



OCS

**BUILD
YOUR NETWORK**

Undergraduate Resource Series

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08/12

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WHY START NOW?

A network of professional connections can be useful in many ways in your job search and throughout your career to:

- Explore careers.
- Identify resources for informational interviews.
- Obtain information about organizations for which you might want to work.
- Get career advice – Ask people in the world of work about how you might prepare yourself for a certain field or position.
- Find ways to create your own job or internship.
- And, last but not least...

Meeting people in your field of interest is the single MOST EFFECTIVE method of finding a job or internship.

THE BASICS

You significantly increase the probability of getting an interview if you have arrived at an opportunity through your own interpersonal efforts than through other means (such as job postings, company websites, and print or web ads).

You need just a few things to get started:

- an idea of what you want at this point in your career exploration or job search
- a brief personal introduction
- a system to manage contacts
- an interest in learning and an openness to meet new people
- a handshake and a smile
- a few questions to get the conversation going

PUT yourself in places where there will be people who have interests similar to your own, such as...

- Referrals from other people in your network
- Social networking websites such as Facebook
- Professional networking websites such as LinkedIn
- Harvard alumni (“Crimson Compass” database available to Harvard Students and graduates via the Harvard Alumni Association website: www.haa.harvard.edu)
- Alumni from other institutions you have attended
- Academic departments
- Professional organization meetings (try the Associations Unlimited database, available through Harvard Libraries e-Resources)
- Networking groups
- Community organizations, volunteer work

Try to meet new people wherever you go! Getting to know people in your field will give you a better understanding of current issues and trends including what characterizes a successful employee, and can result in a job prospect that did not exist for you before you met them.

ETIQUETTE and GUIDELINES

- Always be **professional, courteous, and considerate**.
- Be **gracious**. Appreciate the time and effort of your contacts. Write a **thank you note** when people take time to meet with you.
- Be **genuine**. Possess a sincere desire to learn. Be honest in asking for advice.
- Be **interested** in the people you meet. Most people enjoy the chance to tell you about their own careers and activities.
- **Stay in touch**. Check in periodically. Update people in your network when you make significant progress in your research or job search.
- **Give back**. Know enough about the people you meet to keep their needs in mind as you continue to meet people. You may be able to pass on ideas, articles, and contacts that will interest them.
- Be well **prepared** for each conversation. When you ask for advice or help with some career research, and you know what you are looking for, it is easy for people to say “yes.”
- **Don't explicitly ask for a job**. Let the contact decide if he or she is willing to pass on job leads to you.
- Do **ask for names** of other people in the field.
- Find a **connection** to make introductions easier.
- **Have faith** that building a professional network will ultimately result in job prospects, and that the job prospects you find will be much more valid and attainable than those that you find through other means.

WHAT IS INFORMATIONAL INTERVIEWING?

In an informational interview you talk with a professional, typically employed in your particular field of interest, to gather career related information and to add to your professional network. It is NOT a job-seeking interview. Instead, you are seeking to answer questions like:

- What is a typical career path in this field?
- In which company/organization would I be happiest?
- Do I have the right background and abilities for the career I am considering?
- How do I get my foot in the door once I have made a decision?
- What would you do differently if you were to do it again?

Unfortunately, people all too often enter the work force without knowing the answers to questions like these. Informational interviewing is a method of career exploration and network building that aims to answer these kinds of questions.

A Mutually Beneficial Process

Building out a network does not come naturally to everyone. There are a great variety of reasons people use to rationalize why they don't need to (or can't) build their professional network as they explore career options, search for a job, or develop their careers. One of the most common misperceptions holding people back is: Surely, I would be wasting their time! Why would they want to talk with ME?

