

Information Interview: A Strategy for Finding a Really Good Job

by Prof. Seth Freeman*

What Is Information Interviewing?

It's a powerful way to find hidden work opportunities that really match your calling. You can do it in addition to other job-hunting strategies. It takes patience and persistence, but it can pay off well in the long run.

In A Nutshell, How Does it Work?

You seek information about a field, not a job in it, by meeting and talking for about 15 minutes with different people in and around the field. As you have these conversations, you begin to learn (1) what the field is really about; (2) whether you'd enjoy working in it; (3) hidden paths into it; (4) special niches that suit you well; and (5) people who may be helpful or interested. Then you use this information to contact and show the right person that (s)he needs you.

What Information Interviewing Is Not

It's not handing out business cards at cocktail parties; it's not signing up on LinkedIn or Facebook. It's not calling your brother-in-law for a job, and it's not pretending to want advice from someone when you really want him to hire you. Instead, it's a systematic strategy for actually meeting with different people and learning specific, valuable things from them.

Why Is it Effective?

Most jobs available on a given day are *not* filled through traditional methods, such as advertisements, on-campus recruiting, or resume campaigns. Studies find that sixty to eighty percent of jobs are placed through referrals, internal promotions, and connections. That's good news, because you create referrals and connections naturally as you do information interviewing. You also discover where these hidden jobs are, and which ones would fit you well.

There's yet another benefit too. Many jobs actually come into existence because an enterprising job seeker develops a creative job proposal that really fits the needs of an employer. Information Interviewing allows you to learn what those interests are and who has them, which helps you create a job where none seems to exist. (More on this last point in the appendix.)

Also, if you're not sure what you want to do, Information Interviewing is arguably the best way to discover whether an area of interest really fits you well. That's because you can trade notes with people in the field to see if it really would suit your special interests and abilities.

How Long Does Information Interviewing Take?

It can take a while. Unlike traditional on-campus interviewing, there is no clear path in information interviewing- no three-step process that culminates in an offer letter or a ding letter within six weeks. It can take months, and many hours of work that can often seem fruitless. While traditional recruiting is a mechanical process like a sorting machine, Information Interviewing as an organic process, like raising vegetables. Because it's organic, it can sometimes take longer and go in curving paths. It can also produce something much more tailored and suitable to you. Each interview can take about 15-20 minutes. You may find you'll do 10-100 interviews in the course of your search, and you may make several dozen more calls where you get no answer or a busy signal.

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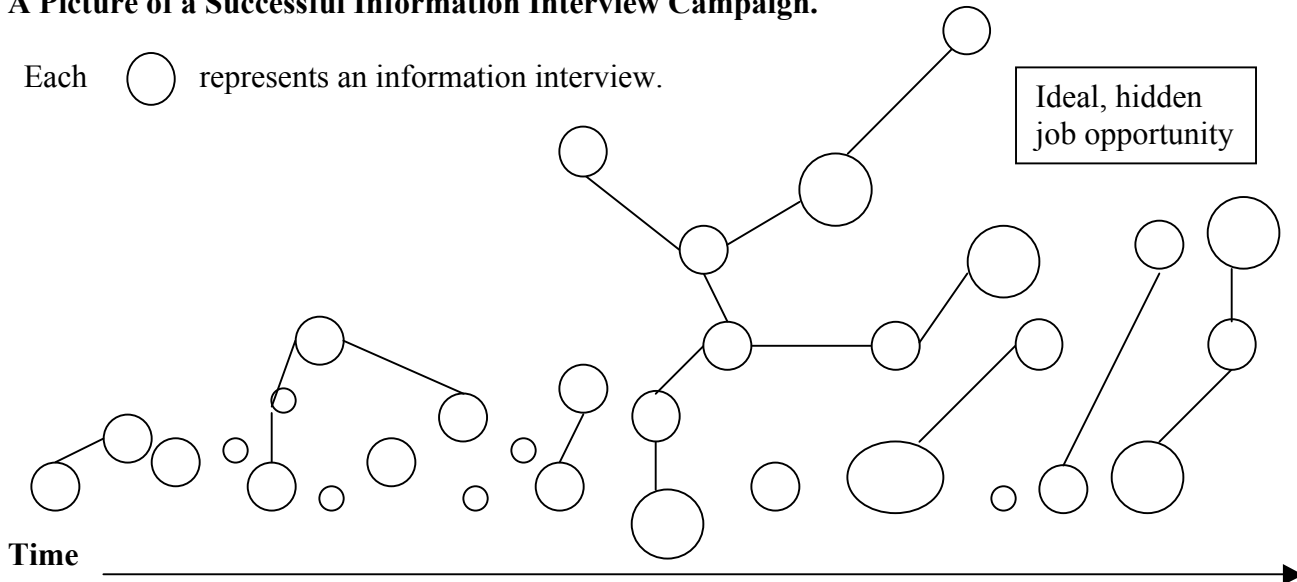
Does It Work in a Bad Hiring Market?

