

INFORMATIONAL INTERVIEWING

Handout Series #5

Informational interviews provide a way to explore different careers and discover jobs that are not advertised. Informational interviewing helps you build your professional relationships and gather information. Take note that informational interviewing is not job interviewing. The people with whom you conduct informational interviews will not have a job to offer; rather they will supply their time, expertise and knowledge of their practice area, and the names of other people for you to contact.

STEP ONE: WRITE TO YOUR CONTACTS

Write a brief letter which states your connection with the contact (e.g., "I am a fellow graduate of Santa Clara University;" "Mary Smith of Jones, Day recommended that I contact you;" etc.). The first paragraph should mention that you are a current student of McGeorge School of Law and state your interest (e.g., working in San Francisco, becoming an intellectual property attorney, etc.). In the next paragraph, state that you are writing to the contact because you are aware of his or her knowledge in your particular area of interest or geographic location. Then request a brief informational interview (20 minutes or so) at his or her convenience, to discuss the legal market that interests you, the contact's background, and his or her perspective on your career goals. Close your letter by stating that you will call him or her within a week to arrange a meeting. It is best not to include a resume. Including a resume may give your contact the impression that your request is just a veiled request for a job interview and s/he may be unwilling to meet with you. If you do choose to enclose a resume, state that you are providing it for informational purposes only. A sample of a letter requesting an informational interview is attached.

If you are setting up a phone interview, have a script prepared. Make it clear that you are only seeking information and not soliciting a job. Be friendly and courteous, especially to staff, as they may be able to help you make contact with the attorney. Have a list of questions prepared in case the contact is unable to meet with you but is willing to speak over the phone.

Sample Phone/E-mail Script for Requesting an Informational Interview

Hello my name is _____. I was given your name and number by [state name of referral] who suggested I contact you since you have information/expertise [state field of knowledge].

I am a [state your class year] at McGeorge:

- interested in [litigation, corporate, labor law, ect.] and I understand you practice in this area.
- researching career options in _____.
- [optional] I have a background in/I am interested in _____ because of [give short, concise description of background or accomplishment].

Would you have 10-15 minutes to meet with me to discuss:

- your area of law, your firm
- legal trends, hot areas of practice
- career planning advice, resume and cover letters, job interview techniques.

STEP TWO: FOLLOW-UP ON YOUR LETTER

Call your contact about a week after sending the letter. Use your most professional, affirmative and articulate manner on the phone. If you are nervous about making the phone call and think you might stammer or forget what you want to say, write a script before the call or use the one provided. Even if you do not use the script, you may feel more comfortable just having it nearby. It is also crucial that you are polite, personable and reasonable. These rules especially apply when speaking to the receptionist or secretary. Many secretaries can influence their bosses to meet with you by reporting, "This person was really nice and would like to see you." On the other hand, many secretaries can also destroy someone's chances of a meeting by saying "This person was rude and pushy; don't waste your time."

Once you get through to the contact, remind him or her of your letter and your desire to arrange a meeting with him or her. If the contact says, "We don't have any openings here and I don't know of any anywhere else," respond with, "That's okay. As I wrote in my letter, I was just hoping to meet with you briefly to discuss the San Francisco legal market." Stress that you are looking to this person for information only and not looking to be hired.

STEP THREE: DON'T WORRY ABOUT THE WORD "NO"

Many people will grant you a meeting if you approach them in the manner described above. If on the phone, the answer is no, ask if the contact has a few minutes to answer questions over the phone or via e-mail. Regardless of the outcome, thank the contact for his/her time. Be friendly and courteous, you never know if you'll cross paths again. Be aware, however, that some

people will feel that they are too swamped with work or may think they really don't have much to tell you or may just not want to help you out. It won't happen often, but you need to be ready for the possibility that not everybody is going to say yes. If your contact is adamant about not seeing you for an informational interview, respect his or her decision. Thank your contact for his or her time and move on to the next person to whom you wrote. Do not take such a rejection personally or use it as an excuse not to contact others for informational interviews.

STEP FOUR: PREPARE FOR THE MEETING

Research the individual with whom you are meeting and the individual's organization. You can research by consulting Martindale-Hubbell, going on-line on WESTLAW, LEXIS or the Internet, and reading the firm's brochure or resume. Since you are meeting for informational purposes, it is not necessary to research quite as extensively as you need to for a job interview.

Prepare questions to ask at the informational interview. You are the one initiating the meeting and you should be the one to control it. Approach the interview as though you were a journalist. Figure out what it is you want and need to know and formulate open-ended questions which will get your contact talking. Some areas to cover:

Contact's Career:

- How did you develop an interest in this field?
- What was your career path leading to your current position?
- What methods did you utilize to conduct a job search while you were in law school or as a recent graduate?
- What do you like best/least about your work?
- What is a typical work day like for you?
- What are the primary qualities/skills/knowledge considered in hiring a candidate within this field/for this type of position?
- What obligations does this type of practice/work environment place on life outside work?
- What trade publications do you read?
- What professional organizations do you belong to?

The Job Market:

- What are the future prospects and growth in this field?
- What is the state of the legal job market in this geographic area?
- Are there other job markets in which this field of law is growing?

