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INFORMATION INTERVIEWS: A TOP TECHNIQUE FOR CAREER RESEARCH

An excellent, easy, and fun way to research careers is to talk to people working in jobs of interest to you. This is called Information Interviewing. Rather than an employer interviewing you for a job, YOU are the interviewer – asking questions to gather information, explore options, and make connections. The primary purpose is to learn new information, not to get a job (at least, not right away).

Why is this important to do? Information interviews are beneficial to:

- Explore careers and fields of interest
- Clarify your goals by getting advice from others and reflecting on what you learn
- Learn about job and internship opportunities that you have not previously seen advertised
- Observe first-hand the culture of an organization, what the office environment is like
- Make networking contacts, who might be useful in your future job search and career planning

How do I do information interviews?

Step One: Identify your Goal

You may already have a few ideas about the types of careers interest you, so spend a little time online reviewing some profiles of these careers. The *Occupational Outlook Handbook* and *O*Net* are great websites to get easy-to-read yet detailed career profiles. These sites give you an overview of an occupation, explain the types of education and training you need to enter this job, describe typical work activities, and provide salary information as well as other useful resources. If what you learn still sounds appealing, then you probably want to start talking to people rather than just reading!

Information interviews are also useful to help you learn about other things. For example, you may KNOW you want to be a teacher, but you may not know if you want to work in a rural or urban setting or if you want to be in a small or large school. Doing information interviews with teachers in *different settings* might help you decide which setting is the best fit for you.

Step Two: Identify Contacts

So how exactly do you find people to talk to? Start with who you know: professors, friends, family members, neighbors, and current employers. Tell them, "I am interested in jobs such as _____. Do you know anyone who does that or something related?" By talking to anyone and everyone you are comfortable discussing this with, you might be surprised what sorts of connections you will make.

Contact the Alumni Relations office via email (struett@wcupa.edu) and let them know that you would like to try to identify WCU alumni working in a particular type of job or setting; they may not be able to give you names or contacts right away, but they will check and will get back to you.

Look on Facebook for West Chester University alumni groups. Consider creating a LinkedIn account (a professional networking site), as there are several alumni groups on LinkedIn. Before you start emailing people from online networking sites, however, be sure you learn about how to do so appropriately, politely, and with reasonable expectations. Also be sure your online profiles are professional or at least don't have any content a potential employer might find concerning. While WCU alumni are willing to help current students, they don't know you, so don't expect them necessarily to get back to you right away and don't expect that all of them will meet with you.

Professional organizations (e.g., American Marketing Association, Public Relations Society of America) are also good sources of contacts. These organizations usually have staff members who you can telephone or email to inquire about ways to then connect with professionals in the field. Some associations have student memberships and mentoring programs that you may want to participate in.

Step Three: Prepare for the Interview

Online resources like the *Occupational Outlook Handbook* provide useful information about careers and are good initial preparation for an information interview. You may read something online and wonder, "Is that really what it is like every day?" or, "How long does it take to advance to the next level in that job?" Reading about careers is useful but also a bit two-dimensional; getting feedback directly from people who work in those jobs is a wonderful next step. Prior to your meeting, conduct some basic research on the organization where your contact works by looking at their website. Doing so should give you a few ideas of questions to ask.

What do you need to know in greater depth in order to evaluate whether or not a particular job is for you? Prepare questions ahead of time to gather input about the following topics: daily, weekly, annual work activities; qualifications and training required; work environment or culture; typical advancement opportunities; employment outlook; salary ranges; typical employers; travel requirements.

Sample Questions: In a typical information interview, you will probably ask 12-15 questions

- Tell me about your career path. How did you choose it and get where you are today?
- On a typical day in this position, what do you do?
- What training, education, and licenses are required for this type of work?
- What types of jobs or internships would you recommend if I wanted to get into this field?
- What personal qualities or abilities are important to being successful in this job?
- What are the toughest problems you have to deal with?
- What is the most rewarding part of your job?
- What opportunities for advancement are there in this field?
- If you were to leave this kind of work, what would drive you away?

- What different kinds of work do you feel you could do if your job was suddenly eliminated?
- Does your work become more interesting as you stay longer?
- What is the typical salary range for entry-level positions?
- How do people find out about these jobs? How are they advertised?
- How do you see this field changing in the future? Is there a demand right now?
- How much flexibility do you have in attire, work hours, vacation schedule, where you live?
- If you were to hire someone to work with you today, which of the following would be most important in your hiring decision and why?
- If you were a college student again, what would you do differently to get into this field?
- What is the organizational structure of your company?
- How does your organization compare/differ with its competitors?
- What is your opinion of my resume? Do you see any problem areas or weaknesses?
- Who do you know that might be willing to speak with me as well? May I use your name when contacting him/her?

