The Informational Interview

Idea In Short

Book informational interviews before you need them, and obey the single rule: never ask for a job. Reach out through referrals, arrive researched, ask smart open-ended questions and look for ways to help the other person. Done well, one coffee builds knowledge, goodwill and a lasting contact.

A Gem That Stays Relevant

Among the many things a Master of Business Administration [MBA] program teaches, the informational interview remains a gem a decade later. These are simply low-expectation business meetings with relative strangers to learn more about an industry, company or opportunity.1 The structure is win-win. The interviewee gets the opportunity to be generous with time, knowledge and advice, and someone holding the job you would love to have makes an outstanding resource. The interviewer gains insight and potentially a lead. Done well, both sides gain a business contact and a broader network.

The Only Rule: Do Not Ask for a Job

Everything else here is advice. This is a rule, and it comes first because it is critical. Asking for the job, or for a recommendation to the hiring manager, marks you as selfish, short-sighted, amateur and weak. It is rude and awkward to invite a stranger for a simple coffee and then ambush them with a job request. It will not work, and the reasons stack up. They do not know you, so they cannot attest to your skills or professionalism. Switching the agenda disrespects the invitation they accepted. Believing one meeting forms a relationship is immature. The move reads as aggressive in the wrong way, signaling that you are risky with relationships. You are probably burning a bridge, because nobody meets with a jerk twice. And if the tactic somehow succeeds, the meeting was an actual interview, not an informational one.

What You Actually Gain

If the job is off the table, what is on it? More than most people expect. Goodwill from someone inside the company or industry you are targeting. Contacts and referrals to further informational interviews, which is how networks actually grow. Knowledge about a specific role, department or company culture that no website reveals. A candid opinion on whether someone with your qualifications might fit. Resources for getting smart on an industry, invaluable for career switchers. Confirmation that a posting is genuinely alive, since some companies must post jobs externally for a week before filling them internally. And the diffuse good karma that comes from meeting successful people who remember you kindly.2

Before the Meeting

Reach out through referrals whenever possible, mining friends, neighbors, school and alumni networks for a connection, because cold introductions are possible but rough. Keep the email brief, since long-winded exposition kills interest before the ask arrives. Cover the basics: who you are, how you found them and why you want to meet or speak. State your objective clearly rather than hiding behind generalities like broadening my network. If you are looking at a role at a specific company, say so. If you are switching into an industry they know, say so, clearly enough that they can help or redirect you. Show manners throughout, with deference, scheduling flexibility and visible appreciation. And do not be upset by silence, because life is about priorities and helping random strangers sits low on most lists.

During the Meeting

Even though you are not asking for a job, this is still an interview, so display professionalism, character, emotional intelligence and rapport, with a hint of ambition. Come prepared by researching the industry, the company and the person, and never ask basic questions any high school freshman could ask. Build rapport deliberately, and if you do not know how, practice until you do. Respect the clock: do not run over, offer exits if they seem antsy and start wrapping up the moment they glance at a watch. Ask smart, open-ended questions and solicit advice, because people oddly love giving advice. Above all, look for ways to help them, since networking means being useful to other people.3

After the Meeting

Follow-through separates professionals from tourists. Complete anything you said you would do, promptly. Send a thank-you note or email as a matter of course. Then keep looking for ways to help them, repay the favor and honor the time they gave you. A relationship begun over one coffee survives only if you feed it, and reciprocity is the food.

Questions That Earn Their Minutes

The quality of an informational interview tracks the quality of its questions. Weak questions request facts a search engine answers, such as what the company does or how large the team is. Strong questions request judgment only this person can supply. What surprised you most in your first year here? What separates the people who thrive in this role from those who merely survive? If you were in my position, what would you do in the next ninety days? What do outsiders consistently misunderstand about this industry? Which skill did you underestimate before arriving? Judgment questions flatter appropriately, produce answers worth writing down and leave the host feeling their time bought something. Prepare six, expect to use four and let the conversation breathe between them.

Cheap, Useful and Repeatable

The informational interview is a remarkably low-cost way to get smart about a role you want someday. Curious about a company's culture? Talk with someone who works there. A practitioner's honest tally: more than thirty such interviews across a decade, roughly twenty while preparing for consulting interviews and another ten during job transitions. People prove surprisingly generous with time, advice and contacts. One good friend completed over a hundred informational interviews in two years. If he can do that many, anyone can manage a few, and a few is all it takes to change a career's direction.

- 1Informational Interview
- 2Never Eat Alone
- 3LinkedIn

Summary

Informational interviews are low-expectation meetings that deliver insight, contacts and

goodwill at almost no cost. The one rule is absolute: never ask for the job. Prepare thoroughly, respect the clock, follow up faithfully and repay generosity. Thirty such conversations can reshape a career.