INFORMATIONAL INTERVIEWS

Background and Benefits:

An Informational Interview is simply talking with a professional who is currently in an occupation that you are considering in order to gain information and insight about a career, industry or company. This information can be used in choosing a major, exploring career options, or preparing for a summer or professional job search. You and the professional whom you are interviewing should understand that this is not a job interview.

Informational interviews are important parts of career preparation and good supplements to your academic knowledge because they can provide:

- "Real World" information about careers
- Suggestions on how to use your college years to gain experience and prepare for the job search
- A network of contacts for your job search/internship search
- Insights into what employers look for in candidates
- An avenue to explore potential job search questions such as: "Why did you choose this field?" or "What skills are required for success in this job?"

Preparation and Procedure:

Before you request the valuable time of a professional in the field, try to learn as much about the career, industry or company that you will be discussing as you can. This will allow you to ask more in-depth questions and make better use of the allotted time. To do this, you can review sample job descriptions, read career and employer guides such as those from the Vault or look at online resources such as Hoover's, the Occupational Outlook Handbook or O*Net.

If you are just beginning to sort through career options, you may want to speak with your college-specific Career Consultant at the Career and Professional Development Center to better define which careers you most want to explore. Schedule an appointment through TartanTRAK to meet with your career consultant.

Informational interviews can be conducted with people you already know or with professionals referred to you through informal contacts--faculty, family, friends, alumni, professional associations, and the Career and Professional Development Center staff. You may want to research the Alumni Website to learn about events for Alumni chapters in various cities and other opportunities for networking. The Alumni Directory is a resource available to you and is an excellent tool to find potential connections. To identify other leads, consider browsing recent and back issues of the Carnegie Mellon Today, a magazine which contains alumni career information. The Career and Professional Development Center also keeps employer contact information in TartanTRAK under the employer tab and in the Recruiting Business Card Database. Speak with your Career Consultant about these and other resources and strategies. Some academic departments or student organizations may also have formal or informal alumni lists. You may also want to explore the Take a Tartan to Work program.

Informational interviews can also be obtained through LinkedIn. Before you start to use this resource for outreach, be sure to build your profile and join some groups, such as those for fraternities/sororities or professional development chapters, which will help you to connect to new people. You can then use the search box to look for companies or people of interest to you. Do not be afraid to ask your contacts to introduce you to others.

In arranging for an informational interview, contact individuals at least a week ahead, either by telephone or through an introductory e-mail to arrange an appointment. A sample request letter is included at the
end of this resource handout. Ask them for about a half-hour of their time. Always clarify your objective - that you are seeking information rather than a job.

The Interview:

The following questions should give you some ideas of information to seek. After reviewing written career information you should be able to add more specific questions to the list.

1. What is a typical day like on this job? or What did you do yesterday?
2. What do you like most about your work? Least?
3. How did you come to choose this profession? This particular job? What steps did you take to get where you are?
4. Approximately how many hours do you work per week?
5. What types of people do you deal with?
6. Do you find your job satisfying? What makes it that way? What effects (positive and negative) does this job have on your family and personal life (leisure time)?
7. What personal qualities are necessary to succeed at this type of work? What skills are important?
8. Do you think that the prospects for success for a person entering this field will grow or decline over the next decade?
9. What kind of position could a college graduate anticipate when entering this field?
10. What is the starting salary range for a college graduate? The eventual range?
11. Are there courses that you would advise taking in college to help prepare for this career?
12. What are your career goals for the future?
13. If you could give only one piece of advice to a young person seeking a career such as yours, what would that advice be?
14. What methods would you recommend for doing a job search in this field?
15. How would you describe your company culture?

Prepare the questions that you want to ask ahead of time. Having them in writing and taking some notes is fine. Preparation, promptness and staying on target are important since the person you are seeing is doing you a favor. Because you initiated the contact and have some control of how the interview goes, keep your purpose in mind and get your questions answered. You'll find that people love to talk about themselves and their careers and may likely digress. The interview itself could be done over the phone or in person.

At the conclusion of your meeting, ask for two or three other names of people to contact for informational interviews so you can begin building your “network.” Confirm permission to use the individual's name when contacting the referrals.

If the meeting goes particularly well, you may feel comfortable asking the individual if you could spend some time “shadowing” him/her during a typical day's activities. If getting work experience or exposure is your goal, you may consider volunteering your services on a project that needs attention - this may later lead to a job contact or reference.

After the Interview:

Immediately following the meeting take some notes and debrief. Analyze the interview. Think about the information that you obtained and evaluate it objectively. Ask yourself the following:

- Did I get answers to questions that I needed to have clarified?
- What did I leave out? What new questions do I have?
- Do I feel caught up in the enthusiasm of this professional?
- Do I need to see more people to obtain a more objective opinion?
- What characteristics did this person have that I need to or want to develop?
- What ideas for future career advancement strategies did I obtain?
A most important follow-up to the meeting should be e-mailing a letter thanking the individual for his/her time and assistance. A sample is included at the end of this guide as a reference. Keep a record of your contacts. At a future date you may want to contact them for additional advice.

What to do if the Informational Interview turns into a Job Interview:

This may occur if the interviewer likes you and feels you would be an asset to his/her organization. How do you handle that kind of possibility? You have several alternatives:

- If you are comfortable and prepared, you can accept the job interview on the spot.
- If you are not prepared for a job interview at the time, you can honestly state that your purpose today is to obtain information. Thank the person and make an appointment for a later date for a job interview.

Whatever you choose to do, be definite in your answer, and follow through with what you decide.

• REMEMBER TO SEND A THANK YOU NOTE!!
• REMEMBER TO ASK FOR NAMES OF OTHER CONTACTS!!
• HAVE FUN WITH THE PROCESS!!
Sample Request Letter

Your Address
City, State, Zip
Today's Date

Contact Name
Title
Organization
Address
City, State, Zip

Dear Ms. ________________:

Professor Smart, my advisor at Carnegie Mellon University, suggested I contact you about my interest in the law field. He thought you would be particularly helpful since you currently maintain your own private law practice and work as a political lobbyist.

As a sophomore Policy and Management major, I am beginning to explore fields such as yours so that I can plan my electives and work experience to make the most of my time at Carnegie Mellon. I've begun researching legal career possibilities with my Career Consultant in the Career and Professional Development Center, but look forward to a practicing professional’s insight about the field. I'd also like to learn more about your career journey, including what internships you completed, what courses you found in college to be the most helpful in determining your future, and other opportunities that exist to help one gain experience and exposure.

I'll be in Washington, DC on March 11 - 15 for my spring break and would like an opportunity to meet briefly with you. I will call next week to see what time is the most convenient for you. If you would like to contact me in the meantime my phone number is (412)123-4567 and my email address is yourname@andrew.cmu.edu. I look forward to our telephone conversation and to meeting you in March.

Sincerely,

(Your signature)

Your name typed
Dear Mr. [Name]:

Thank you very much for taking the time to meet with me on Thursday to discuss professional possibilities in the consulting industry. I was impressed by your knowledge of case interviewing and appreciated your insight regarding which elective classes to pursue, in addition to my major in Business Administration, to further my candidacy in the field.

You had advised me to contact Mr. John Adams at ABC Consulting Firm, and we have scheduled an appointment for early next month when he returns from a business engagement. I greatly appreciate your referral and please know that it will help me to continue to learn more about the consulting industry.

I will be in contact from time to time to keep you posted on my career journey. Please find attached the requested copy of my resume and thank you in advance for your generous offer of a resume critique. I am incredibly grateful for your assistance.

Sincerely yours,

(Your name typed)