Step Four: Arrange the Meeting

You may contact the person you wish to interview by telephone, a letter or email of introduction followed by a telephone call, or by having someone who knows the person set the meeting for you. Information interviews can be done over the phone, but meeting in person is ideal because you get to see people in their place of work and get a first-hand look at the office environment. If the individual is willing to meet you in person, but at a restaurant or coffee shop, at least you still get to talk in person. You could also offer to pay for the coffee as a thank-you for the conversation.

For someone you already know or a more informal interview (e.g., with the mother of your best friend), a phone call is sufficient. If, however, you wish to speak with a senior manager or administrator, a formal letter or email of introduction is recommended. Write to the individual and be sure to specify who referred you or how you found this person, your interest in the individual's career field, your request to speak with her/him about it. Follow up with a phone call, and be clear that you are not looking for a job but rather for information and advice.

A good length of time to suggest for a meeting is 30 minutes. This is enough time for you to ask a lot of questions, and it is also not too much time for someone to commit to you. If the conversation goes well and the individual you are interviewing is enjoying speaking with you, it is not uncommon for someone to give you more time. Still, be considerate of the person's time and watch or listen for cues that it is time to wrap up.

Here are examples of phone calls you might place to set up a meeting:

“Hello, my name is Jane Smith and I am currently a student at West Chester University. I got your name from the WCU Alumni office, because I am interested in speaking with alumni who are working in Accounting. I am interested in setting up a 20 to 30-minute appointment with you, at your convenience, to ask questions about what it is like to be a CPA and get some career advice. Would you be available to speak with me some time in the next few weeks?”

“Good afternoon. My name is John Roberts and I am calling to speak with Mr. Sam Smith. *[What is this in reference to?]* Professor Thompson in the History Department at West Chester University referred me to Mr. Smith. I am a student interested in arranging an informational interview, to learn more about career options within historical societies. I would like to explore the possibility of setting up a conversation with Mr. Smith.”

“Hello, may I please speak with Dr. Arnold? *[Who is calling please?]* My name is Amanda Jones. *[And what is the reason for your call?]* I am a West Chester University student. I read about Dr. Arnold’s visit to Haiti this summer in the *Daily Local* and I was hoping to have a conversation with him about a career in medicine, but in particular about his experiences working with the earthquake survivors. I would really value the opportunity to set up a time to speak with him and learn more about his career in medicine.”

Step Five: Conduct the Interview

Dress appropriately; you probably don’t need to wear a suit, unless you want to impress employers working in more corporate business environments. However, you should dress nicely and not in your old comfortable jeans. Khaki slacks and a button-down shirt, a sweater set and a skirt, a nice blouse and non-denim pants – these are all fine. If you ARE on the job or internship search, your attire will say a lot about how seriously you are interested in making a solid first impression.

Arrive on time and be professional. Be prepared with an introduction of yourself and why you wanted to have the meeting. Having a prepared list of questions is excellent, but don’t be afraid to be more conversational or spontaneous. If the person you are interviewing talks a lot or rambles off the topic, ask questions to gently steer the conversation back to topics that are important to you. And don’t forget, they will ask you questions too so be prepared to talk about your own interests and motivations. Bring a copy of your resume; ask for feedback and advice on what you have included so far. Keep an eye on the time so you do not overstay your welcome.

During the interview you may take notes, but maintain good eye contact and focus as much as possible on having a conversation. Immediately after the interview, write down other thoughts and impressions. Before you leave, be sure you ask the person for his or her contact information or a business card. Ask if she or he can suggest other people who might be willing to speak with you.

Step Six: Reflect and Follow Up

What DID you learn? Spend some time reflecting on what the individual said and what you observed. Are you more excited now or were you turned off by something you learned? **Always** send a thank-you note (in writing or via email) within two to three days of the interview.

Each person you speak with is an individual. Do not make a decision about a career after speaking with only one or two people. Rather than try to do this all at once, try doing this all the time; interview as many people as you can throughout your college career. Speaking with a variety of diverse individuals will give you the most three-dimensional view of what a potential career has to offer.