

Informational Interviews

Informational interviews provide excellent opportunities to collect valuable occupational information while building your personal and professional networks. You are encouraged to use informational interviews throughout your professional development, not only when you are considering a career transition.

An informational interview is an opportunity to:

- gain an inside view of an industry, position, or organization through the first-hand experiences and impressions of someone working in an area of interest to you
- learn about industry trends and variations in position type by sector and field
- compare work responsibilities and environments to your personal interests and skills
- seek advice on strengthening your qualifications as a job applicant
- request the names of additional industry professionals to serve as resources as you explore career options
- build confidence practicing your elevator pitch, articulating skill sets, and asking thoughtful questions in a relaxed environment

Important: An Informational Interview is NOT an opportunity to ask for job leads. The purpose of this exchange is to learn about an area of interest to you, to make professional connections, and to enhance your interpersonal skills.

Requesting an Informational Interview

Identify Contacts

There are a number of resources at your fingertips to help you identify individuals for informational interviews, including:

The Chicago Harris Community

The average Chicago Harris student has 3-4 years work experience prior to entering the program. In addition to talking with your peers, seek information from faculty, adjunct instructors, and University administrators on specific research areas, their professional experiences, and recommendations of individuals to contact working in your area of interest. Recent alumni, including members of the graduating class immediately preceding yours, are often particularly good resources. They have completed the recruiting process recently and are often in a position to give you specific, actionable advice.

The University of Chicago Alumni Directory

The [UChicago Alumni Directory](#) is a comprehensive database of Chicago Harris and UChicago alumni who have generously volunteered to share career information and advice with students. Contact information is provided, and students are welcome to initiate a relationship and request an informational interview with alumni.

Social Media Tools

While a number of social media platforms are available to support your job search process, LinkedIn is a tool dedicated to assisting individuals with career development goals and forging professional connections. You are strongly encouraged to use LinkedIn to:

1. **Build your professional network:**
 - join the [Harris School's LinkedIn Group](#)
 - connect with fellows students, alumni, and members of the UChicago community to identify individuals working in or connected to professionals in your areas of interest
2. **View the profiles of professionals working in organizations/roles of interest to you to:**
 - develop an understanding of valuable skills and work experiences for your target positions
 - view individuals' employment history to identify additional organizations/positions that align with your skills and goals
 - familiarize yourself with industry vernacular
 - identify additional LinkedIn Groups and professional associations to join

3. **Research target organizations using the “Companies” tab to:**

- identify individuals working in organizations of interest to you
- identify connections in organizations by location, job opportunities, industry, connection type, and additional criteria

In addition to identifying alumni connections via the [Chicago Harris Facebook](#) page, connect with and follow members of the [Chicago Harris](#) community on Twitter.

HarrisLink

The [HarrisLink](#) database contains more than 3,400 organizations and 3,600 viewable contacts to aid in your industry research efforts. In addition to identifying contacts by organization, use the “Contact Directory” to search by job title, location, industry, employer, and contact type. You can also tag key contacts under the “Favorite Contacts” tab.

Sample Request

Once you have identified individuals to approach for an informational interview, you will need to request a brief meeting or phone call. You might consider using the template below to assist in drafting your request.

Subject Line: Chicago Harris student seeking informational interview

Note: Your subject line will vary depending on your target audience

Dear [Name of Contact]:

My name is [Your Name], and I am a first-year student at the Harris School of Public Policy. I identified your name through the UChicago Alumni Directory and am writing to request an informational interview with you to learn more about your work [at ABC organization and/or in industry of interest.]

I am very interested in working in [policy area] and would be delighted to learn more about your background and expertise in [try to identify examples of the individual's areas of expertise through company websites, LinkedIn, a Google search, etc.] At your convenience, please let me know if you might be available to meet over coffee or to talk by phone for 15-20 minutes. Thank you for considering my request, and I look forward to hearing from you at your earliest convenience.

Sincerely,

[Your Name]

Scheduling the Interview

If you do not receive a response after your initial follow up, send a follow-up message one week later. (A gentle reminder is usually welcome, as people often intend to respond to messages but may become distracted by work/life events.)

Sample Follow-up Email

Note: Forward your initial request below your follow-up email for the contact's reference.

Dear [Name of Contact]:

I hope you are well, and I am writing to follow-up on my initial request for an informational interview with you. I would very much appreciate the opportunity to learn about your background in [insert area of expertise], and welcome the opportunity to introduce ourselves at a time convenient for you. Thank you again for your consideration, and have a wonderful day.

Sincerely,

[Your Name]

If you still do not receive a response, move on to the next contact on your list; make a note to revisit unresponsive contacts at a later date (e.g., four to six months). If the individual is receptive to your request, accommodate his/her schedule and meeting preferences. Provide a range of times and dates, and inquire on his/her preference to meet in person or by phone. (Remember, the interviewee is doing you a favor, and people who are successful in their work are often pressed for time, so be as flexible as you can.)

Conducting an effective Informational interview

It is imperative to do your homework to make the most of your time together. Revisit the tools you used to secure the appointment (LinkedIn, personal networks, organizational websites, etc.) to research industry trends affecting the contact's field. Additionally, you might establish a Google news alert to remain aware of recent developments related to the interviewee's organization. Use these resources, in conjunction with information on his/her background and current position, to devise a list of thoughtful, intuitive questions for the interview.

