they have to meet with you, great first questions are:

“Tell me more about what you do and how you got to where you are.” or “How did you decide on [specific occupation] or get into [specific career]?”

As they explain things, you can ask follow-up questions to open the door for more discovery:

What do you love most about what you do?

What do you dislike?

What do you find most challenging?

When they tell you something specific, you can also ask exploratory questions such as:

What was that like?

How did you make that decision?

How did you get that opportunity?

How did that make you feel?

Listen carefully to what they're saying and ask your own creative questions as your curiosity leads you. If this is someone you respect and they seem to be opening up, you may even ask some questions such as:

What is the most valuable lesson you've learned in your career?

What are some of the best (or hardest) decisions you've ever made?

What are some of the biggest mistakes you've ever made?

Anything you would have done differently?

If this is a person you like, you may be determining if you share the same values. Would they be a good role model for you? If you are really connecting with this person, perhaps this is someone who could become a trusted advisor or mentor in your life.

Involving Them in Your Process

Ideally, you would like to involve people you respect as part of your discovery process. This may naturally occur in the meeting, or you can simply make the transition by asking if they would help you evaluate your own situation and give some guidance or feedback.

The odds are clear: career experts repeatedly report that 80% of jobs are landed through networked connections, and 70% of jobs are filled before they are even advertised publically. However, those networks are best established before you need a job. There's an adage, "Dig your well before you're thirsty," meaning that you want to have your relationship network built before you need to draw from it. Effective networking involves investing in others and building genuine, high-trust relationships, which is why I put so much emphasis on discovery interviews as early as possible.

Informational Interviews

When you're ready to explore a few specific fields or dig deep into a particular field, you're ready for the *informational interviews*. Although nothing replaces face-to-face, these meetings can be conducted via phone, Skype, or Google Hangouts and may tend to be shorter.

While these meetings may result in someone passing your résumé along, going into a meeting strictly with this mentality may backfire. No one ever likes to feel you are using them for something. As in the discovery inter-

views, you are there to learn yet, in this case, more specifically about their position and more detailed nuances about the field. Depending on how you secured the meeting (if through an introduction or “cold call”) they may be meeting you more as a professional courtesy, so it’s even more important that you watch their time and pay attention to how warm or receptive they are to helping you. Typically you ask more targeted questions about their profession and less about them personally:

- How did you get into this position?
- What do you do on a daily basis? Walk me through a typical day.
- What do you like most about what you do?
- What do you not like as much? Anything you would change if you could?
- How do people break into this field?
- What is a typical career path in your industry?
- What different types of jobs are available in this industry?
- What publications and resources do you use to keep up with developments in your field? What do you read?
- Are there any trade associations or professional groups you would recommend? Do you know anyone in them?
- How has your industry changed since you’ve gotten in it?
- Where do you think the industry is heading? What are some opportunities? What are some threats?
- If you were starting all over today, what would you do?
- What advice would you give someone looking to enter this field?
- What kind of education does one need to excel in this field?
- What’s different or unique about your company?

A great way to transition to a close in these interviews is to thank them for their time and all of the valuable information they shared, and then ask this: What advice would you have for me? The way they answer may also reveal how willing they are to help you. If they seem receptive, you could ask more:

Is there anyone you know specifically that I should meet? If you want to conduct more informational interviews, you may be somewhat strategic in who you ask to meet such as, “Do you know anyone in [specific field/job position] that I could meet in the same way I met you?”

Concluding the Meetings

In either type of interview, don’t be afraid to ask for help. Depending on how well you established a relationship, below are some ways your contacts could help:

- Ask if you can stay in touch with them or call on them in the future for help (to update them or ask for a connection)
- Introduce you to other great people in their network that you can interview
- Invite you to (or suggest) a professional event, social, or volunteer opportunity where you could learn or meet other people who would help build your network
- Review your résumé
- Keep you abreast of any possible job or career opportunities or pass along your résumé
- Give you feedback on how well you conducted the interview with them
- At the end of a phenomenal discovery interview, you may even ask if they might consider mentoring you or ask if you could meet them again to see if they could help you evaluate your strengths and weaknesses, opportunities, and threats

How to Get Interviews

You always want to begin with people that you know and branch out from there. Consider your entire relationship network (or your family's) and think of people you know who would want to help you. Who could you call for *discovery* or *informational interviews*?

Calling on Somebody You Know

There is an immediate higher trust with people you know. Simply call or email them. For example, to secure a discovery interview, "I'm evaluating different career options, and I would really like to learn more about you and how you became successful. I was hoping we could meet so I could learn more about your story."

