**DEC 11, 2013 @ 01:30 PM 309,413**[**The Little Black Book of Billionaire Secrets**](http://bit.ly/2fTiz7H)

Forbes Article:

How To Land And Ace An Informational Interview

[**Jacquelyn Smith**](https://www.forbes.com/sites/jacquelynsmith/), FORBES STAFF *If it has to do with leadership, jobs, or careers, I'm on it.*

[](http://b-i.forbesimg.com/jacquelynsmith/files/2013/12/1019_interview_650x455.jpg)Most professionals are aware of the value of research and networking in the job search process. Savvy job seekers connect with the right people on LinkedIn; study corporate websites to learn more about the companies they’re most interested in; and stay up-to-date on industry news and trends. But as it turns out, one of the *most* valuable tools—one that offers job seekers *both* networking opportunities *and* occupational information—is the informational interview.

“An informational interview is a meeting featuring a conversation about a particular company or industry between you and someone who may be in a position to help you get a job in the future, either directly or indirectly,” explains [Andy Teach](http://andyteach.com/), a corporate veteran and author of [*From Graduation to Corporation*](http://www.amazon.com/From-Graduation-Corporation-Practical-Corporate/dp/1438930631). “Ideally, you want to have the interview in person, not by telephone, or on Skype or FaceTime, because a face-to-face meeting will give the interviewer the best chance for getting to know you.”

Sara Sutton Fell, chief executive and founder of [Flexjobs](http://www.flexjobs.com/" \t "_blank), agrees. She says an informational interview is a great way for job seekers to do exactly that - get information - without having a formal job interview scheduled. “Essentially, you find someone in your profession or who works at a company where you’re interested in working, and ask them if they are willing to chat with you about what they do, potential career paths, their experience in the field, and their advice for you. Informational interviews can be done with people who are in your network, which is generally easier, or people you reach out to out of the blue.”

David Parnell, a legal consultant, communication coach and [*Forbes* contributor](http://www.forbes.com/sites/davidparnell/), says: “While informational interviews are taken under the guise of ‘learning more about the company,’ their true purposes are to impress your connection within the company, and to gather intelligence that might help secure a job there. Looking at this from the perspective of a job seeker, there are two types of informational interviews: those secured directly, and those secured through a referral. This divide is crucial, because the truly benevolent interviewer is a myth, and understanding their motivation helps direct your strategy.”

Where the interview was secured through a referral, it is usually done as a favor--and with little to no benefit to the interviewer, he explains. “Still be prepared to make your host comfortable by showing up with an arsenal of questions, your Sunday’s best and manners, to boot--but worry less about impressing them, and more about exploring other avenues within the company.” Your primary goal, here, will be the gathering of intelligence, first, and impressing the interviewer with your skills, second, he says.

Where the interview was secured directly--via cold call, e-mail or online social network--the interviewer certainly has his or her own agenda in taking the meeting, which usually consists of looking for an outstanding candidate that might tip the scales for an immediate hire, or a quality candidate that might be contacted down the road. “In either case, this interview needs to be taken much more seriously and treated like a regular interview, with an updated resume, polished skills and your sales hat on. Your primary goal is to impress the interviewer, first, and gather intelligence, second.”

Katharine Brooks, executive director of the office of personal and career development at Wake Forest University and author of [*You Majored in What? Mapping Your Path from Chaos to Career*](http://www.amazon.com/You-Majored-What-Mapping-Career/dp/0452296005/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1338822781&sr=8-1), says an informational interview allows you to learn more about a profession than you would by just reading about it. “The individual in the field can give you the ‘inside scoop’ about what the field is really like and provide helpful insider tips you might not otherwise get. The information you get can help you decide whether you would want a career in that field or not.” Plus, she says, the more knowledge you have, the better decisions you can make about your career. "You'll also be better prepared for the real job interview--you will be able to tell the potential employer that you have fully researched the field and demonstrate better knowledge of the field.”

Sutton Fell agrees. She says informational interviews keep job seekers “fresh,” as they get them in front of people who can offer them advice and help guide them in a particular career field or industry. “It can lead to more information and contacts that may lead to a job,” she says. “It’s also great practice for job interviewing, helping to make you more comfortable and confident in situations with industry professionals. For people who aren't currently seeking a job, they help to expand your professional network, keep you fresh in your current industry, or give you a chance to learn about new industries in case you're thinking of a career change.”

