

# FLASHPOINT CHICAGO

A CAMPUS OF COLUMBIA COLLEGE HOLLYWOOD

## WHAT IS AN INFORMATIONAL INTERVIEW?

An informational interview is a tool everyone should use throughout the job search. It's a hybrid of an amazing networking opportunity, an info-session, and a job interview, it can give anyone looking for a job or pondering a career change, an insider scoop.

These opportunities aren't advertised anywhere, and they typically require a lot of work on your end to make them happen and, in most cases, it means you have to convince strangers why they should take time out of their day to chat with you. With the right approach, you can land these interviews (and maybe even a job). Below are a few tips to keep in mind when planning for an informational interview:

### Find the Right People

This may seem obvious, but choosing who you approach can make all the difference in hearing back from them. Start by making a list of companies you'd love to work at and of job titles or positions you'd be interested in. While people who fit on either list are good, someone who works at your dream company *and* has your dream role is where you'll get the most benefit.

That being said, it's important to consider what the person does at the company and the size of the company—you want to target people who are in an aspirational role, but who aren't so high up that they won't have time to meet with you. You may want to talk to the CEO of a major company, but you can probably learn more talking to the marketing director of a smaller company. Also, look for people you have some sort of connection with—if someone went to your college or has a shared connection, he or she will be more likely to want to meet with you. LinkedIn is the ideal platform recommended to find people.

### Perfect the Art of the Ask

Any good "cold" email has two things: a clear message (why you're reaching out), and an easy-to-understand ask (the action you want the recipient to take). Here's a simple formula that checks both boxes and that will work most of the time:

#### 1. Start by Asking for Help

This sounds obvious (and a bit odd), but it's a proven fact that people love to feel like they are helping others. So, if you literally start by saying, "I'd love your help," or "I hope you'll be able to help me out..." your chances of getting a positive response increase significantly.

#### 2. Be Clear

Ask for something very specific, and make it as easy as possible for the person to say yes. Saying, "I'd love to know more about what you do and how you got your start" is okay, but it doesn't tell someone how much of his or her time you're after or what you're really suggesting. Instead, try something like: "I'd love to take you for a quick coffee so I can hear your perspective on this industry and what it's like to work at your company. I'll actually be in your area next week and would be happy to meet you wherever is convenient for you."

# FLASHPOINT CHICAGO

## A CAMPUS OF COLUMBIA COLLEGE HOLLYWOOD

### **3. Have a Hook**

A great way to increase your chance of landing the interview is to demonstrate why you really want to meet with this person. Do you admire her career path? Do you think the work he's currently doing at company XYZ stands out as the best? Maybe you have a shared connection and think she would be a great voice of wisdom. Don't be afraid to share why you are specifically reaching out to this person. The more personalized your ask feels, the greater chance of success you'll have.

### **4. Be Very Considerate**

Remember that, in asking for an informational interview, you're literally asking someone to put his or her work on hold to help you. Show your contact you understand this by saying, "I can only imagine how busy you must be, so 15-20 minutes would be so appreciated."

### **5. Don't Come Across Like You're Looking for a Job...Even if You Are**

If you sound like you're really just looking for a job, chances are this person will push you to HR or the company's career page. So be sure to make it clear that you really want to talk to this person to learn about his or her career history and perspective on the job or industry. After you meet and make a great impression, that's when you can mention the job hunt.

### **Follow Up, and Be Pleasantly Persistent**

If you don't hear back right away, don't worry. People are busy, and sometimes these things slip to the bottom of a person's to-do list. The key is to not give up. If you haven't heard back in a week, email them and politely ask if your contact has had a chance to read your previous email. Also, use this opportunity to reiterate how much it would mean to you to have 15 minutes to learn from him or her.

It's your responsibility to continue to follow up (as nicely as possible) every couple of weeks until you've heard an answer one way or the other. Some would say that after one or two tries, you run the risk of upsetting the person—but sometimes, persistence pays off. At the end of the day, it's really up to you and your personal comfort level.

