



**INFORMATIONAL INTERVIEWS:
A GUIDE FOR DISCOVERY & JOB DEVELOPMENT**

Cary Griffin, Senior Partner

Informational interviewing is an effective means of developing work experience settings, building a job placement network, discovering new types of jobs, introducing employment seekers, yourself, and your services to employers, and building the database of employment ideas. Informational interviews are also, of course, vital for refining emerging Vocational Themes during the Discovering Personal Genius (DPG) process, and critical for gaining insight into the motivations and experiences of others with similar themes to the employment seeker being served.

In the Customized Employment process, Informational Interviews are generally used in two distinct situations:

1. During Discovery: *Getting to know* the owner or manager and having a discussion about them. This is not a job development meeting; it's the opportunity to learn more about the work people with similar Vocational Themes do in the local community. This is also where we ask for "advice" for an individual's career plan from the experienced business owner or manager.
2. During Job Development: Making clear that the employment seeker appears to match the core work and culture of the business, emphasizing the possibility of creating or restructuring tasks that bring greater efficiency and quality to the company and its customers.

Getting an appointment for an informational interview during Discovery is usually easier than setting up a job development meeting. GHA recommends using your Community

Action Team (CAT), Active Employer Council (AEC) or even your local Business Leadership Network (BLN) to “warm up” the business’ manager or owner (*see the section on Active Employer Councils*). Introduce the employment seeker to whatever business roundtable group your agency utilizes and ask the members to assist with connections to business people in their supply and customer chains who have Vocational Themes similar to that employment seeker. Sometimes less effective, but just as legitimate, is 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.) that prompts 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 chat and maybe a brief tour?” Most folks love to talk about their business and since you are not pressing them, setting up a phone call is considered low-risk. Make sure to follow-up soon, before the conversation is forgotten, and to illustrate commitment.

Generally a request for a twenty to thirty minute discussion works well because it signals respect for the person’s time, and it indicates that you are busy as well. In our experience, twenty minutes always becomes sixty minutes once the discussion begins. And, just as we use Smooth Listening in Discovery, its impact is substantial during Info Interviews. During the Discovery phase of Info Interviews remember that job developing is not the point; gathering information that refines Vocational Themes, exposing employment seekers to an array of jobs and work settings, fostering prospective work experience options, and building the database of supply chains and local businesses is the purpose.

Getting a tour is secondary to this first Informational Interview. During Discovery we seek to learn from the business owner’s experience. Ask for a tour and that’s all you are likely to get. Instead, when setting up the interview, ask specifically for twenty minutes of “seat time” to sit and discuss the owner’s career and to get “advice” from the person by asking: “if you were starting out fresh, what steps would you recommend for building a career in this field?” Explain that this information will assist in developing a career plan for the individual with a disability. Make certain you and the job seeker have rehearsed asking a few questions, but make the interview about the owner or manager; show them

they are assisting. Business people tell us they want to help, but short of hiring, they do not always know how. Reinforce that this interview (and subsequent tour) helps refine the career plan. This visit is not for job development. However, should a likely match become obvious after Discovery, a return visit may be considered.

On-site, the employment seeker and the employment specialist are seeking information about the owner or manager first and foremost. Again, during Discovery the process of refining Vocational Themes and matching related skills, tasks and conditions of employment to real work settings is the reason for this research. The individual interviewed should be the owner or upper level manager because the business most likely reflects their themes, skills and conditions of employment. Interviewing the manager of Human Resources is not the aim, and it signals the likelihood the company is too large and bureaucratic for customizing work.

The best method for conducting an interview, whether during Discovery or job development is to make certain the meeting is structured around a discussion with the owner/manager; that seat time in a quiet place in the business precedes any tour, and that for the Discovery period, information and advice is sought on the career plan. During job development, however, the point of the interview is discussing the possibility of a job match.

Throughout the process, find answers whenever possible through conversational exchange rather than a checklist of questions. Discovery is not job development; do not press for a job. That comes later in the relationship. For now, the interview and tour are answering questions about the varying tasks and duties people perform, the values and culture of the company, and needs the business has that the employment seeker can address.

While a more in-depth tour and job analysis occurs during the job development phase, it is essential to pay attention during initial Informational Interviews and tours. The tour provides an opportunity to witness, for instance, the level of natural support that may be

available to someone with a disability. 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. (*See the section on Unmet Employer Needs for more information*).

The Informational Interviewing process, as well, reveals opportunities or red flags 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 in case you now need to refer to the Workforce system if they do all the hiring searches for this particular employer; to identify your competition; and 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 sculpted 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 job developer 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 employment seeker and 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 flextime or other job accommodations? (This gives 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 for using Resource Ownership strategies to propose a job for someone who can use or bring with them a piece of essential technology that can be purchased through a Social Security PASS Plan or through Vocational Rehabilitation).

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 add-on 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 in a company gives the employment seeker and employment specialist added advantage when creating employment or responding to an employer need.