

Networking & Informational Interviewing Guide

People are perhaps the most important source of information about new jobs - or for that matter, careers. One of the most effective ways to gather information about career fields and build your personal network is by talking with individuals who know about the field in which you are interested. This is often called informational interviewing, but in practice it's also networking.

Networking is the art of building alliances. If you are doing it right, networking starts long before a job or internship search, and you probably don't even realize you are doing it. You are networking when you:

- attend/present at professional meetings or conferences
- talk to relatives or your friends parents
- volunteer for a community program
- visit with other members of student organizations or other groups
- talk to your peers & professors
- strike up a conversation with someone else waiting in line at an office
- post updates on Facebook & Twitter
- attend a concert or recital

Getting Started

Creating a network is oftentimes very intimidating to students who feel as though they have no connection with the "world of work". At first, networking can seem unnatural as the thought of rejection sends most people into a panic. However, preparing yourself in advance can alleviate the paralyzing effects associated with networking.

Techniques that can assist you in network preparation:

- Know your own interests, skills, abilities and values inside and out.
- Know the key players in your industry, including individuals, employers and current trends.
- Understand that rejection is not a reflection of who you are and should not be taken personally. Confidence will be built with each positive response, persistence will be gained with each negative response.

Talking to people and learning from their experiences needn't be a formal process or one you practice only when job hunting. There are numerous resources available enabling you to pinpoint the people you'd like to contact.

- Oberlin Alumni are an excellent source of information, and you are guaranteed to have at least one thing in common: Oberlin. An Oberlin Alumni Network is available online through OBIEWeb and via LinkedIn.
- OBIEWeb is an electronic directory containing thousands of alumni profiles & contact information. To access OBIEWeb you must first meet with a Career Services Advisor.
- LinkedIn is a professional social networking tool with more than 2,100 Oberlin College and Conservatory members. We recommended that you get to know LinkedIn. To access the network, you must complete a profile and request to join the Oberlin LinkedIn Group.
- There is also a small group of Oberlin Alumni in Doostang.com.
- Professors can provide a wealth of information about specific disciplines they have encountered through their research or community involvement. Faculty are also a good resource for those considering attending graduate school.
- Friends, family, supervisors, co-workers, coaches and acquaintances. Chat with people casually--on a plane or bus, while waiting in lines, at social gatherings, etc. Join a professional organization in your field and get involved. Most people enjoy talking about the work they do. Curiosity can open a lot of doors.
- People you have heard about: lecturers, employers, prominent people in the community, etc.
- Reading trade magazines and newspapers also provides a networking resource. Authors of articles, and those featured in articles, are potential contacts. If you have done a thorough analysis of an article or profile, and convey that knowledge in a letter, you might be surprised by the kind of positive response you get.

In practice, you'll incorporate a great many more people into your efforts than the one person hiring you. In fact, the more people you involve, the better. It is essential for you to develop a network of people who are within your area of interest.

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The Office of Career Services ♦ www.oberlin.edu/career ♦ 440-775-8140 ♦ career.services@oberlin.edu

Informational Interviewing

Informational interviewing is a method of networking designed to produce information about a particular career field or an individual's career path. An informational interview can help you to explore a career path, learn about a company or organization, and build your professional networking contacts. An informational interview is not a job interview; however, it allows you to build your network and may open up future job opportunities. It is actually just a low-stress conversation about a topic of interest to both you and the person with whom you are talking: his or her career.

Reasons to Conduct Informational Interviews

- Gain information on your career field and the skills necessary to succeed
- Make contacts with managers, supervisors, and colleagues
- Gain information on positions that are not being advertised
- Learn about the realities of the job, as well as the needs of employers
- Gain confidence in talking with people, which may result in lower stress in a formal interview setting
- Identify your personal strengths and weaknesses in terms of the expectations of a specific job or company

Who to Contact?

You should start with people you already know. Family, friends, faculty, members of groups or organizations to which you belong or have belonged, such as professional associations or previous employers, are individuals you could initially contact. Although they may not be in your chosen career field, they may know people who are. If you are seeking a job or internship, you should give them a copy of your resume. They also need to have a good idea about what type of position you are seeking. Share this information in a conversation or in a letter -- people can't help you unless they have this background.

