

Getting a Foot in the Door: *Informational Interviews & Networking*

What is networking and informational interviewing?

Networking is the process of developing professional contacts that may help you to understand more about a field and how to advance professionally. Networking is a way of building positive relationships, even friendships, within your field of interest. Before you dismiss this approach, think about the fact that the large majority of all jobs are filled through networking and *anyone* can do it. By using informational interviews, a specific method of networking, you can learn more about a career field and promote yourself in a polite and effective manner.

How do informational interviews lead to jobs?

The most important thing to remember about networking is that you are not asking people for a job or to exchange favors. You are asking them about their careers, their company, their industry, and whom they know. By building connections, establishing yourself as a job searcher, and opening your ears to the inside of an industry, you will let potential employers know about you, and you will know more about them and promising job opportunities. Rather than waiting for someone to read your resume and to call you for an interview, you are already meeting people face to face and displaying your interest in and talents for a particular field. Maybe your interviewee can tell you about a job opportunity that she heard about with another company, or sometime in the future, she might invite you to apply for an opening at her company. Furthermore, informational interviews let you know more about a career field, such as whether or not you really want to pursue a career in that field, what skills you should highlight and develop, and how an industry or company works.

How can I do this?

The first step is to make a list of all your potential contacts. Contacts can range from relatives, neighbors, teachers, and friends to your banker, your bosses and coworkers, your parents' business associates, and your casual social or organizational acquaintances. Sewanee alumni make great contacts because they are usually willing to help Sewanee students and fellow alumni by providing information and advice about their fields. A great way to connect with alumni is through Sewanee's online directory and career networking system, Gateway. The primary purpose of Gateway is to provide a way for alumni to stay in touch with friends and classmates, and to network with other Sewanee alumni all over the world. Students can register on Gateway by using their student ID number. Alumni should log on using their banner number, which is located on all alumni mailing labels, or can be obtained by contacting the Alumni Office at (931) 598-1402.

Gateway is searchable by city of interest, by profession, by both city and profession, as well many other combinations and options such as Greek affiliation, major, etc. This gives users the opportunity to learn what careers alumni are currently pursuing and provides contact information for those alumni involved in a particular field of interest.

Always think broadly when generating a list of potential contacts. Even if someone does not appear directly involved with your area of interest, keep them on your list – you might be surprised by what other people know.

Before the interview:

- ✓ Begin with the people on your list who you are the most comfortable with or that appear to have the most connection to the industry in which you are interested.
- ✓ Research your interviewee's organization, industry or career.
- ✓ If you do not know someone well, write or email the person a letter in which you explain who you are, what information or advice you seek, and that you will call on a certain date. (See page 4 for a sample)
- ✓ Draft an introduction of yourself and prepare a list of open-ended questions that you would like to ask the interviewee. (See suggested questions on the next page.)
- ✓ Check your calendar to note when would be good times to call again later or to arrange an in person interview.
- ✓ Find a quiet place and a convenient time to make your call.

Arranging and conducting the interview:

- ✓ Introduce yourself. Let the interviewee know who referred you or why you chose to call. Be sure to ask if this is a convenient time to talk
- ✓ If you will be in the area where they work sometime soon, ask if you could meet with this person for a short period of time, or if necessary ask if you could talk sometime by phone.
- ✓ If you meet with an individual in person, arrive early, dress appropriately, and bring copies of your resume in case you need to provide one.
- ✓ Introduce yourself; offer a short summary of your background and interest in talking with this person. Ask your prepared questions, listen attentively to what the person says, and consider taking notes.
- ✓ Keep the interview within the time frame that you established, but do not interrupt the interviewee to halt the discussion. Be reasonable and polite.
- ✓ Before you hang up or leave, thank the individual for the time and for the advice offered.

After the interview:

- ✓ Write a thank-you note to your interviewee.
- ✓ Contact the people that your interviewee recommended. Let him or her know the results. Staying in touch with the people you meet can help you to develop stronger relationships with them and also shows them your appreciation for the advice they have shared with you.

Why write a thank-you letter?

Thank-you letters show professionalism, friendliness, and an appreciation for the time the individual shared with you. They extend the relationships you are developing with the individuals that you meet in informational interviews. If you take the advice of a contact or call an individual at the suggestion of our interviewee, be sure to let the interviewee know.

How do I write a thank-you letter?

A thank-you letter can be typed or handwritten (we recommend handwritten). Be certain that it contains NO ERRORS of any sort (spelling, grammar, syntax, etc.). Use plain stationary. Make your letter clear, concise, and legible. A basic format appears at the end of this packet.

Don't people find this whole process annoying?

Keep in mind most people enjoy helping others and sharing their advice (especially Sewanee alumni). Also, once upon a time, they were in your position. Be professional in your dress and appearance, respectful, courteous, and prepared. You will make a strong impression, and maybe in a few years, you will be the one sharing your wisdom.