No guarantees, but it may work better, because it can help you spot hidden, unexplored areas and 'exceptions to the rule.' It can also be more effective in bad times because firms tend to cut back on advertising in recessions, for fear of being buried by hundreds of resumes. Referrals are even more valuable to them then

"I've Already Tried It, and It Didn't Work. Is There Anything Left to Say?"

Maybe not. But you may well be able to refine your approach with ideas in this article. I can vouch for information interviewing myself; I love my work as a Professor, and it came about through my work using information interviewing techniques.

A Picture of a Successful Information Interview Campaign.



Where Do You Do It?

Face-to-face conversations are usually the richest and the most time consuming; phone calls are often very good and more time-efficient. Email and letter are probably a distant third choice.

How Do You Do It?

1. Understand the Goal is to Get Information, Not a Job

Paradoxically, your success depends on *not* trying to get a job. Each conversation you have should really be about learning things, and *not* about secretly trying to get the other person to offer you a job. You already know that knowledge is power. So the goal here is to gain power by really learning.

2. Pick A Specific Field You're Interested In Learning More About

Start by picking a specific field you think you are particularly interested in, or might be. If you know exactly what you want, you can skip to step 2. If you're not sure, or if you've already tried the normal routes, or if you feel like saying, "I'll consider anything in finance," try picking one or two special areas that get you excited. Try exploring beyond the obvious, perhaps combining a field you like- say, finance- with an interest you like- like, say, sports. (We'll use that sub-field as an example below.) Or you can combine the field you like with a region you're interested in- say, Texas, or Spain. If you have a very specialized sub-field you're interested in, that's fine too.

3. Make a List of Everyone You Know (or Might Be Willing to Contact) Who Might Know Something or Someone in the Field

Start with your family and friends, and keep going. List neighbors, family friends, people you meet at parties, Professors, school administrators, people who write articles and books on the subject, people mentioned in business school cases and Wall Street Journal articles, even famous people in the field. Try for at least 30 names; see if you can generate 100. Put a few people on the list who would be helpful but who it would take some courage to call. A key to your success is your willingness to create this list and not quit until you get 30-100 names on it. You *don't* have to call every name. But the more names you come up with, the better your odds. Keep adding to it - it can only help you.

4. Read articles about the field so you know you're conversant about it.

The people you talk to will give you much more helpful information if you already know the basics about the field. Don't waste time asking them things you could easily learn from books or magazines; save your precious conversation time for more precious information. Like what? Stay tuned.

5. Get Ready to Take Detailed Notes, with a Laptop or Spiral Notebooks

You'll want to record the details of every conversation in the same place. Eventually, they will become a sort of highly-specialized job search guide book- one that's written for you and you alone right now. You'll find you'll be referring to it regularly.

Take notes of every call you make, noting the time, name, phone number, upshot, and any information you get in response to your questions (see below.) As you practice, you'll find you'll develop your own notations to do this faster. (For example, "LMIWCB" might stand for "Left message. I Will Call Back.") Put arrows → next to action items, such as people to call, and firms to learn about.

6. Start by Calling the Person On Your List Who You're Most Comfortable Contacting

Let's say it's your Father's friend Bob, who did some accounting work for some minor league baseball clubs a few years ago. Call him first because you're comfortable with him, so you can get used to the process. Never ask the other person to call back. Instead, either don't leave a message, or leave your name and number and say that you will call back later. (If you like, you can invite him to call you too, but don't just leave the ball in his court- he may never call.) By the way, you may find that Professors are good people to contact first.

7. Be Ready In Case the Interviewee Starts to Turn the Conversation into a Job Interview. While you really are just seeking information, here's one qualifying note: in each call you make, it's possible the person you call may be thinking to himself, "hmm, maybe I can use this person," or "maybe I know someone who can use this person." So be on good behavior, and listen for cues that suggest the interview might be turning into a conversation about a job.

8. What to Say in the First Few Moments

If you do not know the other person

+ "I'm calling [at the suggestion of -----]. Is this a good time? OR

+ "I'm calling [because I learned about your work from -----]. Is this a good time?

If you do know the other person

+Hi, ---, it's me. Is this a good time?

Regardless, then say something like this

+ "At your convenience, for 10-15 minutes, I'd like to talk with you to help me learn more about my interest in [sports finance]. Is there a time that would be convenient for you?"

+ [If necessary:] "I'm not calling about a job; I'm really just interested in learning from you.]"

