

# CAREER TOOLKIT

## INFORMATIONAL CONVERSATIONS GUIDE



## WHAT IS AN INFORMATIONAL CONVERSATION?

An informational conversation is a one-on-one discussion with someone who has a job that you are interested in learning more about, who works within an industry you might want to enter, or who is employed by a specific company of interest. These conversations are an excellent way to help you build a strong career search strategy and focus your career goals while gaining an insider's perspective. It is also a proven way to expand your network into an organization and provide you with an opportunity to convey information about you to a potential employer in a relaxed and friendly meeting. When at all possible, in-person informational conversations are the most memorable and most impactful, and should always be your goal. If an in-person meeting isn't possible, a phone meeting is a good second choice.

## THE PHASES OF INFORMATIONAL CONVERSATIONS

Informational conversations typically fall into two categories or "phases". Phase One conversations are primarily for *researching* and *information gathering*. When you want to learn about a new field or industry, e.g. brand management or investment banking, or if you need to ascertain what specific skills are necessary to be successful in a certain area, e.g. supply chain or non-profit management, Phase One informational conversations will provide you with that knowledge.

When you have had sufficient conversations with a number of people in your targeted field, and you find that you learning very little that is new, you are at the onset of Phase Two. This phase of informational conversations will allow you to be more sharply focused on your targets, ask more insightful questions, and most importantly, it *positions you to impress*. Having gained a lot of specific knowledge about the position, field, or company of interest, now is the time to take advantage of that knowledge by showing your interest and passion. By impressing those with whom you meet, they will likely be even more open and resourceful for you.

### TYPICAL QUESTIONS TO ASK DURING PHASE ONE

What qualifications do you seek in a new hire?

How do most people enter this profession?

### TYPICAL QUESTIONS TO ASK DURING PHASE TWO

"My research indicates that the change in regulations that comes with CFR 21 Part 11 is affecting the way all pharmaceutical companies are collecting and storing patient data. How has your company been adapting to the change so far?"  
"I'm energized by our conversations and am interested in applying for positions, and even discussing ways I can add value in other ways. Who would be the best person to speak with about that?"

## INFORMATIONAL CONVERSATION ACTIVITIES

Once you identify your strategic contacts, meeting with them is a 4-step process. The steps will guide you from making initial introductions through meeting with key people. An additional 5<sup>th</sup> step is an on-going activity that helps you build and maintain these relationships, and it ensures that valuable resources stay with you throughout your career.

### STEP #1: THE APPROACH E-MAIL

E-mails offer an opportunity to present yourself in a clear, concise manner. They preclude the possibility of betraying nervousness that we have speaking to someone for the first time. They can convey your intentions with an economy of words not often found in spoken conversation. Approach e-mails let you put your best foot forward when making initial contact. And NEVER attach an unsolicited resume to an Approach E-mail! You will find sample emails for requesting informational interviews in our next toolkit item.

### STEP #2: THE APPROACH PHONE CALL

A phone call may be an alternate first step for people you already know, and it is a necessary 2nd step (follow-up) after an Approach E-mail, usually within a week of sending it. It's also a great way to keep in touch as you build networking relationships throughout your campaign. The best possible way to use the phone is to ensure you are fully prepared for a conversation – or – to leave a voicemail. Preparation ensures you will present yourself in the best possible manner.

A typical approach call could be “Hello, this is Jenny Lee calling. I was a co-worker of Emma Nems at Trillium before starting my MBA at Boston University, and she suggested you might be willing to speak with me informally about your role as a financial analyst. I am researching a variety of career paths and hoping we could have a phone conversation or possibly get together for, perhaps, 20 minutes, at your convenience. My phone number is 867-5309 and my e-mail address is...”

Your words must be well-chosen before-hand and your delivery practiced and polished.

### STEP #3: THE INFORMATIONAL CONVERSATION

This is your opportunity to learn (Phase One) and impress (Phase Two). Remember, you requested the meeting, and controlling the content is your responsibility. Here is a 4-stage structure to ensure a logical flow for the conversation. You may only have 20 minutes, so being prepared will help you to optimize this time.

#### STAGE 1 - BUILDING RAPPORT

- Break the ice by mentioning who referred you and why you believe the contact will be of help to you.
- Reconfirm the time allocated for the meeting. If you said “20 minutes” in your Approach Phone Call, reassure the contact that you intend to honor it.
- Set the stage for the rest of the meeting by again reassuring your contact you are not here expecting him/her to have or know of job openings and define what you would like to accomplish in the meeting.

#### STAGE 2 - PRESENTING YOUR BACKGROUND

- Tell the contact about yourself. Be brief! This is an appropriate place to present a slightly expanded version of your commercial - about 60 - 90 seconds, as opposed to the 30-second version.