Another reason informational interviews are key: Not all jobs are advertised--but those on the inside may be knowledgeable about current or future job openings in their company or at another company, Teach says. “If you set up an informational interview, you're ahead of the game because you're benefiting from a face-to-face conversation with someone who's in a position to hire or refer you. You can make much more of an impression on a hiring manager when you're sitting in front of them which increase the chances of having them remember you when a position you're suited for comes up in the future.”

How do you land an informational interview?

"Do your research," Teach says. “Target specific people you want to speak with at a company you're interested in working for,” he explains. “You can do a search on LinkedIn or just Google them. Get the main phone number of the company they work for and call it. Ask the operator for your target person's direct phone number and then ask the operator to connect you.”

Try not to leave a message if it goes to voicemail since it's less likely they will return the call of someone they don't know, he says, but you should have a 20- to 30-second speech ready that mentions why you're interested in speaking with them. “You want to talk about your background, why you're interested in their company, and why you want to specifically meet with that person. You should also mention that you realize that there might not be a job available now but you'd love to speak with them in person for 20 minutes if they have the time.”

If they say “no” or you can't reach them, try someone else in that department or company, Teach suggests. “I can tell you from personal experience that I've received those phone calls and have granted informational interviews. Not everyone will have the time or desire to speak with you so be prepared for some rejection. It's a numbers game so the more people you call, the better chance you have of setting up an informational interview.”

Another way to set up an informational interview is to track down fellow alumni from your alma mater. You can find alumni by either doing a search on LinkedIn or by going through the alumni association of your college or college career center, Teach says. “If you call someone out of the blue and the first thing you mention is that you graduated from the same college as they did, you immediately have something in common with the person you wish to meet with and that alone could be enough for them to grant you an informational interview.”

Sutton Fell recommends that you start with people you know well when trying to land an informational interview. “Family, friends, former colleagues and/or current colleagues,” she says. “Then, in these ‘low level’ interviews, you can ask the person you're speaking with if they have anyone else they wouldn't mind connecting you with for further exploration and information.” This is how you expand your network. One of your last questions in an informational interview should be: *Who else should I be speaking with? And who can you connect me with for more information?*

If and when you land an informational interview, here’s how to ace it:

**Research the company**. Just like you would for a job interview, spend a lot of time on the company's website to find out about their products and services, their locations and the names of their key executives, Teach says. “Print out their latest press releases so that you can discuss what's going on with company now. Your extensive knowledge of their company could impress the person you're speaking with.”

**Research the individual you’re meeting with**. Go on LinkedIn and do a search on the person meeting with you. You can ask them specific questions about their background including why they chose their career and company. “If they're not on LinkedIn, Google them,” Teach says. “Look for any interests or background that you might have in common with them.”

**Dress to impress.** First impressions count so dress conservatively as if you're on a real job interview. "You will be judged as soon as you walk in the door by how you look, so make it count," Teach says.

“Dress professionally and always have a copy of your resume with you,” Brooks adds.

**Remember you’re not in a job interview.**The most important rule about informational interviews is they are for information--not a job, Brooks explains. “If you confuse the two, and ask or imply you're really seeking a job, you have defeated the purpose of the interview.  It can also appear that you were ‘tricking’ them into an interview,” she adds. That said, sometimes the person you're interviewing may ask you if you'd be interested in applying for a job, which is fine—as long as it’s their idea, not yours.

**Have a game plan.** Be certain to have a game plan when you arrive, Parnell says. “Regardless of your hopes or intentions, this isn’t a regular interview, and the interviewer isn’t going to take charge.

**Express your gratitude early on.** “Be thankful,” Sutton Fell says. “You're asking someone for their time and information, so start by thanking them earnestly for this.”

**Come prepared with at least five key questions.**Think of questions that can't be answered through the Internet, Brooks says. “Ask such things as: *How did you get into the field? What advice would you have for someone starting out in this field? Who succeeds in this field? What characteristics are needed?*And, *What do you see happening in this field over the next few years?*”

Parnell agrees. He says: “Be prepared with a list of focused questions that will not only highlight your seriousness and professionalism, but also net you useful information for eventually gaining employment.”