"What if I don't know anybody?" - The "Cold Call"

It's often scarier to call someone you don't know at all, introduce yourself, and ask to meet them. A pure cold call is where you have absolutely no relationship at all, nor do you know anyone in common. Though it may be more challenging, don't be afraid to give this a try, as the advantage is you can meet someone more targeted toward your specific field. You may have to reach out to a few more people until you get someone ready and willing to meet you. If someone seems resistant to a meeting, don't take it personally; just thank them and move on. Start with people with whom you have some sort of tie, such as alumni of your college. Reach out to people with whom you have more identity capital. For instance, call on people in an organization with which you are affiliated, like a fraternity/sorority or other organization or club you are in.

When you reach out to someone in this situation, it might go something like this:

"Hi, my name is Drew Lichtenberger and I'm a recent alumnus of Virginia Tech. I noticed that you graduated with a degree in finance, as did I. I'm contacting you because I'm exploring careers in investment banking and I was wondering if you would be willing to meet with me, as I'd like to learn more about your field and how you got there. Could I buy you a coffee sometime (or visit you in your office) in the next couple weeks?"

Keep it short, express the purpose of the call clearly, and ask to meet them. If you have a mutual club or affiliation in common, mention that. "...we were both in Student Government and it would be interesting to hear what it was like when you were there." However, be direct and don't mislead them. If you are calling to get to know them and interview them, you must stick to the premise of the meeting. It's a big mistake to request a meeting on one basis, then change to a different agenda while you're in the meeting. Whatever you do, have integrity and be forthright and upfront with your intentions.

Referred Introductions - Make it a "Warm Call"

To avoid making cold calls, find ways to be referred or introduced to other people. In fact, people you are one or two people removed from are statistically the people that are most likely to open doors for you. They are people who don't know you, but they know someone that you know. In other words, you have more *relationship* or *identity capital* with them—the trust is higher and they are more likely to want to help you out. I've called people in the past and had them say, "Any friend of ____ is a friend of mine."

Explain to people what you are trying to accomplish with discovery or informational interviews and ask them to brainstorm with you about who you could meet. You can do this with people you know in your personal network, or you could do this at the end of a successful discovery or informational interview. When you ask, be specific: "I'd really like to meet someone in the journalism field; is there anyone you could introduce me to?" You could even do your research to mention a company or person in their network. Use a resource like *LinkedIn* to find people you would like to meet who already have a relationship with someone you know.

When calling a referred introduction, you could use the same language as with the cold call, but mention your mutual connection's name. "*Hi, my name is Drew Lichtenberger and I'm a friend of [Name]. I'm contacting you because...*"

If your mutual connection gave you a powerful introduction, mention what you can: "[Name] said I should contact you because I'm exploring careers in [specific career] and he/she said that you were really successful and somebody I needed to meet."

Always be sure to go back and thank mutual connections for making introductions, especially if they work out. People love to have the feedback that their introductions helped someone. In fact, they may even introduce you to more people.

Important Items With Both Types of Interviews

- The primary outcome of the meetings should be that you gained valuable information while establishing new relationships
- Go into these meetings with a clear focus, purpose and plan for your time
- Remember that other people's time is valuable: After the customary small talk, thank them for taking the time to meet, be upfront with your objective, and ask them how much time you have
- Be respectful, keep the conversation on track, and conclude the meeting on time

- Be prepared, try to find out something about who you are meeting (LinkedIn) and know what questions you would like to ask them (you can write these down in a padfolio)
- Don't go into the interview angling to grab an opportunity; people can sense if you're just trying to use them to "get in the door" or something else
- Informational interviews can be conducted over the phone or by video chat
- Always thank people for their time at the end of a meeting
- Send a handwritten note (stands out) or an email expressing your appreciation

Summary

These meetings can lead to other incredible outcomes such as introductions to other people and new opportunities. As a result of informational or discovery interviews, I've been asked to sit on boards and received job offers. Those doors didn't open right away, but I maintained the relationship and such opportunities were presented later.

Some of my best opportunities have come through people that I barely knew. It's impossible to anticipate who will and will not help you. That's why it's important to do several of these meetings. Continue to meet new people and take a genuine interest in their lives with a hunger for learning and serving others. In other words, seek to build enduring, authentic relationships with a spirit of serving others, and the rest will fall into place. Keep the long haul in mind. You may not be thinking this way in your twenties, but the people with whom you establish relationships today could prove to be some of your strongest allies 10 or 20 years from now. Don't overlook establishing high-quality, long-term relationships for short-term gain. So, even if you didn't get a lead or introduction to someone else, you have connected with someone and you have earned their respect to maintain contact, which is a major win. You may even be able to gain a new mentor—see *Attracting Mentors*.

Lastly, the more interviews you conduct, the more likely these efforts will pay off—some meetings will be more beneficial than others. You never know, you might just run across someone who is looking to hire immediately or in the near future, and they are interviewing you.

Wishing you all the best in learning new things and creating some great relationships!