Sample Questions

1. I saw on your LinkedIn profile that you have experience in [demonstrate your research by referencing industries, types of positions, and/or organizations.] Can you tell me how these experiences led you to your current position?
2. What are the most rewarding aspects of your work? The most challenging?
3. What advice do you have for someone hoping to work in your field or type of position?
4. What professional and academic experiences are beneficial in your line of work?
5. What are the most important skills someone needs to succeed in your position?
6. Please describe the culture of your organization and/or work environment.
7. Is there a typical career path leading to [type of position] in [specific industry or organization]? If so, can you please describe that path and the qualifications typically required of those positions?
8. I recently read about [industry trend/recent development affecting his/her company]. Is this indicative of the key challenges/opportunities facing your company and/or industry today?
9. How do you envision your industry changing over the next 10 years?
10. Do you subscribe to particular periodicals to remain aware of developments in your field?
11. Can you recommend any professional or trade associations that may be beneficial for me to join?
12. I noticed on your company profile that you are responsible for/working on [insert job responsibilities or specific projects]. Can you tell me more about these responsibilities and projects?
13. How has [accomplishment or current project] differed from your expectations? What have been the greatest moments and biggest challenges?
14. What type of position(s) or organization(s) would you advise someone particularly skilled in (fill in the blank, e.g.: quantitative analysis, grant writing, project management, advocacy, etc.) to investigate?
15. What are the types of jobs that exist for someone with my qualifications in your organization and in the industry in general?
16. What is differentiating about your company?
17. This conversation has been extremely helpful and interesting. As I move forward, I'd love to gain additional data points related to [industry/field of interest/organization] in order to get a fuller sense of whether it might be the right path for me to pursue. With that goal in mind, is there anyone with similar experience you might also recommend I speak with?

Tip: Always ask your contact to introduce you to 1-2 additional people. However, phrase your request in a thoughtful manner, such as "I would like to gain as many data points as possible, as everyone has different experiences." (This approach avoids implying in any way that you did not value the interviewee's perspectives.)

Personal Preparation

It is also very important to prepare clear, crisp, and concise answers to questions the interviewee is likely to ask, such as:

1. What did you do before graduate school?
2. Why did you decide to pursue a graduate degree in public policy?
3. What are you hoping to do after graduate school?
4. What is it about [job/industry of the person you're meeting with] that you think you would like?

(If the industry is not immediately policy-related, this question might be phrased as, "Given that you are studying policy, why do you want to go into [job/industry of the person with whom you are talking]?")

Having thoughtful—but concise—answers to these questions helps the interviewee help you!

Execution

Approach each interview as a business appointment, and conduct yourself in a professional manner. Remember, however, that it is just as important to build a connection. (If the other person likes you, they will want to help you; if they don't, they won't!)

Adjust your tone to the context of the conversation. For example, if you are meeting over coffee with a senior-level professional, it is appropriate to use more formal language. If you are sharing a beer with a recent alumnus, it may be more appropriate to use more informal language. In either case, always maintain a professional and polite demeanor.

Arrive several minutes early, dressed in business or business casual attire. Assure you know the correct pronunciation of the person's name and the title of his/her position. A limited amount of note-taking is justified, provided that your contact is agreeable and you do not interrupt the communication flow. It is also very important to respect your contact's time by adhering to the agreed upon meeting length. (The interviewee can always indicate that s/he is open to continuing the discussion.)

Remember: Be nice, genuine, and enthusiastic! It is very important for the other person to like you!

Post-Interview Within 24-48 Hours:

1. Summarize a brief outline of the topics covered to ensure you remember important points. Use an "Employer Tracking Spreadsheet" to assist in organizing and tracking your new connections.

Tip: Remember—and make a note about—a fun fact about the person you are meeting. Perhaps he or she completed undergrad at Wisconsin and is a Badgers football fanatic or was recently married, had a baby, bought a home, etc.

2. Important: Send a personalized thank you note, highlighting helpful information you gained from your time together. A sample thank you might read:

Dear [Contact's Name],

Thank you for [reference your interaction]. I particularly enjoyed learning about [insert key topics covered in your conversation] and greatly appreciate all your time and support. As you suggested, I will be reaching out to [insert name of contact recommended in appointment], and it would be great to have his/her contact information. Thank you so much for the opportunity to meet with you, and [insert personal note, such as "I hope you enjoy a wonderful holiday season in your new home."]

Sincerely,

[Your Name]

Maintain the Connection

1. Follow up within one week. If you indicated that you would send an article or contact someone, do so.
 2. Continue to cultivate relationships by: sending articles related your contacts' personal interests; forging connections and introductions for professionals to serve as resources to one another; and/or extending invitations to upcoming events.
 3. Report back to your contacts if you have followed up on their suggestions.
- Tip: Combining a thoughtful and intelligent update with one informal/personal comment demonstrates that you really care about the person. Leverage the fun facts you jotted down to establish a genuine connection with the person. Make a reference to the Wisconsin football team's record, ask whether the baby has learned to walk, etc.

Remember: Building strong rapport creates a subtle sense that you have an ongoing, reciprocal relationship, rather than a series of random, transactional interactions. These efforts will increase the likelihood that your contacts will offer assistance when you are ready for the next step in the job search process.

Sources:

- <http://jobsearch.about.com/cs/infointerviews/a/infointerview.htm>
- <http://shiftingcareers.blogs.nytimes.com/2008/01/29/mastering-the-informational-interview/>