Also, consider researching organizations that fit the career field you are interested in. Sometimes employers profile the staff (some non-profits, for example, do this) – pick someone who has a job that sounds interesting and contact him or her (check their LinkedIn profile to see if you already have connections). You may also want to research professional associations in your field of interest. Find out if they have a local/regional chapter. Find the name of someone on the board i.e. President, Vice-President, Membership Chair, Program Chair etc. and contact them.

Be creative. The only limits are your imagination!

Setting up the Interview

Identify what you are seeking to gain from the informational interview. Are you trying to gain an entry into a specific company? Working on a broad career search? This process will help you to determine who to contact and how to approach them. A career counselor can help you to determine the answers to these questions. Make a list of everyone you know who can help you get an introduction to a company or recommend a contact for you to talk with. Start with people you already know. Family, friends, faculty, previous employers, and members of groups you are associated with can all be potential sources. Although they may not be in your chosen career field, they may know people who are.

As an Oberlin student, you have access to an invaluable network of alumni, many of whom are very willing to share their career expertise. Oberlin College hosts an alumni directory called OBIEWeb, as well as an active alumni group on LinkedIn. Students will need to meet with a Career Counselor in order to access OBIEWeb. Ideally, you will contact the person who you wish to interview through an introduction made by a mutual acquaintance. If you are contacting them without an introduction, email, phone, or even a social networking site such as LinkedIn or Twitter can be used for your initial connection. You should research the person in advance and try to determine the best method of contacting them.

Prepare an introduction

If you do not know the person well – it's not a family or close connection – it is appropriate to write a formal email or letter expressing your intentions. Due diligence may be required to find an appropriate email address, so use your resources: OBIWeb, LinkedIn, internet searches, organizational lists/bios. Your initial outreach should include:

- How you found out about them
- Why you're writing
- A request to meet with them for approximately 30 minutes at their convenience
- How they can contact you

SAMPLE ONE (Email)

Dear Ms. Kubitschek:

It was pleased to find your name on the Oberlin College and Conservatory LinkedIn group. I am a graduating Oberlin senior exploring a career in Disability Law. It has been a difficult decision for me to decide which human service sector to focus upon and whether to apply directly to Law school or to pursue a Legal Assistant position following graduation.

I am contacting you because I am interested in your direct experience in this field, as well as your perspective on the pros and cons of various law programs, and their timing, with which you may be familiar. If possible, I would like to speak with you directly; I would anticipate no longer than a 15 minute call. In advance, might I email you a list of 6-7 related questions? Perhaps you could email a reply and one or two convenient times for me to phone over the next week or so to follow up. I look forward to your email and thank you for your consideration.

John Doe '10

SAMPLE TWO (Letter)

Jill McLoud
30 Pleasant Street
Oberlin, OH 02454

October 1, 2009

Mr. Thomas Slone '86
Associate Media Planner
BBDO
000 Avenue of the Americas
New York, NY 11111

Dear Mr. Sloan:

I was delighted to find your name on the OBIWeb alumni database because I am seeking an opportunity to speak with a Oberlin alumna who is an experienced professional regarding career opportunities in advertising and public relations. Although I have had an internship with a local advertising company, I am hoping to learn more about the national and international advertising marketplace from your perspective.

As an intern for The Martin Agency in Richmond, VA, I gained an appreciation for the creative and organizational aspects of communicating effectively with targeted consumers of media. I have developed analytical, decision-making, and interpersonal skills through my studies in Art History and Economics, participation in the Student Government, and study abroad experience. My goal is to find the best way of presenting my skills and abilities to potential employers.

I would greatly appreciate having an opportunity to talk with you about your work and your point of view on

effective job search strategies for graduating seniors like me. I will call you in the next week to see if we might be able to arrange a convenient time to talk. In the meantime, feel free to contact me at 781-555-5555. Thank you for considering my request.

Sincerely,
Jill McLoud '10
Enclosure: Resume

SAMPLE 3 (Email)

Dear Mr. Kelner,

I am a second year student at Oberlin College majoring in History. In exploring the Oberlin College and Conservatory LinkedIn group, I noticed you have been working in consulting for the past three years.

Though I have a few years remaining at Oberlin I have started exploring my next steps and wondered if you could offer thirty minutes of your time to discuss ways in which to enter the consulting industry. I feel it is important for me to gain a practical, real world, perspective about the field and hope that you will be able to share your career path. I have attached my resume for your review to offer any suggestions.