The benefits of informational interviewing:

YOU

- Get insider advice on entering a field; learn whether specific credentials or more practical experience is necessary
- Get first-hand impression of work environment
- Learn about current trends and vocabulary of the field
- Have a professional in the field critique your resume
- Practice presenting yourself in a low-stress situation
- Ask questions that would be inappropriate in a job interview, e.g. salary range
- Gain visibility in the field
- Expand your network of contacts – maybe even develop a mentor
- Build confidence in yourself and your decision to move into the field – OR –
- Learn enough that this field is not for you
- Refine your career options, generate others
- Develop and maintain relationships that may help you in your job search and professional development

THEM

- Enjoy talking about themselves and their job
- Enjoy sharing wisdom and advice
- Giving back – they got started the same way
- Recognize you are a potential new colleague – a professional contact for THEM when you enter field
- May gain valuable information, resources, or contacts from you (now or in the future)
- Increase understanding of what potential employees in your demographic are interested in or looking for
- Facilitate search for good employee (now or in the future).

Allows them to assess your:

- Personal chemistry
- Initiative (sometimes, the only way in!)
- Communication skills
- All with minimal time or \$ investment
- Strengthen professional relationships with colleagues, e.g. by referring you to a colleague who eventually hires you

REMEMBER

Never ask for a job directly.

HOW DO I GET STARTED?

A. Whom Should I Contact?

Draw up a list of potential contacts within your fields of interest. Look for people doing a job you would like to do, in a field you would like to investigate, or working for a company that interests you. Contacts can be people you already know through an internship, job, or community activity, or people you have never met. Obtain names of new contacts through:

- **All the people you already know.** Career counselors, friends, relatives, faculty, House tutors, past and present work associates or supervisors may also be able to refer you to professionals in a variety of fields. Don't be afraid to tell people what you're looking for—you never know who has a great connection. Utilize your LinkedIn network.
- **Alumni/ae Contacts.** Alums have a common bond and often find it quite gratifying to be able to provide assistance to those following in their footsteps. Harvard's Crimson Compass database (available online to Harvard students and alumni/ae through the Harvard Alumni Association website) houses the contact information for alumni who have indicated that they are willing to speak with students about their career paths.
- **Industry directories and trade associations** can help you identify organizations that may interest you. Contacts within these organizations can be professionals in positions that interest you or managers of departments you might enjoy working in. Avoid personnel offices (unless you are considering jobs in human resources!) since you are seeking information, not a job. Call the main switchboard to secure the names/titles of appropriate individuals.
- **Associations Unlimited**, a database of national and local trade associations, may be found through <http://lib.harvard.edu/e-resources/index.html>. Databases like Lexis/Nexis and Factiva (also available through the link above) are also helpful for searching trade journals for mentions of organizations, key people, trends, and events in different fields.

B. How Should I Prepare?

Research: Read career literature, trade publications, company information, and biographical information. Find out as much about the individual, the company, and career field as possible before you meet. It's better to use your expert contact as a resource for specific information rather than the basics. Information directly from your contact's employer is a great place to start.

Questions: Think about the kinds of things you hope to learn, and develop questions that will elicit that information. The kinds of information you might want to discuss may include:

- **A detailed description of the job:** What challenges, rewards, or frustrations have you encountered? How do you typically spend your time on the job? What kinds of decisions do you make?
- **Desirable skills, education, and experience:** required training or experience: What did you do in preparation for entering the field? What courses could I take, skills should I possess, or internship experience might be valuable for me if I decide to enter the field?
- **Career paths and advancement:** What are your career goals? What kinds of opportunities do you see this job preparing you for?

- **Lifestyle implications of the work:** e.g. travel, hours, pressure, flexibility, salary/benefits, family policy, security, etc. It is acceptable (and recommended) to ask about what range of salary you might expect upon entering at a specific level. Do NOT ask how much money the interviewee makes personally.
- **Work environment:** physical setting, people (colleagues and clients), organizational structure and culture -- How does this job fit into the department's/ organization's structure?
- **Current issues in the "industry"** (beyond what you've read): What trends or changes are occurring in your field? Have these changes affected pathways into the industry? If so, in what ways?
- **Ways to get more information:** Journals, professional organizations, names of 3-5 contacts, possible internship opportunities

Be sure to avoid questions that can be answered "Yes" or "No." Open-ended questions (particularly "What" and "How" questions) will allow your contact to respond providing the most information possible.