That being said, once you shoot off a few emails, you'll see that most people are happy to help (hey, people love talking about themselves). What's the next step? Getting ready for the meeting.

# FLASHPOINT CHICAGO

## A CAMPUS OF COLUMBIA COLLEGE HOLLYWOOD

### CONDUCTING THE PERFECT INFORMATIONAL INTERVIEW

Let's say you managed the tricky process of asking for an informational interview and have succeeded in arranging a meeting with an ideal contact. What now? How do you make the most of this conversation while still keeping things casual and comfortable? As always, it's just a matter of being prepared. Below are a few tips for your next meeting that'll make sure you get the advice you need and make a great impression.

#### 1. Warm Up

People love to talk about themselves, so when you first sit down, let them! Get the conversation going by asking your contact something about his or her experiences thus far, something he or she knows all about. Some good places to begin are:

**How did you get your start in this field?**

**What's it like working at your company?**

**What projects are you working on right now?**

**What's your opinion on [exciting development in the industry]?**

You should also be prepared to chat about yourself, your past experiences, and your career goals. Remember, this meeting isn't just a time to ask for advice and learn from your contact's experiences, it's also a chance to make an impression. For example, don't be afraid to preface your questions with what you already know. Something like, "It looks like recent developments in the field of virtual reality are going to be quite impactful to the design industry. How do you think this will affect your company?"

#### 2. Get What You Want

After you've made some general conversation, it's time to move on to what you came for: the advice you can't get anywhere else.

Before the meeting, think through the insider information you want to learn from this person. What information are you seeking? Is there something you can learn from this person that would be difficult for you to learn on your own? Depending on where you are in the job search process, adjust your questions accordingly. For example, if you're still in exploration mode, trying to find out if, say, working for an educational technology startup is for you, then ask questions like:

**How did you choose this company or position over others in your field?**

**What is the most rewarding thing about working in this industry? What's the most challenging?**

**My background is in urban planning; how do you think I can best leverage my previous experience for this field?**

# FLASHPOINT CHICAGO

## A CAMPUS OF COLUMBIA COLLEGE HOLLYWOOD

If you're further along in your job search and could use some job hunting and interviewing tips for specific companies, don't be afraid to ask questions like:

**I'm waiting to hear back about interviews for positions, what advice would you give me on how to best prepare?**

**What experiences, skills, or personality traits does your company look for in new hires?**

**What do you wish you had done differently when you first started at your company?**

**What job search advice would you give to someone in my situation?**

Of course, you'll want to go with the flow of the conversation. After all, you're trying to build a relationship, not fire off as many questions as you can. Also remember that what these questions have in common is that they are all seeking advice. Keep it that way. It's no mystery that you are clearly looking for a new position or career change, and the fastest way to alienate your contact is to ask for a job (or anything along those lines). If your contact offers to forward your résumé based on your conversation, then by all means, take advantage of it, but that process is for him or her to initiate, not you.

### **3. Tap Into Their Network**

As you're wrapping up the meeting, you should ask for recommendations for two or three additional people who would be good to talk to as you continue networking. The likelihood that someone will take time to chat with you goes up significantly if your initial request comes through a mutual contact, so it's a fast, easy way to talk to even more people.

The key here is to make your request as specific as possible. This might be counterintuitive, but it actually makes it easier for your contact to think of someone when you say, "Could you recommend a couple people for me to speak with to learn more about audio opportunities for recent graduates?" than to come up with an answer to, "Is there anyone else you would recommend that I speak with?"

Remember, get the conversation going, know what you want to get out of the meeting, and don't leave without knowing who you're contacting next. And don't forget to follow up with a thank-you note! Better yet, follow up again with an update on your meetings with the people he or she recommended and the results of your job search. After all, your informational interviewees aren't just useful for their one-time advice, they can become a long-term part of your network.