Please let me know when would be convenient time for us to talk over the phone. I am happy to work around your schedule. You can reach me at or call me at 773-111-1111 or by email at dsmith@oberlin.edu. I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,
David Smith

SAMPLE 4 (Email)

Dear Ms. Ross,

I am a student at Oberlin College, and I got your name through Career Services Office. Upon graduation, I will receive my degree in Economics. My goal is to apply this degree along with the experiences acquired through internships and Honors to obtain a position in public finance. Given that you are a graduate of Wharton and you work at XYZ Public Finance Agency, I am writing to request an informational interview with you. I hope that you will allow me to speak with you either in person or over the phone for approximately thirty minutes to discuss your graduate school and professional career experience. I am particularly interested in hearing about what you do at XYZ Public Finance Agency, how you got there, and if you have any advice for someone looking to enter this field.

My schedule is flexible, and I am happy to work around your availability to meet in the near future. I can be reached at 212-998-0000 or interested.student@oberlin.edu. Thank you in advance for your time, and I look forward to speaking with you soon.

Sincerely,
Jane Doe

SAMPLE 5 (Phone Cold Call)

Good Morning Mr. Griffin, my name is Devon Thomas and I'm currently attending the Oberlin Conservatory of Music. I'm in my third year. I'm interested in learning about how I could set up my own teaching studio and thought you would be a good source of information and advice. Would this be a good time to talk or should I call you at a mutually convenient time? I'm glad this is convenient. I have a few questions.

I saw on OBIEweb that you are a private teacher and I've perused your personal website. Can you share your career path to this? ...

... Thank you Mr. Griffin, it is kind of you to give me a bit of your time today. I wonder if you know of anyone else that I should speak to about this? Great, would you mind contacting to them to say that I will be in touch with them soon? I will keep you informed of my communications with them. Thanks again for your time.

Preparing for the Interview

- Research the field, organization, and person you'll be meeting with before your meeting so you can ask focused questions. Scour the website of the organization where your contact works s/he may have a bio there. Use a Google or LexisNexis search to look up press releases, annual reports, and other details on the organization. Solid research demonstrates your initiative and interest in the field.
- Dress appropriately for the field and practice your best professional etiquette. You may need to do research in advance to determine the best way to dress. When in doubt, dress more formally.
- Although informational interviewing is a great way to practice for a formal job interview, the experience can be daunting itself. Consider practicing with a friend, family member, or career counselor beforehand. You can also prepare by getting into the habit of striking up conversations while traveling, at lectures, or meetings.

During the Interview

- Stand for introductions, shake hands firmly, and smile. Maintain eye contact and listen attentively. Informational interviews are often short, 20-30 minutes to an hour max - so don't overstay your welcome.
- Bring your resume to the interview. If you feel comfortable at the end of the conversation, ask the interviewee to critique your resume or offer to leave it with them. This can allow the professional an opportunity to see your skills and abilities without pressuring them to hire you.
- Be ready at all times with a brief personal introduction. For example: *"Hello, my name is Cory Brown, and I'm an Oberlin College junior majoring in politics and biology. I'm interested in how government regulations affect health care issues such as stem cell research. I'd like to hear about your experience as a policy maker in Washington."* Adapt your introduction to the setting.
- Ask for referrals! After speaking with an employer, ask for suggestions for other individuals or companies that you might contact.
- Before you leave, ask for a business card

Questions to Ask

You should carefully consider your questions beforehand, and craft them based on your goals for the informational interview. Avoid asking questions that are easily answerable by a quick scan of the person's bio or company website. Below are some common questions that you can ask. You should modify and supplement these questions based on your advanced research on the person you interview and their company or organization. For more extensive list of questions, please see the book *Informational Interviewing* that is available in the Career Services office.

- What aspect of your job do you find most engaging?
- How did you get started in this field?
- What is your typical day (week) like at _____ ?
- What do you enjoy most about what you do? What do you enjoy least?
- What kinds of skills and abilities are required for this type of work?
- What kinds of people are successful in this field (this organization)?
- What training or education is required for this type of work?
- Can you describe the work environment in your organization in terms of individual effort vs. teamwork, pressure, deadlines, workload, etc.?
- What publications are especially important for people in your field?
- If you were starting out now, how would you get into this field? What strategies would you use to get your foot in the door? What advice would you give to someone in my position?