Write down a list of possible questions or topics before you begin to contact advisors.

C. How Should I Go About Obtaining an Interview?

Start with your least intimidating contacts first. **Write a letter, email, or call:** Call first if (as indicated in the Crimson Compass database) they have specified that they would like to be contacted by phone. Write first if you think the contact would appreciate having a brief introduction and a sense of what you are exploring or if you are not confident about presenting yourself over the phone. (See a sample introductory email.) Remember, even when writing, it is preferable to have a personal conversation either by phone or in person to get the most out of the conversation. Experiment and decide what works best for you.

Explain what you want (NOT a job, just information), suggest a time frame (a particular week?) a particular place (preferably workplace), and suggest a limited amount of time (perhaps 30 minutes). Be prepared to settle graciously for an over-the-phone interview if it is the only alternative, however if a phone interview is suggested, it's worth asking if Skype might be an alternative.

Sample phone introduction:

"Ms. Smith, my name is Emilio Sanchez, and I'm a student in Sociology at Harvard. I got your name from the Harvard Alumni Association Crimson Compass database. I understand that you have been a writer with *The New York Times* since you graduated. I've been reading a lot about the paper on your website and in the trade press. I'd love to hear more about your career path, and perhaps see your office, and was wondering if you would be willing to set up a time to share your experience with me in a brief meeting."

Note: If you call and get voicemail, briefly introduce yourself and explain your interest in wanting to connect. Say you'll try calling back, but also leave both a phone number and email address where you may be reached.

Sample Introductory Email

This email message is to request an informational interview to learn more about an alumna's experience as a book editor. The student is careful to avoid asking for a job, or for anything other than the chance to listen and ask questions. The email includes a brief "elevator speech" that summarizes the student's interests.

Dear Ms. Ramos:

I found your name through the Harvard Alumni Association's Crimson Compass database and I am writing to ask your advice about the field of publishing. I am an English concentrator at Harvard College and will graduate with my BA in May, 2012.

Book publishing is a career option that I have considered for some time. I am currently a writer for Arts Today magazine and also sit on the editorial board. Prior to attending Harvard, I was the editor of my high school newspaper and contributed to a local weekly as movie critic. I am eager to learn more about the field of publishing to determine if my interest in writing and editing is consistent with the industry.

I will be in New York the week of October 9th and would greatly appreciate the chance to speak with you about your experience. If meeting with you at that time is not convenient, I wonder if we could talk by phone at another time.

Is there a time that I could call your office to make these arrangements?

Thank you for your consideration.

Note: Don't be afraid to follow up if you don't hear back from your contact within a week or so. Change the way you are contacting them. If you emailed the first time, try following up by phone. People are busy, and you will likely not be a top priority. **But this does not mean they are not willing to speak with you.** Persistence is important, and people often appreciate the reminder that they haven't returned your call, and that you are still interested in speaking with them. That being said, know that you won't have a 100% response rate, either. Don't take this as rejection—they don't even know you!—but as an indication of how demanding their job may be on their time. If you have not heard back after the initial outreach plus two follow-ups, it's time to contact the next person on your list. Remember: Three strikes and you're out!

