



The Informational Interview

By William Hendricks

The answer to every concern or question you have about any potential job or career is *information* from someone who is already doing that job or career.

The purpose of an **informational interview** is to get **information** about a potential job or career from someone who is already doing that job or career. By gathering that information, you arm yourself with a means of qualifying a given career option as to whether or not it will really “fit” you—that is, the extent to which it matches your giftedness. The following steps will help you navigate the process of setting up informational interviews.

Step I

Determine the Career Options You Want to Consider

There are more than 12,000 occupations listed in the Dictionary of Occupational Titles (DOT).¹ That’s a lot, but it’s hardly an exhaustive list of all the possible jobs and careers there are in this world. So obviously the place to start your career search is to narrow down the options from those countless possibilities to just a handful that you’re really interested in, and that you really want to explore. If you can get down to six or less options, that would be good. Two or three would be ideal.

Try to get as specific as you can about each option. To say, “I’m looking for something in accounting, or nursing, or law, or whatever” is pretty vague. Of course, maybe that’s as much as you know about a given field, and you don’t even know where to start. In that case, before you approach anyone for an informational interview, hunt around on-line to find some resources and books that will give you a feel for the *career field* in general (accounting, nursing, law, etc.), some of the *occupations* within that field, and examples of the different *places* where people work in those occupations.

Many occupational areas have associations, trade groups, or other clearinghouses that supply materials to explain the field to prospective workers. Don’t waste anyone’s time until you’ve made

the effort to obtain that kind of basic information and look it over. That will help you get more specific about what you are actually interested in. It will also make you more intelligent about what to ask in an informational interview.

A preliminary survey of the field will enable you to go from something hopelessly general like, “I’m looking for something in accounting,” to something very specific like, “I’m interested in the field of forensic accounting and fraud examination.” From, “I’m looking for information about nursing,” to, “I’m looking for information about neonatal nursing, and especially careers in the neonatal ICU.” From, “I’m thinking about law,” to, “I want to find out more about the field of intellectual property law, and specifically the protection of patents and trademarks.”

The finer a point you can put on your inquiry, the better and more helpful the information you will get from informational interviews. That’s because it’s unfair to throw a generic occupational category at someone and say, “Tell me about that area.” If you were five years old you could get away with that: “Daddy, what do accountants do?” But if you’re going to ask someone to spend some of their valuable time supplying you with information they’ve

¹ The DOT is published by the U.S. Department of Labor. It is slowly being replaced by an on-line listing of occupations called the [O*NET](#).

gained over a lifetime, the least you can do is study up on the area in question, so that you display a genuine interest in that area and at least a threshold of awareness for what it involves. To do less is to show the other person that you really don't know what you want to do with your life.

At the other end of the spectrum, don't be afraid of declaring a career interest that may sound so unusual, exotic, or rare that you're sure no one you talk to would ever consider it. You'd be surprised! Maybe your highest aspiration is to design experiments to be run on space vehicles. Maybe you'd like to find out what it would take to become an acrobat with Cirque de Soleil. Maybe you

think being a set designer for the Blue Man Group would be your dream job. Maybe you want to find out how one would go about becoming the pastry chef on the *Oasis of the Seas* cruise ship. Whatever your interest, someone out there is already doing it, or doing something like it. The goal of your search is to get to that person, because they know more about what you're talking about than anyone else in the world. That makes them your best source of information to decide whether that job really does fit you.

But how will you get to that person? The answer, of course, is by talking to people, as follows.

Step II

Start With Your Network

Whether you realize it or not, you are part of a network of people. Your network is much, much larger than you realize. It consists of several layers, but your *immediate network* is: *all the people you know or have ever known in your life*. "Known" means had a relationship, acquaintance, or interaction with at a personal level. In other words, people with whom you have some point of connection.

Perhaps the simplest way to decide if someone is in your immediate network is to answer this question: *Would I feel comfortable contacting this person and reminding them how I know them?* If the answer is yes, they are part of your immediate network.

Some other ways to qualify who is in your immediate network are:

- If you felt comfortable enough to send a high school graduation notice to someone, they are part of your immediate network.
- If you would invite someone to your wedding, they are part of your immediate network.
- If you would send someone a Christmas card, they are part of your immediate network.

What about your "friends" on Facebook?

...or some other social networking site? You'll have to be the judge of how well you actually "know" each of those people. But some of them may well be useful to your information-gathering task. With those folks you can use many of the principles given here.

Whatever their connection to you, all of the people you already know form the network through which you're going to take the next step.

