

Informational Interview Guide

Overview:

As a CMU student, you will frequently hear the term “networking” throughout the internship/job search process. Networking can occur at various events, such as career fairs, information sessions, seminars, and through self-initiated *informational interviews*. An informational interview is one of the most effective job search techniques you can utilize.

Why are informational interviews so effective? These networking conversations will help you develop meaningful, (potentially) long-lasting professional relationships with people who work at organizations or in industries of interest to you. Informational interviews are a great way to gain knowledge and insight from professionals, which may help you in your own professional journey. These one-on-one conversations can focus on questions about a specific company or industry, a person’s past work experience and career growth, and much more.

Reasons to Initiate an Informational Interview:

- To explore career paths and learn about the work of someone in a certain position, within a specific industry or at a particular organization—this will help you prepare for your future career and understand a certain job function more clearly
- To learn about a company of interest—you can gain an understanding of how a company is structured, and about the company culture and work environment
- To expand your professional network with people in industry—developing relationships can alert you to soon-to-be-published job postings, inform you on recruitment processes, and allow you to practice professional communication
- To gain an understanding of the necessary skills and experiences for a position within a field of interest

Steps to Take to Schedule an Informational Interview:

First, research and identify organizations that interest you.

- Make a list of 20-25 companies within your field of interest. You will focus on networking with these companies first.
- If you do not already have organizations in mind, you can find company names and details by using CMU resources such as [CareerShift](#), [D&B Hoovers](#) and [Handshake](#). These resources, as well as the individual company websites, will tell you more about the organization’s hiring requirements, projects, and culture.

Next, find employees at those organizations with whom to speak.

- Start by searching for CMU alumni who work at each company via [CMUniverse](#) and LinkedIn. If you are not able to find alumni, identify someone who is in an early career to mid-level position, working within your field of interest at the company.
- Do not hesitate to reach out to an alumnus or an employee of an organization of interest if you have not yet met them in person—it is perfectly appropriate to form a new connection.

Then, make the connection and request an informational conversation.

- If reaching out via LinkedIn, you should first send that person an invitation to connect. Once your LinkedIn invitation has been accepted, you will be able to send the contact a direct message. (note: the request to connect process is not needed for CMUniverse as you can directly message)
 - In 300 characters or less, briefly introduce yourself, state how you are connected (if possible) and explain why you would like to connect on LinkedIn. Do not use the standard default LinkedIn template.
- Once you can directly message your contact, send a message requesting an informational call. (Remember: if you connected with them via LinkedIn the message should start by thanking them for accepting your connection request). Use formal language, (re)state how you are connected and what you hope to learn through the conversation and be specific when requesting a time to speak.
- Allow two weeks before following up; if they do not respond then, stop communication, and move on to another potential connection at that organization.

If your connection agrees to talk, take the lead on arranging the meeting details.

- If the conversation will be done via phone, ask if they would like to call you or if they would like for you to call them. If they choose the second option, remember to have them send you their phone number. For video chat conversations, set up and send them the meeting ID and link.
- Once the logistics have been decided, send them a calendar invite that includes when and how you'll be meeting.

What to Do Before, During and After Your Informational Interview:

- *Before:* Prepare by familiarizing yourself with your contact and their work background. Then, write out 5-8 questions that you hope to discuss with them.
- *During:* Highlight your skills and experiences throughout the conversation. While informational interviews are not official, they can lead to future opportunities if your connection thinks that you are a qualified candidate.
- *During:* Stop the conversation at the previously agreed upon time. Many of the people that you meet with will be doing so in the middle of their workday, and thus need to stick to the schedule.
- *During:* Finish the conversation by saying that you want to stay in touch, which will signal that you want to build your relationship with them. Ask if they know anyone else in your industry that you should connect with—this will expand your network.
- *After:* Remember to send a thank you message following your conversation. You can refer to our Career Fair Follow Up Tips Guide in Canvas for assistance.

What NOT to Do During Your Informational Interview:

- *Do not ask for a job, about open positions at their company, or for them to be a reference on an existing application during your first interaction.* Your first conversation with a contact should focus on building a relationship with that person. Being overtly direct or asking for a job/referral from someone who doesn't know you yet is not likely to be received well and likely won't produce the results you were hoping for. However, if your contact initiates this topic, you can proceed appropriately.
- *Do not be unprepared.* This conversation was initiated by you and therefore it is your responsibility to lead the discussion and come up with questions. You should not expect for your connection to guide the conversation.

Examples of Questions to Ask:

To explore career paths and learn about work...

- What inspired you to work in this field?
- How have you enjoyed working for your company?
- Can you tell me about some of the projects you have worked on?
- What was your interview and application process like when you were trying to enter the field? How did you prepare?
- What were the most impactful things that you did prior to graduating that have helped you throughout your career?
- What is the most rewarding thing about working in this industry? The most challenging?

To expand your professional network...

- Is there anyone else you'd recommend I speak with in the field?
- I'm getting started with my job search—what recommendations would you give to someone in my position?
- May I keep in touch as I continue my job search?

To communicate professionally...

- What's your opinion on [exciting development in the industry]?
- I recently completed research on [enter field of study], and I am interested in continuing to find solutions for [insert problem area]—can you tell me about how your organization has prioritized this kind of work?

Examples of Connection and Conversation Request Messages:

Old Colleague/Classmate, LinkedIn Request: Hello Anika, I hope your new position at Google is going well! I'd like to stay connected with you on LinkedIn and look forward to chatting again soon.

Unknown Connection or Alumni, LinkedIn Request: Hello Kimberly, I am a third-year undergraduate studying Policy and Management at Carnegie Mellon University and saw your talk on starting a career at a non-profit. I would love the opportunity to speak with you more about your experience at CMU and your career path.

Conversation Request: Hi Robert – Hope all has been well. I am closing out my master's program at Carnegie Mellon University, where I have been working on research around automated driving. I noticed you've been doing similar work at Tesla. I would love to hear about your transition into the autonomous vehicle industry after graduating from your master's program, as well as more about your current work. Would you have 15-20 minutes to connect sometime this month? I'm happy to meet in-person or talk over the phone.

Conversation Request: Hello Alex - Thank you for accepting my LinkedIn request to connect. As I mentioned previously, I am currently getting my undergraduate degree at Carnegie Mellon, with an interest in spherical CNNs. I am very interested in learning more about your work across the artificial intelligence industry. Would you have 15 minutes of time in the coming weeks to set up a phone conversation so I might be able to tell you a little more about my research and ask you some questions regarding your work?