Whenever possible, try to meet in person. If you know you will be traveling to a geographic area where you might want to work or intern, then plan ahead and set up appointments in advance to meet with individuals who could be helpful. If someone meets you in person, he or she will be more invested in you and will be more comfortable referring you to people they know. Remember to dress appropriately and make a good impression. If you are able to interview the person at their place of work, be prepared to observe many aspects of their workplace for additional information on the company:

- How are people dressed (formally, informally, uniformly)?
- How diverse is the work setting (age, gender, ethnicity, race)?
- How do the staff members address each other? Is there a hierarchy?
- Is the atmosphere calm? Stressful? Fast-paced?
- How were you treated when you arrived?
- Do people appear to enjoy working there?
- Do your contacts talk with you freely or did they seem restricted?
- Are the employees working in offices or cubicles or open spaces?
- What is the noise level? How is the lighting?
- What equipment do you see? Who is using it?

After Your Informational Interview

- Think about what you saw and how you felt in the work setting. Can you see yourself working there? Why or why not?
- Write a thank you note within two days of your meeting. Comment on how the meeting expanded your knowledge of the field, or cite the follow-up steps you plan to take. For a meeting with an alum, a handwritten note on an Oberlin note card is a nice touch; for others, you may prefer an email or word-processed note. (See sample thank-yous below)
- Keep a record of your networking activities - when your conversations took place, suggestions the contacts made, the dates you mailed your thank you notes, and any follow-up steps you took. If there's any information you can provide to your contact that might be helpful, do so.
- Maintain your networking relationships by emailing or phoning periodically. For example, you might send a link to an interesting news article or word of a conference that may appeal to your contact. Keep your networking connections updated on your progress. Networking is a skill for life. Learn and enjoy!

Informational Interviewing DON'TS

- Don't be too pushy, by doing things such as giving out your resume before the conversation has begun.
- Don't overstay your welcome or expect the other person to pay for your lunch or coffee. You invited them and they are doing you the favor.
- Don't ask for a job or internship. If he or she suggests the possibility of a position, that is a different matter.
- Don't act in an unprofessional manner, be on your best behavior.
- Don't hesitate to contribute to the conversation.
- Don't forget to ask for additional references.

Thank You Letters

Letters can be sent in an email, hand-written in a note card, or typed in a standard letter format. You want the note to be sincere and warm, yet professional. Prepare to write the thank you card by gathering the interviewer's information – be sure you have the correct spelling of his/her full name along with the right title and address (if applicable). Draft the thank you note using a separate sheet of paper; write and edit what you plan to say before you copy it to the thank you card. Try to write the way you talk. Keep the tone casual but professional. Start with a simple greeting such as, "Dear Maria," if you call her by her first name, which is typical. Thank the interviewer for taking the time to speak with you. You may refer to a specific conversation or insights from the discussion. For example, you can briefly summarize your strengths and career goals. If applicable, write about the next steps you had discussed. End the thank you on a positive note. Ask if you can keep in touch. You may want to thank her again and let her know that you look forward to speaking with her again soon.

SAMPLE ONE (Email)

Dear _____:

Thank you so much for taking the time to talk to me about your career path and current position with _____. The information you shared with me about your own career path in public relations was very insightful and helpful. I didn't realize that there were so many options available to me. I'm excited to learn more and will follow up with your advice to look into the Public Relations Society of America. It sounds like being a student member and having access to all their resources will be extremely useful. I also appreciate the referral to your friend who is the Public Relations Director with the American Cancer Society. I will contact her and let you know how it went.

I look forward to keeping you posted about my progress as I continue to explore public relations and other fields. It is great to know that I can rely on Oberlin alumni like yourself for support, advice and encouragement. It means a lot. Thank you.

Sincerely,
Joe Student

SAMPLE TWO (Letter/Note)

222 Grant Avenue
Anytown, Wisconsin 53200
April 30, 2008

Ms. Jamie Exxon
President
Excel Corporation
2999 Hearsay Avenue
Milwaukee, Wisconsin 53200

Dear Ms. _____:

Thank you for taking time to meet with me yesterday to discuss the field of accounting. You provided me with a wealth of information and advice that will help me to determine the best approach to take in planning for a career in corporate accounting. As you suggested, I plan to locate a part-time job or internship next semester to help me further investigate the career and gain related skills.

Thank you for referring me to Mr. Dorian Graybar and Ms. Kelly Jackson-Hunt. I look forward to speaking with them soon. I will keep you posted on the status of my career exploration.

Sincerely,

(Your signature)

Brett Smith