

If only they knew me: Informational interviews improve your job prospects

Written by Julie Desmond
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“I’m good at what I do. I’m always on time, I never call in sick. My manager gave me great reviews. But now I can’t find a job. If someone would just agree to meet me, I know they would want to hire me. How do I get noticed?”

With all the competition for work out there, getting a foot in the door can be a challenge. Have you thought about not asking for a job? Ask for an informational interview instead.

An informational interview is a try-before-you-buy search tool, a conversation between you and anyone at a company who is willing to share information with you. Informational interviews are short – 20 minutes or less – and provide an excellent way for a candidate to learn about a company or an industry without the pressure of selling yourself.

Getting an Informational Interview is easier than getting a job interview, because you are not asking to be hired. Choose a place where you think you would like to work. Do you know anyone who works there? If not, then do some internet searching to find out who works in the area you want to work in. If you want to be in manufacturing, for example, find out who manages operations there. If you can’t figure it out on your own, you can call the main number of a business and just ask for the name of the manager of your area.

Contact this person and explain that you are interested in learning more about the company or the industry, and ask if he or she would be willing to talk with you. You must be willing to go to their office at the time they choose. Make it very easy for them to see you by being flexible and agreeable and grateful.

Once you get the appointment, make the most of the meeting by coming in fully prepared. This isn’t a job interview, but dress and behave as if it is; remember that you are being assessed any time you are with anyone. Always make a dazzling impression.

Because you asked for the meeting, it is your responsibility to start it off. Research the company and the industry so you can ask three sets of intelligent questions. Yes, you only need three sets of questions. The first questions are about your interviewee: How did you decide to work in this industry? What skills or attributes help you to be successful in your work? What is a typical

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day like for you? Listen to his or her answers and remember what was said. Prove your own professionalism by paying attention. Your second question is about the business: how is this industry/company being impacted by our changing economy? Your last questions are about opportunities: I noticed there's a customer service position open at this company; can you tell me what education or training would be required for that type of position? What advice would you give to someone looking to get into this industry? Is there anything else I should know?

Informational interviews should be brief. Once you have asked your questions, make a graceful exit. Stand up, smile, shake hands, make eye contact and say thank you. On your way out, smile at anyone else who walks by and, always, say thank you to the receptionist. The front desk is a power seat; be respectful.

You'll want to follow up after the interview with an email to say thank you. Include a line or two referring to the conversation: a fact that interested you or something you appreciated learning about.

An informational interview is not a job interview. But it can open the door to new opportunities, new contacts, new possibilities.

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