Informational interviews: a step-by-step guide

For more detailed guidance on how to prepare for and conduct an informational interview, follow this simple six-step process:

1. Identify your career interests
2. Select your interviewee
3. Get in touch
4. Prepare your questions
5. Conduct the interview
6. Follow-up

# Step 1: identify your career interests

Through a combination of self-reflection and using the portal resources to research different careers, you should hopefully start to identify some potential career interests. These may be closely aligned with the work you’ve been doing as a postdoc, or you may be curious about a completely different sector or area.

Remember that an informational interview is a chance to follow your curiosity. You can learn more about a profession, meet the people who work within it and ask them the kind of questions you’ve always wanted to ask. Don’t feel constrained by what you’ve done in the past. Your work as a postdoc has equipped you with valuable skills that can be transferred to a wide range of different careers.

Reflection helps you to discover more about your strengths, motivations, values and interests. These should be kept in mind, both when looking for careers and when conducting the informational interviews. If you’ve not yet done so, take some time to explore this section of the portal before organising your first informational interview. Having a clearer idea of your goals and motivations will make it easier to identify the kind of roles that you may enjoy doing.

Limit yourself to two or three career interests at first. That way, you can take your time to explore professions in more detail without getting overwhelmed.

Once you’ve considered the possible career pathways that you’d like to explore in more detail, it’s time to find some people to interview.

# Step 2: select your interviewee

Begin by talking to people in your warm network. Ask family, friends, fellow postdocs and your PI if they know of anyone working in the areas you’re keen to explore. You might be surprised at the results. Even if members of your immediate social and professional circle don’t know anyone working in the field you’re targeting, they may well know someone else who does. It’s worth casting your net widely at this point since the idea is to try and identify as many points of referral as possible.

Use some of the career exploration strategies we have provided to identify other candidates that you can approach. Be realistic about the kinds of people you target for an informational interview. Someone in a very senior position may not have the time to speak with you (though it’s always worth a try!). You’re more likely to get a positive response if you approach individuals in the early-to-mid stages of their career. This can also make the informational interview process a bit more relaxed.

Keep in mind that anyone you approach for an informational interview is likely to do a little background research on you. They may google your name or look at your social media posts. Check your online presence creates a favourable first impression before connecting with potential interviewees.

# Step 3: get in touch

If you have identified your potential interviewee via a mutual connection, consider asking your contact to make an email introduction. Alternatively, mention your mutual acquaintance in your first approach. The personal touch counts for a lot when contacting somebody that you don’t know, so this can be a useful way of initiating a friendly conversation with potential interviewees.

If you’ve not been introduced by someone else and you are “cold calling”, then it’s worth trying to engage as much as you can before asking for help. You could comment on a recent blog post or article that the person has written. Perhaps you attended a conference at which the person was speaking (or saw the video on YouTube). Maybe you heard them being interviewed on a podcast or appreciated something they tweeted. Maybe they attended the same university as you. Anything at all like this could help you to make your initial contact as smooth as possible.

The point is to show that you’re interested in the person and their work. If you take the trouble to do this, and do it authentically, then the person is more likely to be responsive to your requests and give up some of their valuable time to help you.

Below, you can see some example scripts. Each one is personalised. Messages that begin “dear sir or madam” are unlikely to create a favourable impression.

Remember that you’re trying to initiate a professional relationship with this person, so take the time to find out not only their name, but also their professional contact details.

Sample script 1

Dear [Insert Professional Name],

I’m currently working as a postdoctoral researcher in [insert discipline], looking to explore possible career pathways.

In a recent career development discussion, my PI [PI’s name] mentioned your name and talked about the success you’ve had since moving into [career/role/industry].

As a former postdoc who has moved beyond academia, I’d love to hear more about how you made the transition and the experiences you’ve had in your current role. I was wondering if you might have the time to answer a few questions?

Sample script 2

Hi [Insert Professional Name],

I was in the audience for the recent talk you gave at [insert event name here] and wanted to send a quick word to let you know how much I enjoyed it. It was

interesting to hear about your company’s recent product launch and I was really impressed by how you overcame some of the technical challenges.

I’m keen to learn more about your field and would appreciate hearing about your experiences. Could you perhaps spare some time to answer a few of my questions?

Sample script 3

Hi [Insert Professional Name],

I read your recent blog post on project management and wanted to send a quick note of thanks to let you know how useful I found it.

Some of the strategies you talked about were completely new to me, and I’m keen to try them out in my own work.

I’m currently exploring new career options and was wondering if I might be able to ask you some questions about your current role and what it takes to break into your industry.

If you get a positive response to your message, you should follow up with further details. Suggest a meeting of 15-30 minutes at most. Any longer than this and you may find it difficult to get people to commit.

It’s important to be flexible. Suggest several dates and times and work with whatever is easiest for the person you’d like to interview. If distance or time pressures make a face-to-face meeting too difficult to arrange, then you could hold the interview virtually. Failing that, a phone call would work, though it’s often more difficult to build up much of a rapport with someone if you are unable to see one another.

Keep track of everyone you approach for an informational interview. Use a spreadsheet in which you record their name, company, date of interview etc. If you’ve not had any response to your initial contact after a week or two, then by all means send a short follow-up message. People are busy, after all, and it’s unlikely that mail from an unknown person will be top of their to-do list. If there’s still no response then you could wait and try a third and final time. But if you don’t receive an answer at that point then it’s probably a sign that the person isn’t interested.

You’ll also undoubtedly receive some responses in which people thank you for your interest but decline to be interviewed. Don’t take it personally, since it may be that the person is simply too busy to meet with you.

# Step 4: prepare your questions

Once you have someone who has agreed to meet with you for an informational interview, you’ll need to prepare some questions.

