



# MAKING CONNECTIONS

## ***Undergraduate Resource Series***

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## WHY START NOW?

A network of professional connections will help you:

- Explore career interests and options.
- Identify resources for informational meetings.
- Obtain information about organizations you might want to work for.
- Get career advice about how you might prepare for a certain field or position.
- Discover potential job or internship opportunities.
- Connect to other people in an organization or career area.

**Meeting people in your fields of interest is the  
MOST EFFECTIVE method of finding a job or internship!**

## THE BASICS

You have a much better chance of getting an interview through your own personal and professional connections than through other means (such as job postings and company websites).

**You need just a few things to get started:**

- An idea of what you are looking for at this point in your career exploration or job search.
- A brief personal introduction.
- A system to manage contacts (e.g. an Excel spreadsheet or Google Docs).
- An interest in learning and an openness to meeting new people.
- A smile.
- A few questions to get the conversation going.

**Interact with people who have interests similar to your own:**

- Get referrals from other people in your network.
- Join social networking websites and professional networking websites such as LinkedIn. Be sure to use LinkedIn to find Harvard alums who might be willing to speak with you.
- To connect with Harvard alums, the Harvard alumni database is available to Harvard students and graduates at: [alumni.harvard.edu](http://alumni.harvard.edu).
- Talk to academic department representatives (including faculty members and TFs).
- Attend professional association meetings/conferences. (Search Google for associations in your field(s) of interest.)
- Join networking meetup groups and alumni shared interest groups (SIGs) such as Harvardwood and Boston New Tech Meetup.
- Get involved with community organizations; do volunteer work.
- Attend Mignone Center for Career Success career programs and workshops.

**Start simply: Set a goal to meet one new person whenever you travel!**

## ETIQUETTE and GUIDELINES

- Be **well prepared** for each conversation. When you ask for advice or help, and know what you're looking for, it's easy for people to say "yes." Develop a list of questions ahead of time.
- Find a **connection** to make introductions easier. Look for Harvard alumni through the Harvard Alumni Association's alumni database or through LinkedIn.

- Always be **professional, courteous, and considerate**.
- Be **genuine**. Possess a sincere desire to learn.
- Be **interested** in the people you meet. Most people enjoy having the chance to tell you about their own careers and activities.
- **Don't explicitly ask for a job**. Ask for advice on how to obtain jobs in that field. Let the contact decide if they are willing to pass on job leads to you. \*See the Employee Referrals section below.
- **Ask for names** of other people in the field whom you could contact.
- **Give back**. Learn enough about the people you meet to pass on ideas, articles, and contacts that will interest them.
- Be **gracious**. Appreciate the time and effort of your contacts and send a **thank you note or email**.
- **Stay in touch**. Check in periodically. Update people in your network when you make significant progress in your research or job search.
- **Have confidence** that building a professional network will ultimately result in job leads.

## EMPLOYEE REFERRALS

In certain industries such as technology, referrals from current employees can play an important role in the hiring process. Companies often value the judgment of their employees, and encourage them to refer qualified job-seeking candidates who they know. In fact, some companies even provide a financial incentive or “referral bonus” to the employee if the referred candidate is ultimately hired. If someone you know is at an organization you are interested in working for, reach out and express your interest. If you don't know anyone at a particular organization, one of your connections likely does—reach out and ask for an introduction. LinkedIn can be a helpful tool to find connections at different organizations who can potentially help you land an interview.

## WHAT IS AN INFORMATIONAL MEETING?

In an informational meeting (sometimes referred to as an informational interview), you talk with a professional, typically employed in your field of interest, to gather career-related information and to add to your professional network. It is NOT a job-seeking meeting. Instead, your goal is to answer questions such as:

- Can you tell me more about your career path? (Research their background on LinkedIn beforehand.)
- Is there a typical career path in this field? If so, what is it?
- Do I have the right background and abilities for the career I'm considering?
- How do I get my foot in the door once I've made a decision?
- What would you do differently if you were to do it again?
- Is there someone else with whom you would recommend I speak?

