

Building Professional Connections

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WHY START NOW?

Many students begin thinking about building their network as they prepare to apply for jobs. But it's important to begin building your professional connections as soon as you can. A network of professional connections will help you:

- Explore career options and interests.
- Get career advice about how you might prepare yourself for a certain field or position.
- Obtain information about organizations you might want to work with.
- Identify contacts for informational conversations.
- Discover potential job or internship opportunities.

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

THE BASICS

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

You need a few things to get started:

- An idea of what information you are seeking in your career exploration or job search.
- A brief personal introduction.
- A system to manage contacts (such as an Excel spreadsheet).
- An interest in learning and an openness to connecting with people.
- A greeting and a smile.
- A few questions to get the conversation going.

Interact with people who have similar interests:

- Get referrals from people in your network.
- Use [Firsthand Advisors](#) to connect virtually with alumni from a variety of Harvard schools who have volunteered to offer you a resume review, mock interview, or simple career conversation.
- Join professional networking websites like LinkedIn. Be sure to use the LinkedIn alumni feature (visit a LinkedIn school page and click on the alumni tab) to find additional Harvard alums who might be willing to speak with you.
- Meet Harvard alumni and alumni from other institutions you have attended. The Harvard Alumni database is available to Harvard students and graduates via the Harvard Alumni Association website: www.alumni.harvard.edu.
- Talk to academic faculty and department staff to identify alumni in your field.
- Attend professional organization meetings (try the [Associations Unlimited database](#), available through HOLLIS).
- Get involved with community organizations and do volunteer work to interact with people who share your interests.
- Attend programming offered by career-related Graduate Student [Groups](#) at Harvard and consider joining the leadership team.

Start simply: Set a goal to meet one new person wherever you go!

WHAT IS AN INFORMATIONAL CONVERSATION?

In an informational conversation (also known as an informational interview) you talk with a professional, typically employed in a 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're seeking to answer questions like:

- 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 started in this field?
- What does a typical day look like for you?
- What would you do differently if you were to do it again?

A Mutually Beneficial Process

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

The benefits of informational conversations:

BENEFITS FOR YOU

- Get insider advice on entering a field; learn what is necessary to obtain a job.
- 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 generally be considered too direct in a job interview.
- Gain visibility in the field.
- Expand your network of contacts – maybe even gain a mentor.
- Build confidence in yourself and your decision to move into the field. – OR –
- Learn 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.

BENEFITS FOR THEM

- Share information about their job and career path – People like to talk about themselves!
- Pass along wisdom and advice.
- Give back – they probably got started the same way.
- Recognize you are a potential new colleague – a professional contact for THEM when you enter field.
- May gain valuable info, 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.
- Strengthen professional relationships with colleagues, e.g. by referring you to a colleague who eventually hires you.
- Potentially earn a referral bonus if they refer you and you are eventually hired.

Allows them to assess your:

- Personal/professional chemistry.
- Initiative (sometimes, the only way in!)
- Communication skills.

Remember:

Never ask for a job directly. Ask for advice.

ETIQUETTE and GUIDELINES

- Be well **prepared** for each conversation. When you ask for advice or help, and you know what you're looking for, it's easy for people to say "yes." Develop a list of questions ahead of time. See the list at the end of this booklet for examples.
- Find a **connection** to make introductions easier. Look for Harvard alumni through the [Harvard Alumni Association's database](#) (available to Harvard students and alumni/ae), [LinkedIn](#), or [Firsthand Advisers](#).
- Always be **professional, courteous, and considerate**.
- Be **genuine**. Possess a sincere desire to learn. Be honest in asking for advice.
- 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**. Let the contact decide if he or she is willing to pass on job leads to you. But do ask for advice on how to obtain jobs in that field.
- Do **ask for suggested names** of other people in the field you might talk to.
- **Give back**. Learn 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 **gracious**. Appreciate the time and effort of your contacts and send a **thank you note**.
- **Stay in touch**. Check in periodically. Update people in your network when you make significant progress in your research or job search.
- **Have faith** that building a professional network will ultimately result in job leads.

HOW DO I GET STARTED?

A. Who Should I Contact?

Create a list of potential contacts within your fields of interest. Look for people doing a job you'd like to do, in a field you'd like to investigate, or working for an organization that interests you. Contacts can be people you already know (through your lab, friends, or community activity) or people you have never met. Obtain names of new contacts through:

- **People you already know**. Career advisers, friends, relatives, faculty, 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](#) (available to Harvard students and alumni/ae) lists the contact information for alumni who have indicated that they're willing to speak with students about their career paths.
 - [Firsthand Advisers](#) is an online tool that connects current Harvard students to hundreds of alumni advisers offering career conversations, resume reviews, and interview prep.
 - Also see [LinkedIn](#).
- **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 Human Resource offices (unless you're considering jobs in HR!) since you are seeking information,

not a job. Review organization websites or LinkedIn to secure the names/titles of appropriate individuals.

- [Associations Unlimited](#) is a database of national and local trade associations, accessed by visiting HOLLIS. Databases 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. Platforms like [Imagine PhD](#) have valuable tools like Job Family Resources that can help you better understand different pathways. View our [Vault guides](#) as well.

