Getting Started

Begin with family members, friends, social contacts, previous work contacts, and recreational contacts. Don’t forget service contacts (your doctor, insurance agent etc.), as well as contacts via professional affiliations, religious affiliations, and volunteer organizations and activities. Talk to classmates, see if they have any connections they are willing to make. Don’t prejudge or exclude people from your list of initial contacts. Write down everyone you can think of and fine tune your list later.

Talk to People

When you have decided whom you want to contact on your preliminary list, let them know you are looking for help, not a job. When you are talking to family, friends, faculty or anyone else you feel comfortable with, all you have to do is tell them what you are looking for:

*I’m interested in working for a medical insurance office in Cleveland and would like to learn more about what it’s really like. Do you know anyone working in a medical insurance company? In Cleveland? Who might have some advice for me?*

If the answer is “Yes,” ask if they can call and introduce you, or if you can use their name when you call. If the answer is “No,” ask them to please let you know if they do think of a referral. (Don’t hesitate to take the conversation further by asking more questions like those listed below.) Most people want to be helpful to others, and if they know you want advice, not a job, they are usually happy to talk to you.

*Informational interviewing is not interviewing for a job. It is a method of exploring career options and discovering opportunities that are not publicly advertised.*

Write a Letter

In general, people feel most comfortable writing to their contact to request an appointment for an informational interview. This gives the contact person a point of reference for your later phone call/meeting and will help you to be perceived as businesslike and professional.

You can send your letter via regular mail or via email. If you contact people by email, you must maintain the same high standards of grammar and punctuation as you would in any business correspondence. Just because the medium is more informal does not mean that the message should be as well.

Your letter should tell the person:

- Who you are
- Where you got their name
- What you want
- When you will call or how they can reach you if that is their preference
- Thank you
If you decide to include a resume, be sure to include some language in your letter which says something like, *To give you a bit more information about my background before our meeting, I've attached my resume.* If you do not send a resume, you should write a slightly longer letter which includes a little more information about you.

**Call Directly**

If you would like to call without sending a letter, you will be making essentially the same request, but will try to find out:

- If they are free to talk now
- When you could call them again
- When you could meet with them
- Where they would like to meet

You would usually benefit from a meeting at their office where information for additional contacts is readily available.

Note that when you call to arrange an informational interview, you need to be prepared to deal with some additional issues like:

- The person who answers the phone
- The person who screens your contact’s calls
- Leaving a message
- Explaining your request
- What to say to someone who is busy or brusque
- Your response to being turned down
- What to say when someone says they’ll see you

While you may want to write out your telephone script, remember that this is simply a normal conversation. Always treat the person who answers the phone with respect and care. Be polite, considerate and clear about what you want.

When setting up the appointment, bear in mind that you are asking busy people to give up time to talk to you; their convenience, not yours, should be paramount. So, be as flexible as you reasonably can be as to time/date/location of the meeting. Also, be prepared for interruptions and last-minute rescheduling.

**How to Conduct the Interview & Sample Questions**

If you are meeting in person, dress as you would for a job interview (but remember, you are asking for advice, not a job). Be prompt. Observe as well as listen. Be prepared with open ended questions such as:

- What are some of the particular advantages and disadvantages of this kind of work (or company)?
- Could you tell me what a “typical” day is like for you?
- What do you like about your work?
- Are there things you dislike about your work?
• Is there any sort of path in terms of course selection that is particularly important in your work?
• Are there particular skills or personality traits that you think are needed in your work?
• What would you see as the best way to get the skills and experience to best qualify me for this kind of work?
• What do you suggest as the best way for someone with my experience to approach prospective employers?
• How should someone with my lack of experience approach prospective employers?
• How did you go about finding this job?
• Would you suggest any ways in which I could improve the content or appearance of my resume?
• Do you think there are things on my resume that prospective employers might object to?
• Can you think of anyone else that I should talk to? Would you mind if I used your name when I contact him/her?

You are in the “driver's seat” in this interview, so you need to keep the conversation going and be ready with the next question. As the interview proceeds, you may find that you need to re-focus, if the interviewer does not want to go in the direction in which you would like to go. Also, if this meeting becomes a job interview, you may have to switch gears and field more traditional interview questions. So, make sure to bring a copy of your resume, if you didn’t send it initially, and practice answering typical job interview questions before the meeting. Don’t be afraid to arrange for another interview if necessary to continue with the job interview.

**Follow-up**

Be sure to send a thank you letter as promptly as possible. If applicable mention your desire to keep in contact, especially if they gave you a name of someone to contact. You’ll want to let them know the progress of the referral they made.

Keep a log of all information interviews. Note the name, contact information, date and the date(s)/nature of all correspondence (including thank you notes) you have with each person. If they are connected to another contact, make note of that as well.