

Career Information Interviewing Guidebook

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UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA
CAREER CENTRE

What is Career Information Interviewing?

You've begun to think about different career and job options. There are a lot of job titles that sound interesting but you don't really know what people in those jobs actually do. Perhaps you have a basic understanding of a field, but you'd like more in-depth, insider knowledge about the day-to-day realities. Even after doing some research, you probably still have many unanswered questions: What is a typical work day like? What is graduate school like? What kind of work-life balance does a career provide? Does a position involve working more with people or information? Does a specific workplace have a healthy culture?

Career information interviewing is a way for you to answer these questions and more. *Career information interviewing is a method of gathering first-hand information and advice about career options by talking to people about their individual career paths, jobs, industries, or work settings.*

Why Do Career Information Interviewing?

- **Get first-hand, realistic information about a career or field** – details like working conditions, earnings and trends can help inform your career decisions.
- **See if the realities of a job fit with your interests, skills, and values** – do you like to work alone or with others, indoors or outdoors, with people or information, early or late in the day? How does the reality of a position compare with what you previously envisioned?
- **Evaluate your academic plan** – are you on the right track with the academic program you are in, or do you want to try some classes in another faculty, change your major, or apply for graduate studies? Can you apply your degree in a way that you have not previously considered?
- **Discuss how to deal with potential career barriers and challenges** – from disclosing sexuality in the workplace to accommodating disabilities, you can search for contacts who are comfortable discussing potentially sensitive topics that matter to you.
- **Practice communicating and sharing information about yourself in a low-stress situation** – this is great practice for job interviews, or other interactions with potential employers at career fairs, networking events, and so on.
- **Create and take advantage of hidden opportunities** – by discussing your interests and aspirations with new contacts, you may learn about new programs, theories and practices; perhaps you can generate an entirely new position that uses your unique skills to fill a need in an organization.
- **Start to build your professional network** – whether or not positions are advertised, contacts can influence hiring decisions by informing you about and recommending both advertised and unadvertised positions.



The Career Information Interview Process*

Step 1: Identify careers, jobs, industries, or work settings you are interested in learning more about

You may already have some areas of interest, but this is a chance to explore all of your options with minimal risk – if you are thinking about applying to veterinary school or completing a degree in industrial design, investigate both.

Research, research, research! Even if you already know which careers or fields interest you, you still should gather more in-depth information *before* talking to anyone in person:

- Use the Career Centre's Career Resource Centre to access resources such as industry guides and books outlining careers associated with specific academic majors. Search the Career Centre's holdings using the online Career Resource Centre catalogue at www.uab.ca/cc.
- Attend a Career Centre career fair, career forum, or Career Chat to learn from, meet, and network with professionals of various backgrounds.
- Review organization and professional association websites, including specialized professional associations for marginalized groups such as women, people with disabilities, Aboriginal peoples, sexual minorities, visible minorities, and so on. (E.g. National Gay and Lesbian Journalists' Association).
- Look at the web pages of university departments, faculties, and alumni groups to see if there are lists or mention of jobs held by past graduates.
- Browse the Internet and review current news for political, social, and economic factors that may be affecting the labor market and specific industries.

Researching potential careers and fields will help you learn what types of positions/job titles you'll need to search for in order to find the right contacts. It will also focus the questions you ask your contacts. People are generally interested in talking about what they do, but don't waste their time or yours by asking questions that could have been easily answered elsewhere.

Step 2: Identify your beliefs, assumptions, and uncertainties about each area of career interest

When you are considering a particular career, job, industry, or work setting, you have probably already made some (often implicit) assumptions about the work, compensation, areas of satisfaction, and so on. Some of these assumptions will be accurate and others won't be. One of the goals of talking to people is to explore, question, and validate these beliefs before making any significant career decisions.



For each area of career interest, ask yourself:

“What *positive* beliefs/assumptions do I have concerning this career/job/industry/work setting?”

“What *negative* beliefs/assumptions do I have concerning this career/job/industry/work setting?”

“What *uncertainties and unknowns* do I have concerning this career/job/industry/work setting?”

Step 3: Translate your beliefs, assumptions, and uncertainties into specific questions

There are a lot of questions you can ask someone about their work and career. However, you will generally have only 30 minutes with a contact and you should use that limited time to get your most pressing questions answered.

Make a list of questions that will best help you answer the personal beliefs, assumptions, and uncertainties you identified in Step 2. See the list of sample questions at the end of this guide.