Suggested questions for informational interviews:

- Why did you choose this career? How did you make your way into this field? What has been your career progression? How do people typically move through this industry?
- What education/personality traits/experience/skills are needed in your career? How should I emphasize these in an interview?
- How did your Sewanee education prepare you for what you are doing now? What courses of study do you recommend?
- What is your typical day/week like? What is work like for the people at the bottom/middle/top of the industry/company? How do (computers, interaction with people, travel, dress, place of residence, vacation, other benefits and obligations) play into your work/personal life?
- How does your company work (i.e. communications, organization, management, philosophy, relationship with customers and with competitors, movement from position to position)? How is it different from other companies in the field?
- How does one/is it possible to/its it typical to transfer between companies? To other careers?
- What do you see as the future of this company/industry?
- What magazines/journals would you suggest I read? What organizations should I join?
- How would you suggest that I enter this field? What internships/summer jobs are available? With whom might I discuss them?
- What special advice would you give to someone who is considering entering/about to enter this field? What do you wish you had known about this industry/job/employer before you began?
- To whom would you suggest that I speak to for further advice regarding this career field?
*** Note: you should **ALWAYS** ask this last question or something like it during an information interview. ***

A Sample Format For An Informational Interview Request:

(1" or more from the top of the page)

Your Street Address
City, State, and Zip Code
Date of Letter

(leave 3 lines blank)

Mr./Ms./Dr. First and Last Name
Position Title
Name of Business or Organization
Street Address
City, State, and Zip Code

(Leave 1 line blank)

Dear Mr./Ms./Dr. Last Name:

State why you are writing (*e.g.* to learn more about a career in _____, to request a brief interview within the next month, how you found his/her name, why you chose to write him/her). (2-3 sentences)

Explain your interest in the field, particularly his area of work (*e.g.*, refer to classes that you have taken/projects that you have done/extra-curricular activities that have inspired your interest and demonstrated your talents, discuss information that you have learned about the industry/company through reading/talking with others). Perhaps give more detail about the sort of information that you would like to receive (*e.g.*, what are good graduate schools for a particular field, how his company works, how to apply your liberal arts skills, etc.). (3-5 sentences)

Give a specific time that you will call to arrange a meeting (*e.g.*, when I am in your town the week of month-day for spring break, next week.). (1-2 sentences)

Sincerely,

(sign here in ink)

(leave 3 lines blank)

Your Name

A Sample of an Informational Interview Request

735 University Avenue
Sewanee, TN 37383
March 5, 2003

Mr. Blake Williams
Associate Editor
Southern Living
2100 Lakeshore Drive
Birmingham, AL 35209

Dear Mr. Williams:

My name is Job Surcher, and I am currently a student at the University of the South. I selected your name from Sewanee's on-line directory because of your focus in the magazine industry. If possible, I would like to meet with you in order to discuss careers in editing.

As a junior English major at the University of the South, I know that I would like to continue to work with literature. A career involving writing and researching sounds exciting to me. Furthermore, my experience as an editor for *The Mountain Goat* and for *The Sewanee Purple* has reinforced that I enjoy the challenge of correcting another's work while maintaining the integrity of his or her voice.

I will be in Birmingham at the end of March and will call you next week to see if we might be able to meet at a time that is convenient for you. If you wish, you can call me at 931-598-8888 or email me at jobsurcher@sewanee.edu.

Sincerely,

(sign here in ink)

Job Surcher

Sample Format For A Thank-You Note

Your Street Address
City, State, and Zip Code
Date of Letter

Mr./Ms./Dr. First and Last Name
Position Title
Company Name
Street Address
City, State, and Zip Code

Dear Mr./Ms./Dr. Last Name:

Thank you for talking with me/answering my questions. (1-2 sentences)

I liked ___ about your company/field. I appreciated your advice about ____. I can contribute in ___ way. (2-3 sentences)

I will keep you informed of my progress with the information that you shared with me. If you have any other ideas to share with me, please call me at _____. (1-2 sentences)

Sincerely,

(sign here in ink)

Your Name

A Sample Thank-You Note

735 University Avenue
Sewanee, TN 37383
April 14, 2003

Ms. Carolyn Thompson
Program Director
WVTV Channel 9
789 James Robertson Parkway
Nashville, TN 37165

Dear Ms. Thompson:

Thank you for meeting with me yesterday to share information about your experience in the television industry. I particularly enjoyed learning how you juggle the many aspects of your job. I have already begun to investigate the internships that you suggested, and I am hoping to speak to Mr. Woodhouse soon.

I will keep you posted on the progress of my career.

Sincerely,

(sign here in ink)

Carney R. Searchen