

Yes, You Need Informational Interviews. Here's How to Land Them

“Are informational interviews not a thing anymore?” a reader asked me last week. “I’ve reached out to a few friends of friends about these, but I must be going about it in the wrong way, because I either don’t get a response or I find myself in an actual interview.”

Truthfully, I can’t recall the last informational interview I’ve gone on myself. And it isn’t a subject I cover too much on the careers beat here at Fast Company. So I asked career coach Sarah Vermunt to weigh in, and she assured me that, yes, informational interviews are still very much a thing. The hitch, she says, is the same one that can make professional networking hard across the board: “Landing an informational interview can be tough because everyone is so friggin’ busy,” she says. “Hell, it’s hard to even get someone to reply to an unsolicited email, let alone meet with you.”

But Vermunt believes it’s worth the effort. Here’s her take on how informational interviews can help your career, and what it takes to land one.

Unlike a job interview, “it’s not about impressing the person you’re speaking with,” Vermunt explains. So keep it informal. “This is just a chill conversation between two individuals; if you make it into a big thing, you’ll likely get nervous and fumble through the conversation. Not helpful,” she says.

As Vermunt explains in a blog post on her site, “If you’re using an informational interview to suss out your options, one of two things might happen,” she writes:

“You get confirmation that the path you’re going down seems to be a good fit. You like what you hear about this industry or company, and your skills and interests match up.”

“You dodge a bullet. The industry or company you’re learning about is nothing like you thought it was. It’s not actually what you want, and you’re glad you found that out now.”

Both outcomes, she adds, are equally good: “More information means better decisions.”

The More The Better

Vermunt says she tells all her career-coaching clients to lock down a bunch of informational interviews, and “not just [with] one or two people.” Successfully changing careers demands casting a wide net, she believes. But even changing jobs in your industry can still feel like a pretty momentous transition, so the same principle applies; the more you know, the better off you’ll be.

In fact, says Vermunt, “There’s a huge risk in speaking only to one or two people, because you’re basing a huge career decision on what that one person said. Better to get more information from a handful of people so you can get a true sense of what you’re getting into if you go down that career path.”

“Also,” she adds, “rejection is a huge part of informational interviews. Only one out of every three or four people you ask to meet with will say yes (if you’re lucky), so you’ll have to reach out to a lot of people in order to speak with just a few.”

Who Should I Ask?

“If there’s an organization you know you’d like to work for, you’d be crazy not to try for an informational interview with someone who works there,” says Vermunt. “An HR person isn’t likely to meet with you (they’re tired of everyone trying to hustle them for a job hookup), so don’t work that angle—unless you want to work in HR.”

Informational interviews aren’t about getting face-time with someone more senior to you, either. “It’s best to reach out to someone who is doing work that is similar to the work you want to do. That’ll give you a true picture of the work—the good, the bad, and the ugly,” says Vermunt.

She has one caveat, though: “Don’t reach out to too many people in the same organization at once. It gets creepy. Wait for someone to get back to you, and if they don’t in a week or two, it’s fine to approach one of their colleagues to ask them instead.”

How Should I Ask?

When it comes to outreach, less is more. “You drastically increase your chances of getting a yes if you keep your email concise—a very short paragraph is all you need,” says Vermunt, pointing me toward a sample email she’s posted on her site:

Hi Shawn,

I’m a sales and marketing manager, and I’ve been working in this field for 10 years. I’m hoping to eventually develop my career in a different area, specifically brand development. I’m not looking for a job or connection, but I’m interested in learning more about your field of work, and specifically your own experience with branding in the beauty industry. Would you be willing to connect? Coffee is on me, and of course I’m happy to work around your schedule at whatever location is best for you. What do you think?

Thanks in advance,

Taylor

And yes, the goal is a live interaction, not a phone call. “You’ll make less of a connection and your conversation will be shorter if it’s on the phone,” Vermunt explains. “Aim for in-person meetings, and only opt for phone ones if the person suggests it or if they live in another city.”

Got One! Now What Do We Talk About?

Your goal here is to ask what the person’s job is like—now’s your chance to get the inside scoop! So most aspects of their professional experience, from big-picture career path issues to day-to-day headaches—in bounds. Vermunt has four tips:

1. Plan ahead. “Don’t show up at your informational interview without a game plan. And don’t assume that the person you’re meeting with will drive the conversation. That’s lazy.” She suggests brainstorming a few questions you’re planning to ask “so you can fill your knowledge gaps.”

2. Don’t hustle your resume. Again, you’re only collecting intel, not trying to market yourself, Vermunt cautions. “With that said, you should keep a copy of your resume tucked into your bag in case they ask for it.”

3. Make it a natural conversation. “What I mean by this is, don’t take notes while you’re speaking to the person. That will make the flow of the conversation feel stilted and awkward. If you’re worried you’ll forget to ask certain questions, keep a notebook tucked in your bag beside you and only consult it when the conversation is wrapping up. And write your notes afterwards.

“Keeping the flow of the conversation natural not only gets you good information (which is the name of the game), but builds a personal connection and makes the person you’re speaking with more interested in helping you. Double win.”

4. Be efficient with their time. “If you said you’d like to speak to them for 45 minutes, keep an eye on the clock and wrap it up at 45 minutes. This is a generous person who has agreed to share some of their time with you,” Vermunt adds, “so respect it.”

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