

Getting the scoop on a new career

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The informational interview. Good way to test-drive a new career or a surefire way to pester a mentor? Either way, for job seekers thinking about jumping into a new profession, playing a game of 20 Questions with someone doing their dream job is bound to be less stressful than a full-fledged job interview. Besides, a well-prepped, polite candidate might just land a new career.

So, how do you make informational interviews work?

It's all research

For starters, stop calling them that. "I haven't been calling them informational interviews for a long time. I just call it research," admits Ross Macpherson, president of interview coaching and résumé writing firm, Career Quest in Whitby, Ont.

Print Edition - Section Front



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The problem, according to Mr. Macpherson, is that informational interviews have developed a bad reputation.

"In the past, people called in these informational interviews and they were really just an excuse to take 10, 15 or 30 minutes of my time for entirely selfish reasons - and then I'd never hear from them again," he says. "A lot of people simply cannot give a chunk of time like that."

Set it up

Whatever you decide to call them, setting up career research interviews should be effortless, with e-mail, voice mail and social networking sites such as LinkedIn or Facebook. But that ease of connection also has a downside, says Alexandra Levit, author of *How'd You Score That Gig?: A Guide to the Coolest Jobs (and How to Get Them)*. People, particularly well-connected superstar employees, are overwhelmed with requests.

"People are less likely to pay attention to you today," she says.

So work those warm introductions. Ask everyone you know if they know someone employed in the field you're interested in. Chances are someone will. Then name-drop. Type that referral's name right into your e-mail's subject line, says Ms. Levit.

Then it's all about ego

"I hate to boil it down to this, but flatter a person. If you say, 'Hey, I could really benefit from your knowledge and expertise in this industry,' it's a lot better than, 'I would love to take 10 minutes of your time,'" Mr. Macpherson says.

If you don't hear back, try Ms. Levit's 3/6 rule: Contact the person via e-mail or phone three times (every two weeks or so) for six weeks. If they still don't respond, move on.

What to say

Let's say you do get the expert to give you 30 minutes on the phone. What then?

Be prepared with a list of thoughtful queries. Is the industry stressful? What does it take to be successful? What education do you need?

"You have to go in armed with specific questions. You can't go in there just to chat for 10 minutes. No one's going to give you the time," says Jeremy Miller, partner of LEAPJob, a Toronto-based sales recruiting firm, who says he gets at least one call a week from people asking about the recruiting profession.

It also means it pays to be prepared for anything, even doing the interview the moment you get the expert on the phone.

"They may say, 'I've got five minutes right now.' So you better have some intelligent questions to ask right then and there," says Mr. Macpherson.

Above all, don't ramble. If you say you want 20 minutes, stick to the time allotted.

The follow-up

Here's where most people falter, Ms. Levit says. They either forget to follow up at all - not even a thank-you card - or they engage in what she calls, "stalker networking."

Stalkers, often overeager twentysomethings, call repeatedly, treating their contact as a personal career counsellor. They think they're being proactive. Instead, they're on a one-way ticket to becoming blackballed.

"It's supposed to be a one-shot deal," she says. "If you use the foot-in-the-door technique and then you abuse it, you've really done yourself a disservice."

Dora Vell, president of Vell & Associates, an executive search firm in Waltham, Mass., is already trying to teach her 16-year-old son, Chris Tai, how to conduct respectful research interviews. He wants to be a film producer. To make it happen, he recently hooked up with a major Hollywood producer who gave him 45 minutes on the phone.

After the call, Ms. Vell made sure her son thanked the contact and continues to send the odd e-mail to let him know when he makes a new student movie, wins an award or takes a recommended scriptwriting class.

"It's 'Thank you very much and here's what I'm doing.' " says Ms. Vell.

Why mentors win

Besides giving them a warm and fuzzy feeling for helping someone out, informational interviews can also benefit the adviser. Long-term, the career-coveter could just become a big-wig herself some day.

Yet the biggest boon might be more immediate. With the unemployment rate at a 33-year low, employers are always looking out for star candidates.

"I don't typically hire from my own industry, but I do love the people who come up to me and say, 'I can really see myself working in this, but can you tell me more?' They demonstrate through their questions and interest that they'll be a good fit for us," Mr. Miller says.

Ask away

How is the economy affecting this industry?

How much demand is there for people in this career?

What are the salary ranges for higher levels in this occupation?

What skills or personal characteristics do you feel contribute most to success in this industry?

What sacrifices have you had to make to succeed in this field, and do you feel the sacrifices were worth it?

When people leave this career, what are the usual reasons?

What is a typical day like?

Source: <http://www.quintcareers.com>

THE UPSIDE

"Most people will talk about themselves and their industries very openly."

Jeremy Miller, partner, LEAPJob, a Toronto-based sales recruiting firm

THE DOWNSIDE

"I've seen people get the informational interview and proceed to call repeatedly, saying, 'Did you send my résumé? Would you be willing to connect me with this person or that person?' And all of a sudden it's the poor contact's full-time job to get this person opportunities."

Alexandra Levit, author of *How'd You Score That Gig?: A Guide to the Coolest Jobs (and How to Get Them)*

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