Informational Interviews

WHAT IS AN INFORMATIONAL INTERVIEW?

An informational interview is a discussion with a legal professional for the purposes of gathering first-hand information, seeking advice and making contacts. Informational interviews are an ideal way to build a network of contacts willing to help you explore career paths and ultimately assist with your job search.

Networking has been proven to be a successful means of securing employment in the legal profession and informational interviews are key piece in the whole networking process. Law students and recent graduates can benefit from the knowledge and experience of legal professionals who are anxious to mentor the next generation.

It is important to keep in mind the difference between an informational interview and a regular job interview. In an informational interview, you are the one seeking information about a particular field of practice and guiding the interview in a direction that is useful to you. The Center for Professional Development can assist you in identifying contacts for informational interviews.

BENEFITS OF INFORMATIONAL INTERVIEWS

- To explore different career paths and practice areas.
- To gain fundamental knowledge from practicing attorneys.
- To become aware of characteristics and skills law firms look for in an associate.
- To seek advice from experienced attorneys.
- To make contacts that could result in a job or internship lead.
- To provide practical experience meeting and conversing with attorneys.
- To gain self-awareness through clarification of interests and goals.
- To expand your professional network.

FINDING CONTACTS

The first thing you can do to prepare for an informational interview is to create a list of people with whom you would like to interview. This list can include people you already know, either currently or from your past. As you speak with your friends, family, classmates, professors, alumni, visiting speakers, your list will grow as they share information and contact(s) with you. Completing your Personal Networking Plan is an effective way to organize your contacts.
You can also search for lawyers and legal professionals on the following websites in the practice area(s) you are interested in pursuing.

- Martindale-Hubbell
- NALP Directory
- WestlawNext
- LexisNexis Communities
- Lawyers.com
- Findlaw

**HOW TO GET THE INTERVIEW**

After creating your contact list, the next step is to place a phone call or send an email introducing yourself and requesting a meeting. If you received the contacts name through a mutual acquaintance, you should mention this in the beginning of your call or email. If you do not have a mutual acquaintance, let the contact know how you heard about them. When scheduling an interview, attempt to conduct it in-person rather than over the phone.

It is essential to have your questions ready before you make the call because some employers may not have time to schedule a face-to-face appointment with you; however, they may say, “I have a few minutes right now. Go ahead and ask me your questions.” Below are some sample scripts you can use to assist you as you contact potential interviewees to set up a meeting time. As you work your way through your contact list it would be beneficial to make notes after each contact, including any additional relevant information.

**Sample Phone Call Script**

“Hello Mr. Smith. My name is _____. I am a (first, second, third) year law student at Elon University School of Law. I was given your name and phone number by (name of referral), who suggested I contact you since you have expertise in the area of ____ law. I am currently researching my career options and would welcome an opportunity to sit down with you to discuss your expertise in this practice area. I would only take 15-20 minutes of your time and would meet with you at your convenience.”

**Sample Email Script**

Dear Ms. Jones,

I am a (first, second, third) year law student at Elon University School of Law. You were referred to me by (name of referral), who suggested I contact you since you have expertise in the area of ____ law. I am currently researching my career options and would really appreciate your advice and first-hand knowledge of what it is like to practice this area of law. I am available to stop by your office for a meeting next week for 15-20 minutes, or we could meet for a cup of coffee at your convenience.

I look forward to hearing from you and will follow up with you next week.

Sincerely,

Name

(If you choose to send an email instead of calling the contact and you state that you will follow up with them by phone - do so!)
QUESTIONS TO ASK

Asking questions you have prepared in advance is a great way to gather first-hand information about the contact’s career path, area of practice and additional career advice the contact may have to offer.

Remember to ask open ended questions, keeping a relaxed conversation style that is enjoyable both to you and the interviewee. Introduce yourself and begin with a simple “ice breaker” question, followed by a variation of the questions below. Feel free to skip some and substitute others during the interview if you feel they will be more helpful to you.

**Career Background**
- How and why did you decide on this practice area?
- Did you clerk or intern while you were in school?
- What law school classes have been most beneficial in your work?
- What do you wish you would have known before leaving law school?
- What was your first job after law school?
- How did you obtain your current position?

**Continuing Legal Involvement**
- What professional publications do you read?
- Are there any professional associations you would recommend with which I should become involved?
- How does someone progress in your field?
- Are there other job duties you are expected to perform outside of normal working hours?

**Daily Job Duties**
- Can you describe a typical day at work?
- What is the most interesting project on which you have recently worked?
- What is the most difficult aspect of your job?
- If you could change anything about your job, what would it be and why?

**General Advice and Suggestions**
- How did you prepare for this work?
- What advice do you have for me, given my current situation and goals?
- Can you recommend anyone else I should talk to?

YOUR RESUME AND THE INFORMATIONAL INTERVIEW

Although the purpose of the informational interview is not to interview for a job, it is a good idea to bring a copy of your resume with you to the informational interview. A certain rapport can build between you and the contact during the span of the interview and the contact may ask you for a copy of your resume.
PREPARATION CHECK LIST

☐ Research your contact and the firm/organization they work for before your interview.
☐ Prepare a list of questions and update your resume.
☐ Print off extra copies of your transcript, writing sample, and references in case they are requested.
☐ Call to confirm your appointment the day before.
☐ Keep a calendar with all your interview dates and times.
☐ Pre-route your destination the day before so you are aware of the travel time and distance.
☐ Arrive at your destination early to allow enough time to gather your thoughts.
☐ Ask for a contact referral at the end of the interview and request to stay in touch.
☐ Turn off your cell phone during the interview.
☐ Do not arrive at the interview with the illusion that this is a job interview.
☐ Be courteous and do not interrupt the interviewee when they are speaking.
☐ Bring a pen and paper the day of the interview to take notes for reference material later on.
☐ Stay within your appointed amount of time for the interview.
☐ Thank the employer for their time and assistance.
☐ Dress professionally.

EVALUATION, FOLLOW-UP AND FOLLOW THROUGH

Once your informational interview is over you should review your notes and make a record of what was discussed during the interview. Record any ideas or suggestions made by the interviewee that may assist you in the future. Thank the interviewee for their time by sending them a thank-you note or email immediately following the informational interview.

Follow up with any and all contacts the interviewee may recommend; this will help your network grow and will give a positive impression to the interviewee and the referral. If a suggestion was made to join an organization or read a certain publication, follow up on these suggestions and let your contact know how you have benefited from them.

After the interview you will want to evaluate your experience and the information received to make an informed decision about furthering your professional development and career path. Ask yourself the following questions: What are your thoughts and concerns about this practice area? Upon hearing the information presented, do you want to learn more about this practice area? How will you apply what you have learned to your career search?

If you would like more information or have any questions about informational interviews and the interview process, please contact the Center for Professional Development for further assistance.