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# Informational Interviewing & Networking



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**I**nformational interviewing involves meeting professionals in a particular field to discuss their skills, background, and career path as well as insights they may have on the state of their field. Talk to people currently employed in jobs or fields that interest you. They can tell you what skills and experience are essential and which courses they took or wish they had taken. You can find out whether an advanced degree is required before entering that profession and if prior work experience is preferred. You can also discuss salary levels for various positions.

**N**etworking entails talking in person and by phone with individuals working in areas that interest you. Sixty percent of all job leads result from hearing about them from others. These job opportunities are the “hidden job market” because they are often not listed in newspapers and their organizations do not interview on campus. Job seekers learn of openings in the hidden job market by talking to such contacts as alumni in the AU Alumni On-Line Community and employers at receptions and association events. Knowing someone within an organization increases your ability to make a strong impression. The longer you maintain contact with these professionals, the more likely you are to be referred to others or receive job leads.

## Where Can I Go for Help?

**Consult the AU Alumni On-Line Community**, a database of thousands of American University alumni who will answer questions about their jobs, employers, and other career-related issues. See the Career Center Web site for details.

**Attend Career Center events**, such as employer panels or presentations, and receptions. These events, which occur regularly in the fall and spring, provide opportunities to meet alumni or other professionals working in your field of interest.

**Join a professional organization** or attend one of the many professional seminars, receptions, or conferences. Many large organizations either have a student chapter or offer reduced membership fees to students. Volunteer to help plan, publicize, or run an upcoming program. Assume a leadership role and make yourself stand out from the crowd.

**Describe activities and subjects you enjoy** to family, friends, and professors. Ask them for names of individuals in fields involving similar skills or expertise.

## Tips for Networking in Social Settings

In social situations, it can feel uncomfortable to interact with people you do not know. However, these are great opportunities to gather information from people who may have knowledge and experience in a career field of interest to you. Receptions, parties, and conferences are prime examples of social situations where networking can lead to information and opportunities. The following are some tips for networking in social situations:

**Approach strangers and introduce yourself** with a smile and a handshake.

**Try to use an opening line based on the current setting**, and try to end your opener with a question. That way you immediately have something in common to talk about, and it gives the other person the opportunity to talk. For example, “Isn’t it great that AU decided to put together this networking reception?”

**Don’t take it personally** if you try to talk to someone and they do not engage with you after you have given it a good try. Move on and talk to someone else.

**Wait for an appropriate opportunity** or the end of the conversation to ask for a business card.

**Maintain eye contact** when talking to people. Eye contact communicates sincerity and interest.

**Be careful about telling jokes.** Do not tell ethnic, religious, sexual, or gender jokes. (Also be careful of political jokes.)

**If you are interested in staying in contact with the person** to whom you are speaking, suggest an opportunity for the next encounter (e.g., lunch, a conference, a gallery opening) and be sure to follow up.

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## Tips for Successful Informational Interviewing by E-Mail, Letter, or Phone

Consider the following questions to select the right way to approach someone for an informational interview:

- *How comfortable am I speaking on the phone to someone I do not know?*
- *What type of communication is the person most likely to respond to, e-mail or phone calls?*
- *What is the person's role at the company?*
- *Would it be best to talk in person?*

**E-mail can be a convenient way** to introduce yourself to someone, share your resume, and ask for an opportunity to call or to meet face to face. Use a business letter format. Remember, you are seeking advice and information, not asking for a job. Your goal is to gather information that will stimulate your job search and build professional relationships. E-mail should not be used as another form of mass marketing your resume.

**Once you have made contact** with someone in person, you can use e-mail to follow up, pass along information, or schedule another meeting. Remember that sending an e-mail to someone, although it's not face to face, will leave a lasting impression.

**What about the traditional letter?** In some circumstances, a letter can be very beneficial for establishing rapport with someone. It may give them advance notice that you will follow up with a phone call. This is particularly helpful if the person you are contacting is in a senior position. Be sure to include your resume with your letter.

**What do you say to individuals after you have decided how to contact them?** It is wise to think of your introduction before you pick up the phone or click the send button for your e-mail. Here are some examples to consider:

• **Example 1- You have been referred by someone:**

“Good morning. My name is Jessica Edwards and I’m calling on the recommendation of Cheryl Stevenson. She told me at the Mid-Atlantic Marketing Conference that you’d be able to give me some valuable insight on the (your area of interest). Do you have a moment?”

• **Example 2- You do not know your contact:**

“Good morning. We have never met. However, the reason I’m calling you is that I’m currently in a career transition and I am doing some research on how best to move into the (your area of interest) by talking to key people in the industry. Before I formally search for a position, I am looking for advice on how you would research the field and what you might do in my situation. Do you have a moment?”

## Key Points to Remember When You Make Your Introduction by Telephone

**Demonstrate a positive attitude.**

**Pronounce the person's name correctly.** You may ask the person referring you or the receptionist. Always be polite to the secretary or receptionist answering the phone call. Every contact is important.

**Make sure this is the right person to help you.** Don't be afraid to ask, “Would you be the best person for me to speak to regarding \_\_\_\_\_?”

**Communicate your referral,** if you have one, to establish something in common immediately. Indicate that the person you have contacted is valuable to your information-gathering process in preparation for your job search.