Ask yourself what are the two or three things that you want to know about the person’s career or industry by the end of the interview.

Maybe you’re keen to explore the skills and competencies you’ll need to break into the profession. Or perhaps you want to learn about day-to-day activities and how you might fit the demands of the work around your family commitments.

Whatever they might be, keeping these goals in mind will help you to keep the conversation on track and ensure that it's focussed on the topics in which you’re most interested.

You may only have a short time with your interviewee. This means that every question you ask should be designed to elicit as much useful information as possible.

Familiarise yourself with the company your interviewee works for. Being able to demonstrate some knowledge of an employer and the sector in which they operate will be appreciated by your interviewee, and doing this preparation will ensure that you can ask more relevant, searching questions and elicit more useful information from the interview.

You can think about your informational interview as having a clear beginning, middle and end. Each of these three sections will focus on a different area. Here’s some suggested questions that you can ask during each section:

1. Learn about the individual
   * What are the main responsibilities of your current role?
   * What are the specific skills and competencies that you need to succeed? How did you acquire these?
   * What do you enjoy most about your role? What do you enjoy least?
   * What are the most challenging aspects of your role?
2. Discover more about the organisation and sector

This is your opportunity to find out more about the field and how it is changing. This kind of insight is invaluable as it highlights emerging issues and challenges that you’re unlikely to find out about elsewhere

* + How do you think the role will develop in the future? Are there any emerging trends that I should be aware of?
  + What are the opportunities for career progression?
  + What are the typical salary ranges for this sort of role? Though note there may be sensitivities around this.
  + What projects are you working on at the moment?
  + Can you describe a typical working week?
  + What’s the workplace culture like?
  + How does your organisation compare to others in the sector?

1. Ask for advice

Here you’re asking your interviewee, ‘based upon everything we’ve discussed, what do you recommend that I do next?’

* + What would make me an attractive hiring proposition to your company? How can I improve my chances?
  + Is there specific training or development that I could do that would help

me to break into the profession?

* + Are there any industry networks or organisations that you recommend for me to join?
  + Are there any questions I haven’t asked that I should have?
  + Do you know of anyone else I can speak to who can help me learn more?

This last question is important. Your interviewee is likely to know lots of people in similar roles, either working for the same organisation as them, or elsewhere. If they can put you in contact with other professionals then this will extend your network, increase your chances of organising further informational Interviews and developing your career in the way that most appeals to you.

Exactly which questions you choose to ask in the interview will depend on several factors; not only the amount of time you have available, but also what you already know about the interviewee’s role or organisation. While it is vital to turn up to the interview well prepared, follow your instinct on the day and let the conversation flow naturally.

# Step 5: conduct the interview

When you meet, after thanking your interviewee, be prepared to give an elevator- style pitch of your career to date and how it has led you towards an interest in their profession.

After this, mention the subjects you’re keen to discuss. If you only have a short amount of time with the person, then you might want to tell them exactly how many questions you want to ask. This will encourage them to keep their answers concise and prevent any lengthy digressions.

Provided you’re well prepared, the interview itself should be straightforward. The first time you do one, it’s natural to be nervous. But remember that you’ll be the one directing the conversation. Unlike in a traditional recruitment interview, you won’t be surprised by a difficult question. You’ll be in control the whole time.

All you need to do is be attentive, make a note of what you hear and enjoy the discussion.

# Step 6: follow-up

At the end of the interview, be sure to thank the interviewee for their time and tell them how useful you’ve found the discussion. It’s important that you acknowledge the effort they’ve made in agreeing to meet with you.

Within a day of the interview, follow-up with a written message of thanks and, if you have a LinkedIn profile, add them as a contact.

Now that you’ve made a connection with this person, you may wish to keep in touch at regular intervals. Why not let them know how your job search is going from time to time? Or share articles and social media posts you think they might find interesting? They may, in turn, point you towards other resources, or let you know if they hear about any job vacancies.

By connecting with more people and developing your professional network, you’ll have the opportunity to further your knowledge of available career pathways. And the more you know, the easier it will be for you to find a career that’s right for you.

# Reflecting upon your informational interviews

As soon as possible after an informational interview you should take some time to go over the notes you made during the discussion and reflect upon what you learned.

Based upon what you now know, ask yourself:

* Would I enjoy working in this role?
* Could I realistically balance the demands of this role with my personal commitments?
* Do I have the necessary skills and competencies to do this role? If not, do I know how to acquire them?
* Would I be able to move directly from my current role in academia into a position identical to this role, or would I need to begin in a more junior position and work my way up?
* Does this role offer sufficient opportunities for career progression?
* Do the values of this company/organisation align with my own?

There may be other questions that you can think of that will be of relevance to your personal circumstances. The important thing is to sift all the information you gathered during the interview and carefully consider how it relates to your future career plans.

Having completed the informational interview, it might be immediately apparent that a particular role or company would not be a good fit for you. If this happens, you may feel that the interview was a waste of time. But, in fact, you’ve learned something valuable; a career pathway that you’d initially been attracted towards has been shown to be unsuitable. This means you can now focus your attention and energy elsewhere.

On the other hand, you may not be able to answer all these questions just yet – perhaps there wasn’t time during the interview to gather all the information you would have liked.

If that’s the case, then consider organising further informational Interviews with different people. Perhaps you could get in touch with some of the contacts suggested by your previous interviewees.

The more informational interviews you do, the easier they will become. And aside from a relatively modest investment of time, they’re not difficult to organise.

It’s never too soon to start. By scheduling informational interviews throughout your postdoc contract you’ll be creating frequent opportunities to develop your network and connect with people working beyond academia.