Usually the person is flattered and willing to talk, often right then and there, sometimes at another time. Be sure you know what your schedule is so you can set up an appointment. If the person says 'no,' don't be concerned- just thank him for his time and go to the next person on your list. You must expect some 'no's' in this process; they happen to us all. As long as you are polite and considerate, there is nothing wrong in asking; if someone makes you feel otherwise, simply sign off, and go on, knowing you're simply making reasonable requests. Notice that since some people don't understand what 'Information Interviewing' really means, it's wise not to use the term at the start of the conversation so they don't mistakenly think you're asking for a job.

9. Use Open-ended, 'Dumb' Questions to Learn A Lot

Ask open-ended, dumb questions to help you learn a lot about the field. Some examples:

If you're trying to identify a field you'd like to work in:

+ "What do you like about the field?"

+ "Dislike?"

+ "What do you do in a given day?"

+ "Can you tell me about the people who work in this field? How did they get into it?"

+ "Here's my background. What areas of the field might I be particularly suited for?"

+ "I understand almost everyone in the field gets into it by going through the XYZ route. Are there any exceptions to the rule? Do you know anyone who got into it another way?"

If you are sure you want to get into this field

+ "What special needs, problems do firms in the field face right now?"

+ "I understand almost everyone in the field gets into it by going through the XYZ route. Are there any exceptions to the rule? Do you know anyone who got into it another way?"

+ "Are there related fields that are easier to break into?"

+ "What areas of the field are growing? Will grow?"

+ "If you were just starting out in this field now, what would you do?"

10. As you learn more, ask more focused follow-up questions. Self-explanatory.

11. Honor Your 15 minute limit.

Be sure to watch the clock so you don't abuse the other person's generosity. When 15 minutes have passed, either conclude the call (see below) or at least give the other person the chance to conclude it. You might say, "I'm really getting a lot from our conversation. I'd love to talk more, but I also want to honor my promise to keep this to 15 minutes." If he says, "no problem, let's keep talking," go for it; if not, respect his limits.

12. Concluding Questions.

Here are three questions you must ask before you sign off.

+ "Who would you suggest I speak with to learn more about my interest in the field?" [Especially important question if the other person has not suggested that you speak with anyone else.]

+ "May I call you again as I learn more?"

+ "I want to make sure I get the exact spelling of your name and your title and address." It's essential because you must send a thank you note within 48 hours.

13. Review Your Notes.

Among other things, be sure to highlight any particularly juicy information such as leads and contacts, backdoor strategies, and other surprises and tips.

14. Write and Mail a Thank You Note within 48 hours.

If you get it out quickly, you can usually convey your sincere thanks in a line or two. Thank you notes create an unrivaled tone of professionalism and good feeling. George Bush (senior) may well have eased his path to White House by getting into the habit of writing personal notes to almost everyone he met along the way. (Handwritten notes are much more meaningful to people in an age of email.)

15. An Unwritten Rule- If You Use Information Interviews, Be Willing to Give Them Too.

If you do use information interviews, be willing to grant them when some eager, aspiring job seeker calls *you* some day and asks for 15 minutes of your time.

16. Next Steps and 'Dead Ends'.

If the interview produced a prized referral, call the referral and do an information interview with her. If not, go back to your list and call the next person. If the list seems cold, add to it. If you are discovering a dead end, check your notes carefully and see if anyone has recommended an 'alternate path' and pursue it in the same fashion. Keep plugging! Often you find a closed door and discover an open window leading to a related field that may be better for you. Look for it.

17. But When Do You Shift From 'Information Interview' to Job Seeking'?

When your research reveals a firm that might have a need you'd fit well, you can either call someone there cold or, much better, ask for a referral there from someone in an information interview: "You mentioned that XYZ may need someone like me to do financial analysis of stadium construction. I'm very interested in that possibility. Is there someone there you'd suggest I speak with about that?" "Do you know someone who knows someone there?" "What approach might you suggest if I wanted to see if XYZ can use me?" If you get a referral, you then contact the contact at XYZ, saying "----- suggested that I speak with you about your needs for stadium finance analysis. I'm very interested in that sort of work, and think I can really help your firm." (Notice that from the start of the conversation you're focusing on her needs, and your enthusiastic interest in helping her satisfy that need.) If you don't get a referral, you at least know now that there may be a hidden opportunity at XYZ, and you need to look for ways to reach XYZ. (See the next item.)