Your Immediate Network

Your immediate network could include people from many, many areas of your life:

- Family and relatives
- Family friends
- Neighbors, past and present
- Friends and acquaintances, past and present
- Classmates from elementary school
- Classmates from middle school
- Classmates from high school
- Classmates from college and graduate school
- People from sports teams you've played on (little league, T-ball, soccer, etc.)
- Members of clubs you've been in (fraternity/sorority, Boy/Girl Scouts, Young Life, debate team, band, FFA, etc.)
- Teachers and professors, past and present
- Coaches, instructors, tutors, mentors
- Pastors, rabbis, youth workers, camp counselors
- Doctors, lawyers, accountants, counselors, and other professionals you use
- College administrators
- People where you work, or used to work

Step III Identify Your Prospects

For each career option you're considering, go through your immediate network and identify three kinds of people:

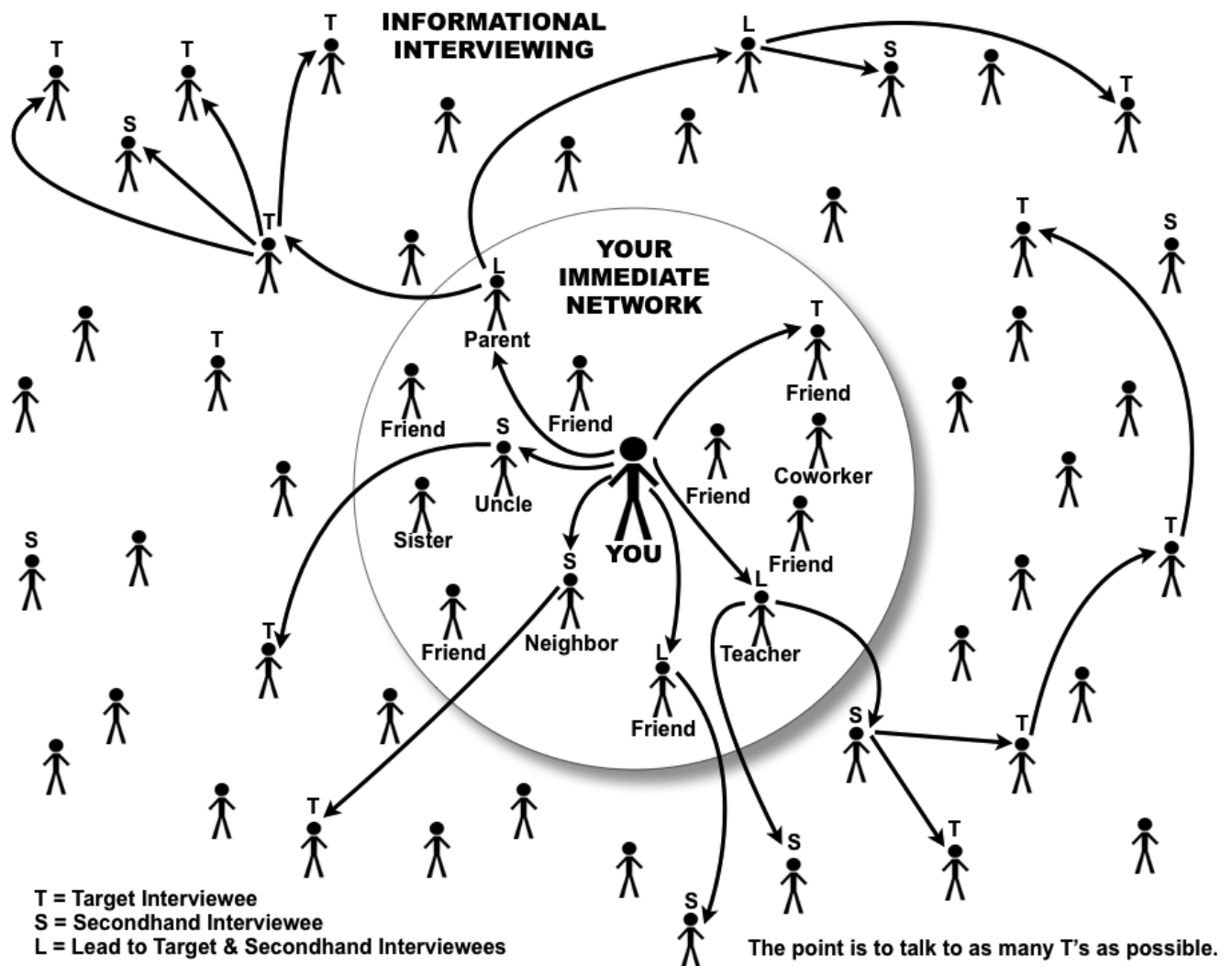
- **T's = Target Interviewees:** Does anyone in my network actually do this job (or used to do it)?
- **S's = Secondhand Interviewees:** Does anyone in my network work in the same basic area as the job I'm considering, even if they don't do exactly that job (or did they used to work there)? For example, an airline pilot is not the same as a flight attendant, but he would certainly know a lot about the job of a flight attendant.
- **L's = Leads to Target Interviewees and Secondhand Interviewees:** Does anyone in my network know someone (or probably know someone) who is actually doing the job I'm considering (or used to do it), or who works in the same basic occupational area as the job I'm considering, even if they