Contact's Organization/Firm:

- What is the structure of your firm?
- Do you supervise anyone? To whom do you report?
- What are the work performance expectations?
- What opportunities are there for advancement within the organization?
- What are the organization's plans for the future?
- What are the advantages/disadvantages of practicing in this type of organization?

Your Job Search:

- Can you provide suggestions on improving my resume?
interviewing strategies?
pursuing other future education or experience to become more marketable?
- What advice would you give a candidate seeking a position in this field?
- What is the best way to find about job openings on this field?
- Can you suggest other practitioners within this field to whom I should speak? May I use your name when contacting them?

STEP FIVE: CONDUCTING THE INFORMATIONAL INTERVIEW

You should dress for the interview as you would for a job interview. Wear professional, clean, pressed clothes and polished shoes and err on the side of conservatism. Remember that one of the goals of the interview is to have your contact refer you to other colleagues; s/he will be more apt to do so if s/he perceives you in appropriate business attire.

To the interview, bring your research (to review, if you have to wait for your contact), your list of questions, and a copy of your resume. Try to arrive about five minutes early and treat everyone you meet professionally and courteously. When your contact comes out to meet you, greet him or her with a handshake and thank him or her for taking the time to meet with you.

Remember that you are leading the interview: be conscious and considerate of your contact's time. Get out your list of questions and dive in. Your main objective during the meetings is to gather information, however, it is perfectly appropriate for you to mention your education, job experience, and enthusiasm about entering the contact person's field. If it seems appropriate, you can also obtain advice concerning your resume and ideas for related fields or jobs in which you might also be interested.

If you impress your contact and they hear of an opening elsewhere, they may pass on your name. Moreover, if you impress the contact and an opening exists in his or her own organization, s/he will be more willing to let the person in charge of hiring know about you. Do not, however, ask if there is an opening at the contact's organization; if one exists and if the contact is impressed by you, s/he will let you know about the opening.

Do not leave the interview without asking your contact if there is anyone else with whom you should speak. If you sense that your contact is having trouble thinking of someone, you can gracefully take the pressure off by saying something like, "I understand if I've put you on the spot. Would you mind scanning your address book or Rolodex over the next day or so? I'll call you to see if you've found anyone you think I should talk to." If your contact recommends someone, ask if you can use your contact's name when writing to that person. Then, start the process over from Step One!

STEP SIX: THANK YOUR CONTACTS AND KEEP THEM INFORMED

After the informational interview, send a thank you note to your contact mentioning how your meeting was helpful to you. If your contact gave you the names of other people to contact, thank him or her again and explain how you are following-up with these people.

Once you obtain a position, it is also a good idea to write a brief note to each of your contacts. Let them know that all turned out well and give them some credit for it. Thank them for the assistance they gave you in your job search and inform them of your new job. Your contacts will appreciate the professional courtesy. They will know that their advice and guidance benefitted you and they will be more apt to help you and others who seek their help in the future.

RESOURCES ON NETWORKING AND INFORMATIONAL INTERVIEWING

The 110 Biggest Mistakes Job Hunters Make, by Richard L. Herman and Linda P. Sutherland; Federal Reports, Washington DC; 1992.

Guerilla Tactics for Getting the Legal Job of Your Dreams, by Kimm Alayne Walton, Harcourt Brace, Chicago, IL; 1995.

It's Who You Know: Career Strategies for Making Effective Personal Contacts, by Cynthia Chin-Lee, Pfeiffer & Company, San Diego, CA; 1999.

Jobs for Lawyers, by Hillary Jane Mantis and Kathleen Brady, Impact Publications, Manassas, VA; 1996.

Knock 'Em Dead: The Ultimate Job Seeker's Handbook, by Martin Yate, Bob Adams, Inc., Holbrook, MA; 1994.

[SAMPLE LETTER OF INTEREST: In this letter, the student seeks an informational interview rather than a job.]

3434 Ivy Drive
Sacramento, CA 98765

January 14, 2006

George T. Moreno, Esq.
Hayton & Lee
3535 Hanson Street
Los Angeles, CA 91403

Dear Mr. Moreno:

I am a first-year student at the University of the Pacific, McGeorge School of Law, pursuing a Government Affairs Certificate in addition to my law degree. I was intrigued by your article in the August 2005 edition of the *California Journal* discussing the constitutional and policy issues involved with campaign finance in California. I am interested in learning more about political law, and I would appreciate the opportunity to get a practitioner's perspective on how I might best prepare for a career in this practice area.

Would you be available for a brief (15-20 minute) meeting to tell me about your background and how you got started in political law? I would be interested to know what publications you read to stay on top of campaign, election, and political issues. I would also appreciate your suggestions about what summer work and elective courses I should pursue in the next two years.

I will call to see if you are available for a brief meeting. Thank you for your time and attention. I hope to have the opportunity to meet you soon.

Sincerely,

- your signature --

Josefina M. Martinez

[NOTE: Generally, you should not include your resume in a letter of interest; however, you can bring it with you to an informational interview. If asked about it by the mentor, you can provide a copy.]