D. Keep Track of Your Networking Contacts

When you are actively building out your network for a job or conducting informational interviews, it is not easy, but it is **NECESSARY, to keep yourself organized!**

Set up a spreadsheet, a relational database, or just write relevant information for each contact on an index card. Here is the type of information you should track, and some example data:

Contact Name: Bill Gates
Title: Co-chair
Organization: Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation
Action Step: Send Thank-you note (always update with most recent action step needed)
To-do by: September 19, 2012
Referral Source: Crimson Compass
Mailing Address: PO Box 000, Seattle WA 98102
Website: www.gatesfoundation.org
Email: info@gatesfoundation.org (preferably Bill's personal email!)
Phone: 206-123-4567

Contact History:

| | Contact 1 | Contact 2 | Contact 3 |
|-------------|--|--------------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| Date: | Sept. 1, 2012 | Sept. 10, 2012 | Sept. 14, 2012 |
| Type: | email | phone, voice mail | On-site info i'view |
| Notes: | introduced self Requested info i'view | polite reminder req'd info i'view | copious notes on entire visit! |
| Follow-ups: | phone | return call; set date | Thank you note |
| Status: | DONE | DONE | TO-DO by Sept. 19 |

Referred to: Madeline Albright, Kofi Anan, Warren Buffet
(make entries for all these, using Bill Gates as Referral Source)

Dos and Don'ts of the Informational Interview Process

Do act as professionally as you would for any interview: call to confirm a day or so ahead, dress appropriately, arrive a little early so you can experience the work environment and also to relax before your appointment.

Do feel free to take in a list of questions with you as a means of guiding the conversation, and definitely jot down any suggestions or referrals during the interview, being sure to clarify any terms you don't know or anything you don't understand. Be sure to update these notes with what you have learned immediately after the interview.

Do respect your host's time. Stick to the time frame suggested in your letter or phone conversation unless you are invited to stay longer. Be sensitive to nonverbal clues that it is time to end the interview.

Do be sure to send your resume in advance and bring a copy along to your meeting (just as a way of presenting yourself and your background, not trying to obtain a job) and

Do ask him or her to review it with you. Ask for advice on how to best present yourself, what skills may need refining, which areas need attention or development to best qualify you for that field.

Do offer to pay, if you've gone out for lunch or coffee for your meeting ("He who invites offers to pay"). But you may accept graciously if he or she insists on paying.

Do ask about compensation in a general way, but **Don't** ask about the advisor's personal income package. You might say, "If I were to enter this field at the entry level, what salary and other forms of compensation might I expect?" Inquiring with individuals in the field, coupled with salary research on the web, will prepare you well for negotiating in the future.

Don't ask your contact for a job, even indirectly. That's not what you are there for.

However, if you have a successful interview and develop a comfortable rapport,

Do open doors to additional contacts by asking "Are there other individuals to whom you might suggest I speak as I continue to investigate this field?"

Do keep your contact network informed of your career development progress, particularly if they have taken an interest in your career. Maintaining professional contacts is an ongoing process that will benefit you throughout your career.

Do write a thank you note expressing your appreciation for the advisor's time. This is important regardless of how helpful you perceive the conversation to be.

Don't speak with only one or two people and assume their views are representative of the field. Continue to develop your network!

Do follow up with contacts you receive as well as with professional organizations.

Developing your “Elevator Speech”

Over the course of your job search, it will be critically important to communicate to people who you are and what it is you’re looking for in a position. An “elevator speech” serves as an introduction you use when speaking with people about your interests. You may have a 15-second version to use at a job fair, a 30-second version for a networking event, and a 60-90-second one for kicking off a job interview. Below are some ways to start thinking about what you’ll say:

- What are your current work roles? Student? Teaching Fellow? Research Assistant?
- What is your current career interest, and how has that developed?
- What transferable skills have you developed that may be applicable to this field?
- What may be the biggest concern on the part of employers considering you for this type of job?
- What is it that you want to know from someone in this field?

Remember that you will not have just one “elevator speech.” Develop your basic introduction, then alter it to be appropriate for different audiences and situations. PRACTICE delivering your introduction to friends (and to yourself). Once you feel comfortable and natural, it will be much easier to adapt your initial presentation on the fly.

**With a concise, articulate, and relevant introduction,
delivered with confidence, a firm handshake, eye contact, and a smile,
you will make a GREAT FIRST IMPRESSION.**