18. Get In to Speak with a Prospective Employer through 'Reverse-Engineering' (aka ('Networking'))

*Here, you start out knowing where you'd like to work, perhaps from information interviews. Regardless, you do some homework to learn about the organization and the people who work there. (Ideally, you learn the name of someone who might be able to hire you, and learn as much as you can about him.) You then try to find someone (an 'angel') who knows a contact who works there (ideally the hiring executive), and ask your angel for a referral to that person (a 'contact'). When you call your contact, tell him the name of the angel who referred you: "Hello, Ms. Wu, my name is --- and I'm calling at the suggestion of Bob Genualdi.... I'm interested in a position at XYZ, and at your convenience, I'd like to speak with you about ways I can be of immediate value to you and the firm..." Don't say you're merely seeking information, since you're now actually seeking a job. As long as you are truthful and clear, you can usually talk with your contact about your wish to work for the firm. Talk about your contact's needs and your enthusiasm.

19. Concluding Thoughts- my own any experience with the informational interviewing process

One of the main reasons I have such a happy work life is because I used Information Interviewing to develop my own career. It took a while, but it really worked. Many others have similar stories. Not a guarantee, but an encouragement. It's worth a real shot, even as you use other approaches too. (In fact, most employment experts recommend that you spend ~80% of your search time using Information Interviewing.)

Where Can You Get More Information About the Process?

Check out What Color is Your Parachute? (This year's edition) by Bolles. You might also look for the now out-of-print The New Guerilla Tactics in the Job Market by Jackson. You can also talk to me. I'm Prof. Seth Freeman and you can reach me at sf14@nyu.edu. * * *

Appendix- Developing A Creative Job Proposal that Really Fits the Needs of an Employer

Here's a related way you can create a job opportunity. As trained students of negotiation know, one of the best ways you can create opportunity is to focus on interests. That means learning about the needs of the other person as well as your own, learning as much as you can about the situation, and then developing creative options that suit you both. You can do the same thing in a job search. To do it, think about the things you love to do, the subject matter you love, the special abilities you'd like to use, and the geographic places you'd like to use them. Then, during your information interviewing, pay particular attention to the special needs of employers in the field you're interested in. As you learn things, see if you can develop some not-so-obvious jobs or projects you could do that could help someone you'd like to work for. For example, in the course of your information about stadium finance, you might hear that several sports organizations increasingly have problems coping with the hundreds of complex licensing agreements different vendors ask them to sign each year. Imagine you learn that many old-time front office managements know little about the complexities of cross-marketing or the financial aspects of various offers, and generally have a hard time dealing with complex offers from outside companies. This suggests a not-so-obvious job or project-- sports licensing manager. Now do some brainstorming and research to develop the idea. Find out if anyone does work like this somewhere in the industry. If so, his work may strengthen your case that (1) this unusual work is valuable and (2) other firms pay to have someone do it. If not, you may have discovered a hidden opportunity that could give a wise employer an advantage over other firms. Test your best idea with further information interviewing to find out what people think of it, and use their insights to refine (and expand) the idea. With this groundwork, you can develop one or more proposal(s) you can pitch to someone in authority at the firm you'd like to work at. In this way, you can actually create a job (or a project or a service or even a business) for yourself that your future employer (or client) didn't even realize it needed, but really does need.

This strategy is so flexible that it can work in many different walks of life. Again, the basic idea is simple: research and information interview to find hidden interests that organizations have that you can satisfy, develop a proposal, and then show the organization(s) their need and your ability to satisfy it. Here are two examples to illustrate.

A certain adjunct professor wanted to find a new course he could pitch to different schools. He spoke with friends and colleagues and read the bulletins of different peer schools, looking for (1) courses that had been successfully offered at the peer schools and that (2) he wanted to teach. Then he reviewed the bulletins of the schools he wanted to teach at to see if they offered these courses. If they didn't, he could now show that "(1) there is a popular, successful course which (2) your peer institutions offer, which (3) you don't offer and (4) which I can teach for you." (If they did offer such a course, he could find out if they needed additional teachers for those subjects.) If he didn't know anyone in a given school, he used information interviewing to find a contact there. This approach allowed the professor to win several assignments to teach courses- often courses that were new to the schools- and that he and the schools were very happy with.

A group of business people wanted to raise corporate donations for an international micro-lending charity. They went to the Foundation Library on 23rd street in New York City. There, they did research to learn which of the thousands of corporations (1) had philanthropic programs, (2) favored giving to causes that helped the poor in developing countries, (3) had an international business, (4) were based in New York, and (5) preferable, well-understood lending. This generated a list of twenty corporations. They then did information interviewing with their board to see if any board members or donors had ties to these firms. This reduced the list to eight firms. They then picked the most promising of these firms, prepared a presentation, and used their connections to win an appointment to see the vice president of giving. In the presentation, they showed how the charity suited the firm's giving goals and mission- things they knew well from their research and information interviewing. Before they were halfway through the presentation, the VP said, "we're sold. How about if we gave \$20,000 to start this year?"

For more information on ways to create your own job, check out [What Color Is Your Parachute?](#)* * *