

Find Your Way into the Hidden Job Market: Informational Interviews

Mention networking to many law students and they freeze. “Why should I network? I’m too shy and I really don’t want to bother people. Besides, why should a total stranger be interested in helping me?” Alternatively, students wonder “Why should I waste my time talking to someone who doesn’t have a specific job available?” These are typical barriers students put up when networking is suggested as a means of finding a job. In any job market, it’s essential to build professional relationships. Fewer attorneys and law students find jobs through traditional sources such as job listings, employment and career service offices, and executive search recruiting firms. The rest of the jobs are found through people you know and people you have yet to meet.

Think of networking and informational interviewing as a way to increase your job-finding visibility, meet many new people and explore different career paths and fields. It is an indirect path to a job that may come your way at an unexpected moment. Why will strangers take the time to meet with you? Most people are flattered to receive an e-mail or phone call asking for their help. Their egos are stroked when a colleague recommends them to a student as a knowledgeable person in a field. Many practitioners enjoy being mentors and passing knowledge and advice on to less experienced law students. Furthermore, many employers hire employees based on recommendations of people they know. If an employee leaves a job suddenly and the position must be filled immediately the employer often will not have time to list the job. Instead, she will ask her colleagues whether they can recommend someone for the position.

WHAT IS AN INFORMATIONAL INTERVIEW?

Informational interviewing is the key to getting your foot in the door of the hidden job market. Informational interviewing is:

- An informal meeting, 15-20 minutes long, during which you gather information on areas of law, types of practice, firm culture, legal trends, career options and other topics.
- A way to increase and build your network of contacts.
- An entry into the hidden job market.

BUT REMEMBER~an informational interview is not a job interview. Your objective is to gather information and if, during the process; your contact is so impressed by you that she states she will keep you in mind if an opening should arise, then more power to you! People are more likely to help you if you come seeking only information and not a job opening. So do not abuse those who agree to take time out of their day to meet with you and give you advice.

Networks take time to build and develop; don’t rush it.

HOW TO SET UP AN INFORMATIONAL INTERVIEW

Network to Meet New People

The more opportunities you take advantage of to meet new people, the more you can increase your chances of meeting someone who can help you. Informational interviews can be set up by phone, e-mail, or preferably by personal contact. But in order to set up an interview, you need to meet people with information and contacts.

Possible networking arenas for attorneys include:

- Bar Association events
- Continuing education classes
- Alumni events for undergraduate and graduate schools
- Student divisions of attorney organizations
- Volunteer positions at non-profits or other civic organizations
- Sports teams, golf games, sporting events, gyms, religious functions, political functions and other social gatherings.

Prepare a Networking Strategy

Make a list of people you know; this includes:

- Family, friends, neighbors, acquaintances, including those out of town.
- Co-workers, supervisors, former co-workers.
- Business associates.
- Service industry businesses you regularly use (dry cleaner, hairstylist, doctor).
- Professional association contacts.
- Social and religious organization contacts (sports teams, gym, classes, churches, temples, etc.
- Academic contacts (professors, other students, administrators).
- College alumni contacts.

Make a List of People You Would Like to Meet:

- Attorneys in the news (read the *Daily Journal*, *Recorder*, *California Lawyer* and other legal newspapers and magazines).
- Alumni practicing in the field of law or at the firm or organization of your interest (see the Alumni Mentor tab on McGeorgeCareersOnline).
- Attorneys in your field or city of interest. (Do a WESTLAW or LEXIS-NEXIS search; scan Martindale-Hubbell, read the local newspapers and legal magazines).
- People in fields outside the law if you are interested in alternative careers or a non-traditional legal career (meet with a CDO career advisor to find out what resources are available).

Requesting an Informational Interview:

- If e-mailing your contact, clearly state that you are a law student and you are seeking information and insight about a topic (practice area, employer, etc.) and do NOT attach your resume.
- If calling by phone, have a script prepared.
- Make it clear that you are seeking only information and advice and *not* a job.
- Be friendly and courteous, especially to staff, as they may be able to help you make contact.
- Have a list of questions prepared in case the contact is unable to meet with you but is willing to speak over the phone.

AT THE INFORMATIONAL INTERVIEW

- Arrive early and dress professionally.
- Research your interviewer, her firm and practice.
- Bring a copy of your resume but do not give her a copy unless
 - (1) She requests it; or
 - (2) You have already established a rapport and you feel comfortable showing it to her to ask for advice and suggestions for improvement.
- Have your list of questions and your skills summary ready. Be prepared to take notes.

At the beginning of the interview, mention the person who referred you (if applicable) and your reason for setting up the meeting. Thank your interviewer for meeting with you, give a brief overview of yourself (your elevator speech) and ask your questions. The questions should indicate that you've done your homework. This is not a job interview, so the focus is not on you.

Get the interviewer to talk about herself, her career path and training and her daily work before asking for contacts. If you launch right into "who else do you suggest I speak with" prior to establishing a rapport with her and demonstrating your interest in her work, she probably won't be willing to share names of friends or colleagues. Do request names of additional contacts toward the end of the interview. If no new contact names pop up naturally in the conversation, ask "who should I contact next?" or "Do you know anyone at that firm/in that field?"

Do not overstay your welcome. Remember, she is taking time out of a busy day to meet with you. Stick to the 15-20 minute time limit. If the interviewer is talking and time is running out, mention this to her and inform her that you do not wish to take up too much of her time. If she says it is alright to stay, then do so. But don't stay longer unless you are invited. At the conclusion of the interview, thank her for her time and for her invaluable help.

What Questions Should You Ask?

Prepare questions to ask at the informational interview. Approach the interview as though you were a journalist. Figure out what it is you want and need to know and formulate open-ended questions which will get your contact talking.

Suggested Informational Interview Questions

Contact's Career:

- How did you develop an interest in this field?
- What was your career path leading to your current position?
- What methods did you utilize to conduct a job search while you were in law school or as a recent graduate?
- What do you like best/least about your work?
- What are the primary qualities/skills/knowledge considered in hiring a candidate within this field/for this type of position?
- What obligations does this type of practice/work environment place on life outside work?
- What trade publications do you read? What professional organizations do you belong to?
- How long did it take for you to conduct a deposition? Argue a motion? Conduct a trial? Handle a closing? Initiate a client meeting?
- If you could do it over again, what would you do differently? What do you wish you had known when you entered this field?

The Job Market:

- What are the future prospects and growth in this field?
- What is the state of the legal job market in this geographic area?
- Are there other job markets in which this field of law is growing?

Contact's Organization/Firm:

- What is the structure of your firm?
- Do you supervise anyone? To whom do you report?
- What are the work performance expectations?
- What opportunities are there for advancement within the organization?
- What are the organization's plans for the future?
- What are the advantages/disadvantages of practicing in this type of organization?

Your Job Search:

- Can you provide suggestions on
 - improving my resume?
 - interviewing strategies?
 - pursuing other future education or experience?
- What is the best way to find out about job openings in this field?