Questions: Think about what you hope to learn and develop questions that will elicit that information. Write a list before you begin to help you prepare. Questions you may want to ask 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? What does a typical day look like?
- **Desirable skills, education, and experience:** What training or experience is required? What did you do in preparation for entering the field? What courses could I take, skills should I possess, or experience might be valuable 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?

Other important areas of discussion might include:

- **Lifestyle implications of the work:** e.g., travel, hours, pressure, flexibility, salary/benefits, family policy, security, schedule flexibility if working remotely with competing priorities, etc. It's acceptable 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—if working remotely, How is your organization cultivating community?—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:** 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 by providing the most information possible.

C. How Should I Go About Obtaining an Interview?

Start with your least intimidating contacts first. **Message through LinkedIn, write an email, or call:** Call first if they have specified that they would like to be contacted by phone. Message 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.) Remember, even when writing, it's 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 who you are, what you want (NOT a job, just information), and suggest a time frame (a particular week and perhaps 30 minutes). Provide flexibility for a phone or video chat conversation. However, if a phone call is suggested, see if Zoom is an option.

Sample phone introduction:

"Director Smith, my name is Emilio Sanchez, and I'm a graduate student in Sociology at Harvard. I received your name from the Harvard Alumni Association database. I understand that you are a writer with *The New York Times*. I'd love to hear more about your career path and learn more about *The Times*, and was wondering if you would be willing to set up a time to share your experience with me."

Sample Introductory Email

This email message is to request an informational conversation to learn more about the field of investment banking. As such, Suzanne is careful to avoid asking for a job, or for anything other than the chance to listen and ask questions about the experience making the transition from academe to Wall Street.

Dear Director Ramos:

I found your name through LinkedIn and saw that you completed your PhD in Applied Math before beginning your work as a quantitative analyst. I will be completing my PhD in Biology at Harvard next summer and am interested in learning more about how I might use my quantitative and analytical skills in investment banking.

Banking is a career option that I have been considering for some time. I am wondering if we could meet so I could learn more about your career path and your experience working on Wall Street. While I do not have specific work experience in finance, I am an avid reader of the Wall Street Journal and the Financial Times. I have also spoken to a few former members of my department about their own decisions to leave academe and use their skills in the private sector.

I'd greatly appreciate the chance to connect for 20 minutes by video chat or phone with you about your experience at Wall Street Bank. If this time frame is not convenient for you, I'm happy to arrange a time to speak on the phone.

Thank you very much for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Suzanne Smith
she/her/hers

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. However, know that you won't have a 100% response rate, either. Don't take this as rejection—they don't 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, 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 interviews, it's **NECESSARY to keep yourself organized!**

Do's and Don'ts of Informational Conversations

Do act as professionally as you would for any interview. Even if participating remotely, still dress professionally and be on time.

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

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 conversation.

Do be sure to send your resume in advance if they ask and bring a copy along to your meeting (to present yourself and your background, not to obtain a job).

Do ask the adviser to review your resume. 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 plan to meet in person, if you've gone out for lunch or coffee for your meeting. 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 adviser'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 (i.e. salary.com or payscale.com), 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. Do ask, "What advice do you have for me if I am seeking a job at an organization like yours?"

Do open doors to additional contacts by asking "Are there other people you think I should meet as I continue to investigate this field?"

Do keep your 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.

Do write a timely thank you note expressing your appreciation for the adviser'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!

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. 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 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 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**.

Potential Questions to Ask in Informational Conversations (be selective and tailor to each person)

A Good Way to Begin

- I'd love to hear about your career trajectory and how you came into this position.

What Work is Like

- Could you describe a typical workday?
- What skills are required in your position on a day-to-day basis?
- What parts of your job do you find most challenging?
- What do you find most enjoyable or rewarding?
- What are your typical work hours?
- What salary range might I expect at the entry level? (Only ask of people at higher levels than you are targeting)

State of the Industry

- What developments on the horizon could affect future opportunities in this field?
- This industry has changed dramatically in the past five years. What have you seen inside your company?
- What types of growth opportunities exist within your organization?
- Where do people typically go after leaving this company?
- Who are the most important people in the industry today?
- Which companies have the best track record for promoting women and minorities?

Skills and Experience

- What qualifications do you seek in a new hire?
- Which of my skills are strong compared to other job hunters in this field?
- What do you think of the experience I've had so far? For what types of positions would it qualify me?
- What do you think of my resume? How do you suggest I change it?
- What companies might be interested in hiring someone with my background?
- What educational preparations would you recommend for someone who wants to advance in this field?
- Taking into account my skills, education, and experience, what other career paths would you suggest I explore?

Fitting In

- Considering my background, how well do you think I would fit into this company and/or profession?
- How does your company compare with others we've discussed?
- Which personal attributes are essential for success in this field/type of position/company?

More Information

- Where can I get up-to-date information on salaries, employers, and industry issues?
- What professional journals and organizations should I be aware of?
- Is there anything else you think I need to know?

Always End With

- What overall advice do you have for me if I'm looking to get a job in an organization like yours?
- Who else would you recommend I speak with? When I contact them, may I use your name?
- *Always send an email thanking the person for their time and advice!*