

INFORMATIONAL INTERVIEW TEMPLATE

(Used with permission --from the "Job Developer's Handbook: Practical Tactics for Customized Employment," by Cary Griffin, David Hammis, and Tammara Geary, Brookes Publishing, 2007)

Informational interviewing is a great way to develop work experiences, build a job placement network, to discover new tasks and jobs of interest to the employment seeker, to introduce yourself and your organization to employers, and to build the database that all of us rely on for employment ideas when beginning a job search with someone.

Special note: Informational interviews are a critical element during Discovering Personal Genius (DPG) when information for the vocational profile and not a job, is being sought. This is when it should be made clear to the host employer that the mission is truly to gather information about the business, its related tasks, and its relevance to the employment seeker. Once job development commences, the employment specialist using informational interviews to go where the career makes sense, uses the interview in the same way (i.e. looking for a vocational match of interests, tasks, and skills). However, upon recognizing that a company does indeed match the individual's vocational profile, the employment specialist should state clearly that while this began as an exploration, there does seem to be a job match. Then, a job can be pursued without it seeming that the employer was tricked into the conversation. Generally, the realization of a match comes after several informational interviews in a variety of companies, and so the follow up is usually straightforward, with a call or a scheduled meeting with the employer to discuss interest in hiring.

The Process

Getting an appointment for an informational interview is usually much easier than setting up a job development meeting. A casual conversation with a prospective employer at the monthly Chamber of Commerce "Business After Hours" social or at a service club meeting (e.g. Kiwanis, Rotary, Lions, et al.) can lead to a probe such as, "I've never seen your operation before, would you mind if I called you to set up a time for a tour and a bit of a chat? I am working on a career plan with a young woman right now who has an interest in your industry, perhaps you could give her some career advice and suggest her next steps?" Most folks love to talk about their business and since you are not pressing them, a tour is considered low-risk. Make sure to follow-up soon, before the conversation is forgotten, and to illustrate your commitment.

Generally a request for fifteen to thirty minutes works well because it signals respect for the person's time, and it indicates that you are busy as well. Experience shows that fifteen minutes always becomes thirty to sixty minutes once the discussion and tour begins.

On-site, the employment specialist and job seeker are seeking information about the company, its hiring practices, what opportunities exist to create or carve jobs, and getting insights into the company culture. The general format of an informational interview is:

1. Brief Discussion prompted by the employment specialist asking something to effect of: “Before we tour, can you tell us a bit about the history of the business, the products and services, and how the business is evolving?” And, “Tell us how you got into this line of work.” People want to know that you care, so give them a chance to talk about themselves.
2. Tour, with questions asked by the job seeker and the employment specialist at appropriate times and of various people performing the many tasks along the way.
3. Wrap-up by thanking the person for their time, and ask for any advice they have for the career plan, other businesses they that should be visited (ask for a referral!), etc. Make your exit and promise to stay in touch.

Throughout the process, opportunities to ask questions conversationally exist. Since this is not a job development visit, do not press someone for a job. That comes later in the relationship. For now, the tour is answering questions about the varying tasks and duties people perform, the values and culture of the company, and needs the business has that your organization or workers can address.

The tour provides an opportunity to witness, for instance, the level of natural support that may be available to the job seeker if hired. Keen observation reveals whether co-workers and supervisors help each other out during a typical day; it reveals who does the training and how an employment specialist might structure the initiation period so that the employer takes significant responsibility for supervision and training right from the start; it reveals what is valued on the worksite, such as muscle, brains, humor, attendance, speed, quality or other worker traits. These are important considerations, of course, when designing a job match that minimizes on-site training and consultation.

The interviewing process, as well, reveals opportunities or issues if the place of employment does not provide a good working environment. Some standard questions for an informational interview, again, asked in a conversational and not an interrogative tone, include:

1. Where do you find or recruit employees? (This is asked to create an opportunity to discuss the service you provide).
2. How are people trained in their jobs? (This gives information about natural training means and methods that can be integrated into a job match and training plan, especially one that recognizes that in most cases business already trains its employees and that the support you offer is customizing their training, not replacing it).
3. What are the prerequisites for working here? (This points out the various qualifications, certifications, etc., that might be needed).

4. How or where do your employees gain the experience required to work here? (Another question that gets at qualifications and that seeks the advice of the “expert.” This also gives the employment specialist and job seeker a list of other similar companies).
5. What personal characteristics do you look for in employees? (This gives insight into the kind of candidate the employer seeks; provides information on what to highlight in a resume or interview; and gives a glimpse inside the culture of the company regarding the most valued skills and attributes).
6. When employees leave, what other industries or businesses do they go to? (This starts getting at issues of staff turnover, which might be an indicator of a great place to work in the case where no one leaves, to an indication of poor management in the case where there is high turnover. It also provides the job developer with information on related industries and possible opportunities for someone interested in similar work).
7. What are the pay and benefit rates?
8. What are the work hours? Is there shift work? Does the company allow for flex time or other job accommodations? (This gives the employment specialist insight into the flexibility of management and the company’s policies on work hours and expected work effort).
9. What impact is technology having on the industry? (This is a common concern for most businesses today and provides an opportunity to explore using Resource Ownership strategies to propose a job for someone who can use or bring with them a piece of essential technology).
10. What are the current forces for change in this industry? (This question often leads to a lively discussion of how the market is changing, how personnel preparation and training is evolving, and how the competitive market is adapting).

All these questions and their answers breed additional questions and discussion points that provide opportunities to solve labor problems or to innovate in the face of emerging trends in hiring. Informational interviews are a low-tech, high-touch option that provides insight into the inner workings of business. Knowing what goes on inside a company gives the employment specialist and the job seeker an added advantage when creating employment or responding to an employer need.