**Be direct and state clearly that you are looking for advice or information,** not asking for a job. By using words such as “research,” “exploration,” or “advice,” you will communicate this to your contact.

**Always ask if the individual has a moment** to speak with you or if you should call at a more convenient time.

## When Meeting Someone in Person

**Send your resume in advance.** Most employers prefer to know your background ahead of time. When you send/e-mail your resume, attach a note indicating that this is an informational interview. Remind the person when you will meet. If appropriate, indicate how you got their name.

**Come prepared with questions.** It is your responsibility to ask intelligent questions within a 20-minute time frame (unless invited to talk longer). Ask only for information that you cannot find on your own.

**Request feedback on your resume,** but do not be surprised if you receive conflicting advice. If your reader cannot figure out what your skills are, revise your resume. Every field has its own jargon—ask how you might change your resume to make it sound like other documents written by professionals in the field.

**Learn how any disability you may have** relates to the work tasks required and the office environment. Seek guidance before the interview from a career advisor.

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## Follow-Up

Let one person lead you to another by requesting the names of other individuals you might contact. Being referred in this manner is the best way to network. Your phone call or e-mail to the next person will be more warmly received when you are referred by someone that person knows.

Write a thank-you note within one week of meeting or talking to a contact (the sooner, the more memorable). The Career Center's handout "Cover Letter and Thank-You Letter Writing" provides tips.

Maintain contact with the professionals you meet by calling or e-mailing periodically. Report your progress and ask their advice.

### Sample Questions for an Informational Interview

- *How did you get into this line of work? What has been your career path?*
- *What was your academic preparation?*
- *What skills do you need to be successful in this job?*
- *What types of positions do people with my major have in your organization?*
- *What electives can I take now to be better prepared for a career in this field?*
- *I am thinking of changing my major—what other fields match the skills and interests that people in this line of work generally possess?*
- *Have you made a career change?*
- *If yes, how did you make it?*
- *How is your organization structured?*
- *What are the most important issues affecting your organization?*
- *What is the hiring procedure when vacancies occur?*
- *What are the salary ranges and benefits for a \_\_\_\_\_ position?*
- *What magazines, newspapers, or journals do you read to keep up with your field?*
- *What associations or professional membership organizations do you find useful?*

## AU Alumni On-Line Community

**The AU Alumni On-Line Community** is an electronic database of thousands of AU alumni who can offer you helpful advice and information on a variety of career fields. It puts a wealth of knowledge and expertise at your fingertips and is available for you to search 24 hours a day with the click of a button. By going to <[www.american.edu/alumni](http://www.american.edu/alumni)> and clicking on "On-Line Community," you can activate your account and search through alumni by career field, company, or geographic location, to name a few options. To get the most out of your experience with the on-line community and your interaction with alumni, be sure to keep these tips in mind:

**Do not call alumni to ask them for a job.** They are a resource for information about career fields, organizations, or moving to a new geographic location.

**When you get alumni on the phone**, ask if they are willing to speak to you and if you have reached them at a good time. If they are not willing to speak to you, thank them and get off the phone. If they are willing to speak to you, but it is a bad time, offer to call at a better time.

**Introduce yourself as a current student or recent graduate of AU**, and let them know that you are looking for career advice from someone who works in the field. Explain that you found their name in the AU Alumni On-Line Community.

**Have your questions prepared in advance** and do not take more than 10-15 minutes of the person's time.

**Follow up with a thank-you letter.**

*For more information on how to access the AU Alumni On-Line Community, stop by the Career Center or call 202-885-1804 for an appointment.*

## Sample E-Mail: Networking with Alumni

Dear (Mr. or Ms.) \_\_\_\_\_: (do not use first names with those you do not know)

I am currently a senior at American University in the Kogod School of Business with a concentration in \_\_\_\_\_. I obtained your contact information from the AU On-line Community. You are working in the area of business I am pursuing as a career and I am eager to learn more from a current practitioner. I would greatly appreciate an opportunity to talk with you for 15 minutes to ask some questions that I have prepared and obtain some career advice.

Should you wish to know more about my background, I have attached my resume. I am available to talk on Thursday, April 10, between 10 a.m. - 12 p.m., Friday, April 11, between 1 - 2 p.m., and Tuesday, April 15, between 7 - 8 p.m. Would any of these times be convenient for you? I would be grateful for any career advice you could share with me and look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

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## Sample Business Letter Format to Request an Informational Interview

Katherine A. Schwartz  
4000 Massachusetts Avenue, NW  
Washington, DC 20016  
202-898-7343  
Kas@american.edu  
September 2, 2004

Ms. Angela Talbot  
Director of Development  
Children's Defense Fund  
1000 C Street, NW  
Washington, DC 20007

Dear Ms. Talbot:

I found your name through the American University Alumni On-line Community. I am a senior at American University majoring in Literature. I have a keen interest in grant writing to benefit organizations working to advocate for children in need. I have already acquired some grant writing experience through an internship at Planned Parenthood of the Metropolitan Area. As the first step in researching my job search, I am eager to speak with practitioners in my field of interest. Would you have time to meet with me in the upcoming two weeks? I am free mornings on Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Fridays.

I have enclosed my resume for your background review and hope that your schedule will permit a time for us to meet. I would be most appreciative.

Sincerely,

*(signature)*

Katherine A. Schwartz

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