Step 4: Conduct the career information interview

a) Identify individuals

Think about any specific criteria you have when looking for individuals you'd like to speak with:

- Educational background: degrees earned, schools attended, formal and informal training
- Professional experience: current and past positions, involvement in associations, length of career, specific employers, seniority
- Approachability, accessibility, willingness to arrange a meeting
- Knowledge or expertise: currentness of information, awareness of trends and future prospects, reputation
- Demographics: age, gender, ethnicity, sexuality, ability, country of origin, and other personal or background factors

Similar to doing research about a career or field, there is a range of methods to identify contacts:

- Use the Career Centre's Career Information Network – these are people who have signed up specifically to offer career information interviews to U of A students and alumni. View the list of contacts online, search for individuals based on your identified criteria, and submit an electronic request for the contact information of specific individuals.
- Ask everyone you know for contacts, including your professors, supervisors, friends, and family members: this is networking! You might want to ask:

“Do you know someone who *is like this*?”

“Do you know someone who *does this*?”

“Do you know someone who *would know someone like this*?”



- Use the Career Centre Career Resource Centre to check out industry-specific and general directories, either in person at Career Centre or online at www.uab.ca/cc.
- Attend a Career Centre career fair, career forum, or Career Chat that features presenters with the criteria you are looking for.
- Look at the web pages for university departments, faculties, and alumni to see if past graduates are mentioned, whom you can then look up and contact.
- Review company and professional association websites, including specialized professional associations for marginalized groups such as women, people with disabilities, Aboriginal peoples, sexual minorities, visible minorities, and so on. (E.g. National Gay and Lesbian Journalists' Association). You can contact an individual in a company or ask a professional association to refer you to someone with a particular background.

b) Persuade yourself to make contact

Contacting individuals you don't know can be intimidating. But remember that it will get easier with practice and the worst they can say is 'no'! See some sample introductions at the end of this guide.

Be clear about what you are asking for. Prepare a point-form introduction that includes:

- Your name and academic program
- Your connection to the contact (how you heard of them – such as getting their name from the Career Centre Career Information Network – or anyone you know in common)
- Details about yourself, your situation, and how it relates to the person you're calling
- The purpose of your call (i.e. to arrange a career information interview), including how much time you'll need and what kind of information you're looking for
- Arrange the time, date, and location of a meeting

It can take some time to actually make contact with a busy professional, and more time to schedule an actual meeting, but don't be discouraged. Here are some tips for making initial contact:

- Success at reaching your contact can increase when you phone first thing in the morning, immediately after lunch, or late in the afternoon.
- Don't assume that because you have reached the person on the phone that they have time to talk at that moment; briefly explain your purpose and try to arrange for an in-person meeting at a later time.
- You may choose to email your contact first, either to provide some context for your upcoming phone call or to arrange a time to meet in person.
- Face-to-face interviews at your contact's workplace are the best experiences to learn from, but it is still useful to arrange a phone call or email interview.



- If you were referred to the contact, always mention who referred you – whether you are leaving a message with an assistant or on voicemail, this can increase the likelihood of the person calling you back.
- If you have left an initial voicemail or email and haven't heard back from a person, it is generally good practice to wait *at least one week* before trying to re-contact them.
- You may wonder how many times you should try to contact someone before giving up. There is no right answer to this question. It is important to keep in mind different factors that may delay someone in returning your call or email. Check to see if there are large events (such as a fundraiser) being hosted by the organization around the time you are trying to contact them; certain professions might also be cyclically busy, such as accountants during tax season. Finally, be sure to listen closely to voicemail messages, as they often indicate if a person is away from work for a period of time.
- Troubleshooting: What if the person says:

"I can answer your questions right now."

Acknowledge the offer, but try to arrange an in-person meeting at their workplace if possible. Emphasize that the meeting will be brief, at their convenience, and that part of your learning will come from actually visiting the workplace (such as being able to observe the physical work environment, practice interacting in a professional setting, and getting a sense of the organizational culture).

"No." or "I'm too busy."

Thank them for their time, and ask for a referral to another person (inside or outside the organization) who might be able to meet with you. Or, you may try to schedule a 10-minute phone call at a time more convenient for them. If it doesn't work out, don't take it personally – it's all part of the process.

"We are not hiring."

Emphasize that you aren't looking for a job. Rather, you are doing research about your career options.

c) Do the career information interview

Success! You have arranged a date, time, and location for a career information interview, and now all that's left is to do it. Here are some tips for conducting the actual interview:

- Don't ask for a job, even indirectly.
- Wear clothing appropriate to the work environment; this may mean wearing business casual clothing. Leave a good impression.