### STAGE 3 - INFORMATION EXCHANGE

- During this phase, ask questions to enhance your research, and you may be able to share knowledge that you have gathered during your research to-date.
- Begin with questions about the person you are meeting with, and then their industry. The conversation can narrow by discussing industry sectors, actual companies within them, typical or special problems or needs within those companies and ways that companies have tried dealing with them.
- This leads to asking which people can help you more specifically. Make sure that your questions are genuine.

### STAGE 4 - ASKING FOR SPECIFIC REFERRALS

- A major objective of the meeting is to obtain more referrals. You must be prepared to ask for them, and to get specific information about them.
- “Now that you know me and my goals a little better, is there anyone you know that you feel may be helpful?”
- The more specific information you get, the more useful the referrals will be to you. A name by itself doesn't usually provide enough information to follow-up with those referrals.

## STEP #4: THANK YOU!

---

Saying "thank you" is an easy and important step. It shows that you have manners, observe protocol and are appreciative.

At the end of the meeting, tell the contact what your next steps are, including letting them know when you have met with their referrals. This shows you are thorough, organized and definitely committed to the process.

Immediately after the meeting, reinforce the good impression you've already created, starting with writing a “thank you” and including a business card. Make contact with someone soon after meeting them, even if you don't yet have a clear idea of how they can help you. It sets a strong tone for future communication.

## STEP #5: FOLLOW-UP

---

Follow-up is an on-going activity that keeps you connected to your contacts. It is initiated by a thank-you note you send within 24 hours of the meeting.

It continues as you meet with the individuals to whom you were referred by the contact. Keep your contact informed by phone, email or note, of your follow-up efforts and the value they've contributed.

In addition, you can keep your eyes open for articles and information that may interest your contacts.

Through on-going communication and mutual exchanges of information, you will build a strategic network of professional relationships - not just an expanded list of mere acquaintances.

Think of it this way: When you exercise, you start to breathe a little more heavily. When you stop exercising, you don't stop breathing...you just breathe a little less. When you are seeking a new career, you network a lot. When you land that new career, you don't stop networking...you just network a little less.

# QUESTIONS YOU CAN ASK IN AN INFORMATIONAL CONVERSATION

## GENERAL QUESTIONS ABOUT THE INDIVIDUAL

---

- What is your background, and how did you reach your current position?
- What do you like best about what you do? What do you like least?
- What is a typical day like for you? (Start/stop times, general duties, challenges encountered?)
- What are some of the qualifications that make you successful in your position?
- If you were to start over today, what would you change? What wouldn't you change?

## STATE OF THE INDUSTRY/FIELD

---

- What are some of the key trends/issues in this industry/field?
- What are the job prospects for entering this field?
- What developments on the horizon could affect future opportunities?
- What industry changes have you seen from inside your company?
- How frequently do layoffs occur?
- Why do people leave this field or company?
- Who are the most important people in this industry/field today?
- Which companies have the best track records for promoting women and minorities?
- Describe some of the opportunities for self-employment in the industry/field.

## MONEY & ADVANCEMENT

---

- What would be my earnings potential if I entered this field?
- Describe some typical career paths and time frames for advancement in this field/industry.
- How did you get your job?
- If you could start all over again, how might you change your career path?
- What is the background of most senior-level executives in this industry/field/company?

## SKILLS & EXPERIENCE

---

- What educational prep would you recommend for someone who wants to advance in this field?
- What qualifications do you seek in a new hire?
- How do most people enter this profession?
- Which of my skills are strong compared to other job hunters in this field?
- What do you think of my experience? For what types of positions would it qualify me?
- Can you recommend any courses I should take before proceeding further with my job search?
- What companies might be interested in hiring someone with my background?

## WHAT THE WORK IS LIKE

---

- Could you describe a typical workday for me?
- What skills are required in your position on a day-to-day basis?
- What parts of your job do you find most challenging?
- Despite these challenges, what motivates you to remain? What do you find most enjoyable?
- Are there dangers I should be aware of?
- Which seasons of the year are toughest in your job?
- I'd like to walk through and see where the work is done. Can that be arranged?

## FITTING IN

---

- Considering my background, how well do you think I would fit in this industry/profession/company?
- How does your company compare with others we've discussed?
- Describe the lifestyle typical of people in this industry/field/company, e.g., frequency of travel, acceptance of community/family involvement, etc.
- Considering all the people you've met in your field/industry, what personal attributes are essential for success?
- Taking into account my skills education and experience, what other career paths would you suggest I explore?

## MORE INFORMATION

---

- Where would you suggest I look for current information on salaries, employers and industry issues?
- What professional journals and organizations have you found valuable?
- Is there anything else you think I need to know or investigate?
- Who else would you recommend I speak with? For what kinds of information? When I contact this person, may I use your name? What is the best way to get in touch?