

## **Informational Interview**

### **(Sample Practicum Assignment)**

The purpose of the informational interview is to encourage you to gather more information about a particular profession, a person, or a particular organization. It is an opportunity to approach a professional in order to ask specific questions about such things as skills needed to enter a field, educational requirements of a given profession, or the types of responsibilities that characterize a given job classification. It is also a valuable networking opportunity.

#### **Whom should I interview?**

First, you are required to interview AT LEAST one person. If you have more than one person in mind to interview, we encourage you to include others in your portfolio.

In order to fulfill this requirement, you need to interview someone other than your direct practicum supervisor. You may even want to interview someone in your field who is outside your organization, or outside your field for purposes of comparison. Before choosing the actual individual you would like to interview, decided what you want to get out of the interview. Do you want to find out what a person with a Bachelor of Arts degree in political science can do? Are you interested in the actual job duties of a public accountant? What are the basic skills expected for an entry level position in international affairs? How important is a firm background in the sciences in order to enter a position in environmental research? Do you really want to be a lawyer? How competitive is the field of broadcast journalism? These are just a few examples.

#### **How should I arrange the interview?**

The informational interview is one in which you are seeking career information directly from professionals within your field of interest. If you call to schedule a meeting, make sure you cover three points: a personal introduction, your purpose for seeking an appointment, and arranging a mutually convenient time. It might help you to calm your nerves if you write a script of what you are going to say over the phone. If you are calling as a result of a referral, mention that person early in the conversation and, if it is to your benefit, mention your relationship to that individual. Request only 20-30 minutes of the person's time.

*Example:* "Hello Mr. Smith, my name is Colleen Jones. I am a student at Hones State University majoring in political science. I am entering this semester at X through an Interdepartmental Studies practicum. While I am here in Des Moines, I am trying to make some career decisions. I thought that by speaking with you, I could obtain first-hand information about careers in finance. Could we arrange for a brief appointment at your convenience?"

*Example:* "Ms. Allison Ray suggested that I contact you because I am contemplating making a move into International Banking and I'd like to find out more about your program. I understand that, in fact, you are planning to expand your operations."

If your first contact is to be by letter, again, start with a personal introduction and your reason for wanting the appointment. Type all letters in business format and correct all errors. Use the spellchecker on your computer and read it out loud to a friend to catch grammatical errors. In the last paragraph, indicate that you will be calling his/her office on a specific date to arrange for a convenient appointment time. Keep a copy of the letter.

### **Identifying a Person to Interview**

A part of the rationale for conducting an informational interview is to encourage the student to develop a network of contacts who could assist the student in the current and future achievement of one's learning objectives. Students are encouraged to conduct the first interview within the first 3-5 weeks of their practicum, rather than waiting toward the end, since one interview could lead to others that may be as productive, if not more so.

To identify prospective interviewees, ask your agency supervisor or simply read the daily newspaper. (You would be surprised by how many newsmakers are more than willing to meet with students.) Professional associates are also excellent sources for making contacts, as are alumni associations. You may have to make cold calls for contact persons. Even other interns working in similar organizations may have suggestions.

### **What should the report of my informational interview include?**

- The reason for selecting the individual you chose to interview
- An overview of the questions you asked
- A summary of the information you received
- A summary of what you learned as a result of this interview
- A reflection of what you got out of this exercise
- A summary of follow-up activities the person you interviewed suggested

### **What format should I use to include the informational interview in my portfolio?**

Please follow the instructions of your program supervisor concerning the format of this assignment.

### **What are some of the criteria used to evaluate the informational interview?**

- Is the interview report completed in a well-organized and professional manner, with a minimum of grammatical and spelling errors?
- Does the report:
  - Include the reason for selecting the individual chosen to be interviewed?
  - Include an overview of the questions asked?
  - Include a recap of the information received in the interview?
  - Include a description of what the student learned from the interview?
  - Sufficiently cover what is otherwise asked of the student?
  - Indicate that the student took the interview seriously and was well prepared?
- Did the student interview someone relevant to his/her area of interest who is not his/her supervisor?
- Did the student demonstrate that he/she adequately processed the information and related it to his/her learning goals?

## **Tips for a Successful Interview**

- Be prepared; above all, be relaxed and be yourself
- Practice with a friend
- Research the agency/organization of the interviewee
- Prepare a folder to include questions
- Present your business card or résumé
- Have clear, concise, and reasonable questions
- Be natural; appear prepared but not rehearsed
- Don't talk too much; let the interviewee do most of the talking
- Don't ask personal questions
- If the interviewee is not too talkative, ask him/her about their "best" experiences or to give their opinion about relevant topics in the field
- Thank the interviewee for his/her time
- Take time immediately after the interview to reflect upon the experience
- Write a short thank you note or e-mail within one day

## **Conducting the Informational Interview**

Dress appropriately and be prompt. Plan your questions in advance because you are the interviewer and you should be prepared to initiate the conversation. Unless the individual seems prepared to give you more time, keep the interview under thirty minutes. As you are closing, ask for referrals of the individuals or organizations. You should NOT try to initiate a conversation about specific job vacancies.

## **Questions**

- Types of positions most often found in that career field or organization
- General skills needed to perform responsibilities
- Specific skills needed to do the job
- Recommendations for training or educations required to perform this kind of work
- Negative aspects of the field
- Typical entry position in the field
- What is the outlook for entry-level professionals?
- Alternative methods to gain entrance to the field (e.g. part-time, volunteer)
- What is the future of this field in the terms of new and expanding opportunities?
- What other kinds of positions are available to a person with similar background?
- Other information that may be helpful; critique of résumé, job-seeking tactics, names of other professionals in the field
- Major challenges of the organization
- Philosophy of the organization and types of training available
- Descriptions of the various positions he or she has held between entry and present
- Description of the individual's present job—both job description and what is done beyond the job description
- From entry level to top management, what would be the typical career path?

After each interview, send a thank you note and keep them posted on your progress.