- Bring your list of questions with you. Make notes of the person's answers (it's okay to make notes while they are talking – just let them know that's what you are doing).
- Take initiative during the interview. *You* scheduled the interview so *you* need to ask the questions.
- Career information interviews are brief – generally 20 to 30 minutes. Arrive on time and leave on time, unless you are clearly invited to stay longer.
- Practice good listening skills. Let your contact do most of the talking.

d) Observe the environment during an in-person meeting at a workplace:

- How are people dressed (formal, informal, uniform)?
 - How visibly diverse is the work setting (age, gender, ethnicity)?
 - How do staff members interact with one another? Is there a hierarchy?
 - Do people appear to enjoy working there?
 - What is the atmosphere like (calm, fast-paced, stressful, tense)?
 - How were you treated when you arrived?
 - What kinds of workspaces are there (cubicles, offices, open layout)?
- Respect confidentiality. Reflect on the appropriateness of disclosing the information your contact has shared with you.
 - Remember the information you collect is only one person's opinion, and not necessarily representative of the perspectives of everyone in the field. Doing multiple career information interviews is your best strategy to make sure you get well-rounded answers to your questions.
 - If there is any way you can help your contact, offer to do so and make sure you follow through. This may involve sending them an interesting article, relevant information, or the name of one of your contacts. Networking is a two-way relationship; the more you can reciprocate with information or resources, the stronger your network will be.
 - Get a business card from your contact. You may want to make your own two-sided promotional business card to give to new contacts. Include your:
 - Name and contact information (phone number and professional-looking email address)
 - Job objective, degree, other qualifications, relevant skills, or accomplishments
 - Leave with 1 to 2 referrals for other people in the field you can talk to.
 - Keep organized records of your career information interviewing process (including names, dates, notes about the meeting and workplace, and follow-up actions taken). This will help you remember details later when you reflect about what you've learned – plus it's just good organizational practice.



e) Follow up with your contact

It is very important to express your gratitude after a career information interview. There are four parts to following up with a contact:

- i. Send a thank-you note within 24 hours of the interview. This can be a letter or email. Comment on how the meeting expanded your knowledge of the field and note the follow-up steps you plan to take as a result. See a sample at the end of this guide.
- ii. If you said you would do something for your contact (such as email them an article, refer them to a website, or give them the name of a relevant contact), make sure you do it. This can be included in your thank-you note.
- iii. If you talk to someone your contact referred you to, or pursue an activity the contact suggested (such as attending a meeting or reading certain materials), follow up again with an update email.
- iv. Build your network by maintaining contact with anyone you have a career information interview with. Let them know if you have any career news to share, such as finding a position, deciding on an educational program, changing your degree, or other news that relates to your career development.

Step 5: Reflect on what you've learned

Look back at your original career beliefs, assumptions, and uncertainties and the questions you based on them. Compare the beliefs, assumptions, and uncertainties you had before the interview(s) with what you learned as a result of your interview(s).

Ask yourself:

“Have I asked the right questions to get the information I originally wanted? Are there new questions I need to investigate now?”

“Have any of my original beliefs and assumptions been validated? Invalidated?”

“How does what I learned about the career/job/industry/work setting relate to my own career-related values and priorities?”

“What is my gut feeling or intuition about this particular career/job/industry/work setting?”

“What implications does this have for me?”

“What should I do or think as a result of the information I have gathered?”



Sometimes the career information interview process reveals that you do not really want the career you had always planned on. It is normal for this realization to make you feel uncertain or disappointed. Fortunately, it is usually better to find this information out sooner rather than later.

Now you can use this opportunity to:

- Begin the career information interview process anew, looking for new career options to focus on.
- Meet with a Career Centre career advisor to discuss how you are feeling and try out different career exploration strategies.
- Talk with an academic advisor about your academic options and their implications, including trying new classes, changing your major, or pursuing further studies.
- Get involved with non-academic activities to find out about alternative and hidden career options, get a better sense of your old and new interests, and expand your network – this might include volunteering in the community, involvement with student groups on campus, paid work, or travelling.