## A Mutually Beneficial Process

Building a network doesn't come naturally to everyone. There are a 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: *I'd probably be wasting their time! Why would they want to talk with ME?*

Informational meetings are mutually beneficial in many ways:

#### **BENEFITS FOR YOU**

- Get insider advice on entering a field; learn whether specific credentials or more practical experience is necessary.
- Get a first-hand impression of the work environment.
- Learn about current trends and vocabulary of the field.
- Have a professional in the field critique your resume.
- Practice talking about your experiences and telling your story.
- Ask questions that would generally be considered too direct in a job interview.
- Gain visibility in the field.
- Expand your network of contacts and maybe even find a mentor.
- Build confidence in yourself and your decision to move into the field.
- Learn that a field is (or isn't) for you.
- Refine your career interests or generate other options.
- Develop and maintain relationships that may help you in your job search and professional development.

#### **BENEFITS FOR THEM**

- Share information about their job and career path.
- Pass along wisdom and advice.
- Give back—they likely got started the same way.
- Recognize you are a potential new colleague—a professional contact for THEM when you enter the field.
- Gain valuable information, resources, or contacts from you (now or in the future).
- Increased understanding of what potential employees in your demographic are interested in or looking for.
- Strengthen professional relationships with colleagues, e.g. by referring you to a colleague who eventually hires you.
- Invest minimal time.

Allows them to assess your:

- Initiative (sometimes, the only way in!).
- Communication skills.
- Enthusiasm.

#### **REMEMBER**

Never ask for a job directly.

## SO HOW DO I GET STARTED?

### A. Who Should I Contact?

Create a list of potential contacts within your field(s) of interest. Look for people doing a job you'd like to do, in a field you'd like to investigate, or for a company that interests you. Obtain names of new contacts through:

- **People you already know.** Career advisers, friends, relatives, faculty, House Tutors, past and present work associates or supervisors may 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 gratifying to provide assistance to those following in their footsteps. Ways to connect with alums:
  - **Harvard's alumni database** ([alumni.harvard.edu](http://alumni.harvard.edu)) lists the contact information for alums who have indicated that they're willing to speak with students about their career paths.
  - **Firsthand Advisers** ([careerservices.fas.harvard.edu/resources/firsthand](http://careerservices.fas.harvard.edu/resources/firsthand)) is an online tool that connects current Harvard students to over 350 alumni advisers offering career conversations, resume reviews, and interview prep.
  - Also see **LinkedIn.com**.
- **Industry directories and trade associations** can help you identify organizations that may interest you. Contacts within these organizations can be professionals in positions that appeal to you or managers of departments you might enjoy working in. Avoid human resource departments (unless you're considering jobs in human resources!) since you are seeking information, not a job. Visit their website or call the main number to secure the names/titles of appropriate individuals.

### B. How Should I Prepare?

**Research:** Read relevant literature, trade publications, Vault guides ([careerservices.fas.harvard.edu/channels/eresources/](http://careerservices.fas.harvard.edu/channels/eresources/)), company information, and biographical information of your contact. Find out as much as possible about the individual, company, and career field before you meet. It's better to use your expert contact as a resource for specific information rather than the basics.

**Questions:** Think about what you hope to learn, and develop questions that will elicit that information. Write a list before you begin reaching out to contacts. Questions you may want to ask include:

- **A detailed description of the job:** What challenges, rewards, or frustrations have you encountered? What kinds of decisions do you make? What does a typical day look like?
- **Desirable skills, education, and experience:** What training or experience is required? What did you do to prepare for entering this field? What coursework, skills, and internship experience(s) might be valuable for me if I decide to enter this field?
- **Career paths and advancement:** What are your career goals? What kinds of opportunities do you see this job preparing you for?

Other important areas of discussion might include:

- **Lifestyle implications of the work:** e.g. travel, hours, pressure, flexibility, salary/benefits, work/life balance, job security, etc. It's 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.
- **Work environment:** physical setting, people (colleagues and clients), organizational structure and culture—How does this job fit into the department's/organization's structure? How does this department work with other departments, and which ones?
- **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:** Ask for recommendations of journals, other contacts, professional groups, and names of other organizations known within the field for offering great internship or postgraduate 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 provide the most information possible.

### C. How Should I Go About Obtaining an Interview?

Start with your least intimidating contacts. **Write an email or call:** Call first if they have specified that they would like to be contacted by phone. Email first if you think the contact would appreciate having a brief introduction and a sense of what you're exploring, or if you're not confident about presenting yourself over the phone (see the sample introductory email below). Remember, even when emailing, it's preferable to have a conversation either by phone, Zoom, 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 specific location (preferably workplace), and a limited duration (perhaps 30 minutes). Be prepared to settle graciously for an over-the-phone interview if it's the only alternative. However if a phone interview is suggested, it's worth asking if Zoom is an option.