Teach says you should use this opportunity to ask the questions you might not want to ask in a job interview. “Ask detailed questions so that you have a really good idea what it would be like to work in a particular company or industry. Ask them to show you examples of the type of work they do. Find out what qualifications are needed to excel in the types of positions they have. You can even ask questions you wouldn't normally ask in a first job interview that relate to salary and benefits,” he says.

**Focus your early questions on the interviewer.**Start by asking about their experience in the field, how they got started, what other careers they considered, etc., Sutton Fell says. “People love to talk about themselves, and the information you get will be interesting and helpful.”

**Don't be nervous.**You shouldn’t be, since this interview is not for a job. “Don't put too much pressure on yourself,” Teach says. “Since this isn't a real job interview, you can relax more and be yourself.”

**Be honest (but professional and polite).**Beating around the bush about why you are *really* there will come off as insincere and possibly offend their intelligence, Parnell explains, so don’t be afraid to be very straightforward. “Explain that you’d love to work there, and are hoping to get some guidance on how best to do that.”

Regardless of the interviewer’s motivations, make no bones about it, they are helping you, he adds. “So be super-considerate of the interviewer’s time by checking their interest-temperature every now and again.”

**Don't ask for a job; ask for advice.** You don't want to put too much pressure on the person speaking with you. Asking directly for a job is a big turnoff to someone who is going out of their way to help you, Teach says. “Always remember that you're on a fact finding mission and that you're just trying to get information to help you make the right decision down the line. This information is going to help you in the future when the right position becomes available.”

Sutton Fell concurs. She says you should never ask outright if they have any job leads for you. “This puts people on the spot and can hurt your chances for future assistance. Instead, ask them about what the company looks for in candidates, what the growing departments of the company are, and what tips they have for breaking into the career or company in general. But don't ask outright for a job.”

**Impress the interviewer.** Your goal is to impress them enough so that they will voluntarily offer to help you find a job, Teach explains. They're not going to refer you to others if you come across as being average or show a lack of passion. “Be enthusiastic and impress them by being articulate about what your background is and why you would be an ideal candidate for any type of job you're looking for.”

**Get referrals.** “Once the interview is over, hopefully they've offered you some referrals to contact,” Teach says. “Keep in mind that when they refer you to someone, their reputation is on the line. If you don't get a referral, ask them what they recommend as next steps for you. Listen carefully to what they say and thank them for their time.”

Brooks agrees. “At the end of the interview--which shouldn't last more than 30 minutes--ask if the individual could recommend anyone else you should speak with.”

**Follow up with a thank-you note or e-mail.** “Always, always, always write a thank-you note or e-mail, regardless of how helpful the informational interview was,” Brooks says.

Teach says to send the thank-you note or e-mail within two days of the informational interview. “Make sure they know how much you appreciated them giving you their time.”

**Keep them informed of your progress.** Keep them in the loop by e-mailing the interviewer after you've met with one of their referrals or after you've gotten a job, Teach says. “By meeting with you, they've invested time in you and they want that time to pay off by seeing you become successful. It will not only make them feel good if you let them know that their advice or referrals paid off, but it will also make it more likely that the next person calling them for an informational interview will get one.”

“Even though it's recommended that you don't ask outright for a job, informational interviews can definitely lead to one,” Sutton Fell says. At the very least, these interviews will give you a better understanding of your field and how to get employed in it. You may get some new networking contacts to conduct more interviews. And, you essentially just got the chance to present yourself as a capable professional in front of someone who might have hiring power. “Even though you aren't asking for a job, the thought may very well occur to the person you're interviewing if you come across as professional, capable, and a good fit for the company.”

Teach says he knows from personal experience that acing an informational interview can ultimately lead to a job. “Keep in mind that you are not just there to ask for advice. You are also there to make a personal connection so that the person you're speaking with will feel comfortable hiring you themselves or referring you to someone else who could hire you,” he says. “Furthermore, even if a particular informational interview doesn't lead directly to a job, it can certainly lead to another informational interview that could lead directly to a job.” Each interview gives you valuable information and can also help you hone your interview skills so that when a real job interview comes up, you'll be prepared to ace it. The more informational interviews you have, the better chance you have of landing the job you want, he concludes.