Sample Career Information Interview Questions

- Can you describe a typical work day or week? Does your work change during the year?
- What do you like best about your job/field/work setting?
- What are the sources of stress in your job?
- If you could, what would you change about your job?
- What values are important in your career/field/industry/work setting/team?
- What makes someone successful in your work?
(Listen for key skill words; you may need to develop these skills or highlight them on your resume.)
- How did you get involved in this type of work? What is your educational background? Is there a specific educational or professional background needed to enter this field?
- How did you learn to do your work? If you were starting out in your field now, how would you train?
- How do you keep current in your field? What should I be reading? Are there formal or informal training opportunities?
- Do people in your field belong to professional associations or organizations? What are the benefits? Do you think it would make sense for me to attend a meeting?
- In what industries and companies would careers and jobs such as yours exist?
- How did you get your job(s)? Are there any job search methods you would recommend?
- What is the compensation range and benefits for a typical job in this field?
- Does this job require/allow, for example:
 - travel/relocation
 - overtime/evening/weekend/shift work
 - working primarily with people (individuals, groups) or alone
- How would you describe the work-life balance? Flexibility? Balancing work with child/elder care?
- Looking back, is there anything you wish you'd known or that you would do differently?



- Can you suggest one or two other people I might contact? May I use your name if I contact them, to explain how I got their name?

Depending on your contact, it may be appropriate to ask some personal questions. If you have a good reason to believe your contact would be comfortable addressing them, you may consider questions such as:

- Are you out at work [regarding sexuality or gender identity]? Do you have advice for coming out at work?
- What advice do you have for disclosing a disability at work? Negotiating accommodations?
- Have you had to deal with discriminatory or racist actions/comments from co-workers or clients? What advice do you have for dealing with it?
- What is it like being a man/woman in a female/male-dominated field?

Sample Networking Materials

Sample Email Introduction:

Subject line: *Request for career advice*

Dear Ms. Contact:

I obtained your name from the online Career Information Network at The University of Alberta Career Centre. I am writing to you because I am in the process of exploring possible career options, and your position as a Volunteer Coordinator with the Public Ecology Centre sounds very intriguing to me.

I am currently in my final year of a Sociology degree at the University of Alberta, and I have recently started volunteering with the Environmental Brigade on campus. I am interested in learning more about how you became a Volunteer Coordinator, what it is like working in the non-profit sector, and any career advice you have for a new grad interested in the environmental field.

Would you be available to meet for a 30-minute career information interview? I would be happy to meet you at your office. Please let me know if this is possible, and I look forward to hearing from you.

*Sincerely,
Nita Path*



Sample Phone Introduction:

On the phone, you shouldn't just read a script such as the one below. Make some key points to remember, and then be flexible and natural in speaking with your contact. Allow back-and-forth dialogue with your contact.

"Hello Ms. Contact. My name is Nita Path, and I am a Sociology student at the University of Alberta. I got your name from the online Career Information Network at the University of Alberta Career Centre."

(pause, back-and-forth discussion)

"I am doing research to explore potential career options, and your position as a Volunteer Coordinator sounds really interesting. I am wondering if you'd be open to meeting with me so I can ask you some questions about your career path and what it's like to work in your field."

(pause, back-and-forth discussion)

"I would only need about 30 minutes of your time, and I am happy to come and meet you at your office. Is there a date and time that works best for you?"

Sample Thank-You Email:

It can be appropriate to use your contact's first name in a follow-up context, particularly if they invited you to use their first name during your meeting.

Subject line: *Thank you*

Dear Neuva,

Thank you again for meeting with me yesterday to discuss my career questions. I really appreciate the time you took to discuss opportunities in the environmental field. It was great to hear about the unexpected twists and turns in your path to becoming a Volunteer Coordinator, and it really emphasized for me how important it is to take advantage of new opportunities as they arise.

I will definitely follow through on your suggestion to contact the Environmental Coordinator at Energy Enterprise, and I will be sure to keep you informed of my progress. I have also attached the journal article we discussed – I hope it is of some interest and use to you.

*Sincerely,
Nita Path*



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Laker, D. R. (2002). The career wheel: An exercise for exploring and validating one's career choices. *Journal of Employment Counseling*, 39(2), 61-72.

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For additional job search advice and career-related topics, the U of A Career Centre offers Guidebooks for *Career Information Interviewing*, *Job Shadowing*, *Personal Statements*, and *Reference Letters*. These [publications](#) are available for download on our website, as well as in print format in our Career Centres on the U of A Campus.

The Job Search Guidebook was originally developed as part of the [Transition to Career](#) (T2C) elearning modules. For more information on T2C, visit the U of A Career Centre website

Are you a U of A student returning to school in the following Fall/Winter semester? Are you interested in working as a Career Peer Educator (CPE)? Find more information about the position and how and when to apply on the CPE program webpage <https://www.ualberta.ca/career-centre/about-us/cpe>

