



INFORMATIONAL INTERVIEWS: A TOOL FOR CUSTOMIZED EMPLOYMENT

Informational interviewing is a great way to develop work experience settings, build a job placement network, to discover new kinds of jobs, to introduce yourself and your services to employers, and to build the mental database that all of us rely on for employment ideas when beginning a job search with someone.

Setting Up An Informational Interview.

Getting an appointment for an informational interview is usually much easier than setting up a job development meeting. A casual conversation with a prospective employer at the monthly Chamber of Commerce “Business After Hours” social or at a service club meeting (e.g. Kiwanis, Rotary, Lions, et al.) can lead to a probe such as, “I’ve never seen your operation before, would you mind if I called you to set up a time for a tour and a bit of a chat?” Most folks love to talk about their business and since you are not pressing them, setting up a phone call is considered low-risk. Make sure to follow-up soon, before the conversation is forgotten, and to illustrate commitment.

A more direct approach can also be used. Simply call the business owner or manager and let them know that you are assisting someone who is interested in the same or similar industry, and that you are seeking their expertise and advice to help this person develop a career plan. Use connections if possible! Having a personal recommendation can help facilitate getting the appointment.

Sample Script: “Hello! My name is Jane Dow. I’m a Career Counselor with XYZ Enterprises, and I’m assisting a job seeker named Nikki who has a strong interest in __ (industry) __ and is exploring career opportunities in this field. Dave Adams, from the Small Business Development Center, recommended I call you. We are hoping you would consider letting us come in and interview you to get your insight and advice on career possibilities in this field, and possibly take a short tour of your business. Would you be willing to meet with Nikki and me for about 20 minutes any time next week, at your convenience?”

Generally a request for fifteen to thirty minutes works well because it signals respect for the person's time, and it indicates that you are busy as well. In our experience, fifteen minutes always becomes thirty to sixty minutes once the discussion and tour begins.

Conducting the Informational Interview.

On-site, the job developer or employment specialist is seeking information about the company, its hiring practices, getting insights to the company culture, but most importantly, identifying unmet business needs. Unmet business needs (or industry needs) will help you identify tasks that match the job seekers abilities and opportunities to negotiate jobs. The general format of an informational interview is:

1. Brief Discussion usually prompted by the employment specialist asking something to effect of: "Before we tour, can you tell me a bit about the history of the business, the products and services, and how the business is evolving?" And, "Tell me how you got into this line of work." People want to know that you care, so give them a chance to talk about themselves. You might also ask about suppliers or end product users to get idea about other places where this type of work occurs. Have some opening questions planned to "break the ice".

2. Ask specific questions to get at unmet needs. Here are some examples, but use these flexibly, or ask additional questions that make sense given the industry.

- *Are there tasks that don't get done, or don't get done to your satisfaction?*
- *If you had an additional staff person, what would you have them do?*
- *How has technology changed your business in the past few years?*
- *What are trends in your field right now?*
- *If you had \$10,000 to invest in your business, what would you do with it? (possibilities for resource ownership)*
- *Are there things that customers ask for, or complain about? (possible new products, potential for a business within a business)*

3. Tour, with questions asked at appropriate times and of various people performing the many tasks along the way. While touring, be observant of possible unmet needs. For example, do you notice phones ringing that aren't being answered, paperwork that needs filing, recycling that needs to be dealt with, etc.

3. Wrap-up by thanking the person for their time, and close by asking if it is alright to contact them in the future, should you need more information. Make your exit and promise to stay in touch. Send a thank you note.

Throughout the process, opportunities to ask questions conversationally exist. Since this is not a job development visit, do not press someone for a job. That may, or may not, come later in the relationship. For now, the tour is answering questions about the varying

tasks and duties people perform, the values and culture of the company, and needs the business has that job seekers could potentially address.

The tour provides an opportunity to witness, for instance, the level of natural support that may be available to someone with a disability. Keen observation reveals whether co-workers and supervisors help each other out during a typical day; it reveals who does the training and how an employment specialist might structure the initiation period so that the employer takes significant responsibility for supervision and training right from the start; it reveals what is valued on the worksite, such as muscle, brains, humor, attendance, speed, quality or other worker traits. These are important considerations, of course, when designing a job match that minimizes on-site training and consultation.

The interviewing process, as well, reveals opportunities or red flags if the place of employment does not provide a good working environment.

Some standard questions for an informational interview are provided below, but use these only a guide. Don't try to ask all possible questions if they don't seem to fit into the conversation. It will feel more natural, and likely be more productive, if you "go with the flow" so that the interview is more of a conversation than an interrogation. Use of smooth listening, which uses silence to prompt the speaker to add details that are important, will serve you well.

Possible Interview Questions:

1. Where do you find or recruit employees? (This is asked in case you now need to refer to Americas Job Centers if they do all the hiring searches for this particular employer; to identify your competition; and to create an opportunity to discuss the service you provide).
2. How are people trained in their jobs? (This gives information about natural training means and methods that can be sculpted into a job match and training plan, especially one that recognizes that in most cases business already trains its employees and that the support you offer is customizing their training, not replacing it).
3. What are the prerequisites for working here? (This points out the various qualifications, certifications, etc., that might be needed).
4. How or where do your employees gain the experience required to work here? (This is another question that gets at qualifications and that seeks the advice of the "expert." It also gives the job developer a list of other similar companies).
5. What personal characteristics do you look for in employees? (This gives insight into the kind of candidate the employer seeks; provides information on what to highlight in a proposal; and gives a glimpse inside the culture of the company regarding the most valued skills and attributes).

6. When employees leave, what other industries or businesses do they go to? (This starts getting at issues of staff turnover, which might be an indicator of a great place to work in the case where no one leaves, to an indication of poor management in the case where there is high turnover. It also provides the job developer with information on related industries and possible opportunities for someone interested in similar work).

7. What are the pay and benefit rates?

8. What are the work hours? Is there shift work? Does the company allow for flex time or other job accommodations? (This gives the employment specialist insight into the flexibility of management and the company's policies on work hours and expected work effort).

9. What impact is technology having on the industry? (This is a common concern for most businesses today and provides an opportunity for the job developer using Resource Ownership strategies to propose a job for someone who can use or bring with them a piece of essential technology that can be purchased through a Social Security PASS Plan or through Vocational Rehabilitation).

10. What are the current forces for change in this industry? (This question often leads to a lively discussion of how the market is changing, how personnel preparation and training is evolving, and how the competitive market is adapting).

All these questions and their answers breed add-on questions and discussion points that provide opportunities to solve labor problems or to innovate in the face of emerging trends in hiring. Informational interviews are a low-tech, high-touch option that provides insight into the inner workings of business. Knowing what goes on in a given company gives the employment specialist or job developer an added advantage when creating employment or responding to an employer need.