#### Sample Phone Introduction

"Ms. Smith, my name is Emilio Sanchez, and I'm a student concentrating in Sociology at Harvard. I got your name from the Harvard alumni database. I understand that you're a writer with *The New York Times*. I'd love to hear more about your career path, and how you got your start, and was wondering if you'd 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 can be reached. Follow up by email, referencing the phone message.

## 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 pitch" that summarizes the student's interests.

Dear Ms. Jones:

I am an English concentrator at Harvard College and will graduate with an A.B. in May, 2023. I found your name through the Harvard alumni database, and I am writing to ask your advice about the field of publishing.

Book publishing is a career option I have considered for some time. I'm 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 a movie critic. I am eager to learn more about the field of publishing to determine if my interest in writing and editing would be a good fit 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 isn't convenient, perhaps we could talk by phone at another time.

Please let me know if there are any particular dates/times that work best with your schedule.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

YOUR NAME

**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 or LinkedIn. 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. However, you won't have a 100% response rate. Don't take this as rejection, but as an indication of how demanding their job may be. If you have not heard back after the initial outreach plus two follow-ups, focus your attention on other contacts from your list.



## D. Keep Track of Your Networking Contacts

When you're actively building your network for a job or conducting informational meetings, it's **VERY IMPORTANT to keep yourself organized!**

Set up a spreadsheet, and include relevant information for each contact. Here's 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/email (update with most recent action step needed)  
To-do by: September 19, 2021  
Referral Source: Harvard alumni database  
Location: Seattle, WA  
Website: [www.gatesfoundation.org](http://www.gatesfoundation.org)  
Email: [info@gatesfoundation.org](mailto:info@gatesfoundation.org) (preferably Bill's direct email!)  
Phone: 206-123-4567

### Contact History:

	Contact 1	Contact 2	Contact 3
Date:	Sept. 1, 2021	Sept. 10, 2021	Sept. 14, 2021
Type:	email	phone, voice mail	On-site info interview
Notes:	introduced self requested info mtg	polite reminder requested info mtg	copious notes on entire visit!
Follow-ups:	phone	return call; set date	Thank you note/email
Status:	DONE	DONE	TO-DO by Sept. 19

Referred to: Madeline Albright, Kofi Annan, Warren Buffet  
(make entries for all these, using Bill Gates as the referral source)

## Do's and Don'ts of the Informational Meeting Process

### DO:

- Act as professionally as you would for any interview: email or call to confirm a day or so ahead, dress appropriately (we recommend business casual), and arrive a little early so you can experience the work environment as well as relax before your appointment.
- Feel free to bring 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. Remember to update your notes *immediately* after the interview with what you have learned.
- Respect your host's time. Stick to the time frame suggested in your email or phone conversation unless you are invited to stay longer. Be sensitive to nonverbal cues that it is time to end the interview.
- 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).
- Ask the person to review your resume with you. Ask for advice on how to best present yourself, what skills may need refining, and which areas need attention or development to best qualify you for that field. Also, be sure to ask for advice on what other experience and knowledge may be needed for the field.
- Offer to pay if you've gone out for lunch or coffee for your meeting ("One who invites offers to pay"). But you may accept graciously if they insist on paying.
- Ask about compensation in a general way, but **DON'T** ask about their personal income. You might say, "If I were to enter this field, 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.
- Open doors to additional contacts by asking "Are there other people whom you think I should meet as I continue to investigate this field?"
- Keep your contact network informed of your career development progress, particularly if they have taken an interest in your career or referred you to specific individuals. Maintaining professional contacts is an ongoing process that will benefit you throughout your career.
- Write a timely thank you note expressing your appreciation for the person's time. This is important regardless of how helpful you perceive the conversation to have been.
- Follow up with contacts you receive and research any professional organizations recommended to you.

### DON'T:

- After speaking with only one or two people, DON'T assume their views are representative of the field. Get multiple perspectives and continue to develop your network!
- DON'T ask your contact for a job, even indirectly. That's not what you are there for.

### Developing your "Elevator Pitch"

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 pitch" serves as an introduction 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.

Here 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 won't have just one elevator pitch. Develop your basic introduction, then alter it to be appropriate for different audiences and situations. PRACTICE delivering your introduction out loud to yourself and to friends. 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, good eye contact, and a smile, you will make a **GREAT FIRST IMPRESSION**.