don't do exactly that job (or they used to work) there?

You can see where this is going. You are trying to track down people with information. The *best* sources are people actually doing the job. The *next best* sources are people doing a job related to or alongside the job you are considering. The *third best* sources are leads to people in the first two categories.

The reason you work through your network is that most people are wary of giving time to a total stranger. That's why it's not as productive to just cold-call someone and ask if you can get some of their time. You likely won't. But if a person who knows you and can vouch for you is able to introduce you to someone they know, then that other person is highly likely to give you some time (and information).

The diagram on the next page illustrates this process.



Step IV Make Contact

Once you've identified whom you need to contact, and on what basis, it's time to initiate a conversation. What exactly should you say to get it going? The following is a bit of a script you can use with someone in your

immediate network. It is written as if you were calling the person on the phone. Obviously you customize it to work in an e-mail, or to otherwise suit your purposes.

Hi, [NAME], this is [YOUR NAME].

THEN IMMEDIATELY ESTABLISH YOUR POINT OF CONNECTION.

EXAMPLE: You graduated last year, and we were in the same sorority.

OR: You may remember me from 4th grade. I'll never forget the talent show where you played the guitar.

OR: It's been a while, but I grew up down the street from you when your family lived on [NAME OF STREET].

OR: You may not remember me, but I was in your cabin at [NAME OF CAMP]. Yeah, I'm the one who [GIVE THEM SOME REMINDER TO HELP JOG THEIR MEMORY].

ONCE YOU'VE MADE THAT CONNECTION, YOU CAN ENGAGE IN SOME SMALL TALK, IF IT SEEMS APPROPRIATE, TO ESTABLISH A COMFORT LEVEL AND TO CATCH THE PERSON UP ON WHAT'S BEEN HAPPENING FOR YOU.

BUT EVENTUALLY YOU WANT TO GET TO THE POINT: Well, I'm graduating from [NAME OF COLLEGE] at the end of May, and I'm exploring my career options. One option that really interests me is [NAME OF THE OPTION, OR OCCUPATIONAL TITLE]. But before I get too far in committing to that, I need to get more *information* about what that job/career entails.

IT'S VERY IMPORTANT THAT YOU STATE CLEARLY THAT YOU ARE LOOKING FOR **INFORMATION**, NOT A JOB.

THEN MAKE THE ASK, AS FOLLOWS:

IF THEY ARE A **TARGET INTERVIEWEE**: As I thought about people who might know something about that kind of work, I naturally thought of you, since that's what you do (or used to do). I was wondering if I could set up a time to meet with you [OR TO SET UP A PHONE CALL] for half an hour or so, and ask you some questions to gain a better understanding of [NAME OF THE OPTION OR OCCUPATIONAL TITLE].

IF THEY ARE A **SECONDHAND INTERVIEWEE**: As I thought about people who might know something about that kind of work, I naturally thought of you, since you work (or used to work) with people who do that kind of work. I was wondering if I could set up a time to meet with you [OR TO SET UP A PHONE CALL] for half an hour or so, and ask you some questions to gain a better understanding of [NAME OF THE OPTION OR OCCUPATIONAL TITLE].

IF THEY ARE A **LEAD TO A TARGET OR SECONDHAND INTERVIEWEE**: The reason I'm contacting you is to find out if there's anyone you could *refer* me to who is actually doing (or has done) that job, or who works (or has worked) with people who do, so that I could contact them to gain a better understanding of [NAME OF THE OPTION OR OCCUPATIONAL TITLE].

THE WORD "**REFER**" IS KEY, SINCE IT ESTABLISHES THAT YOU ARE ASKING FOR A REFERRAL FOR INFORMATION, NOT A JOB. REMEMBER, YOU ARE ASKING THE PERSON TO INTRODUCE YOU TO SOMEONE THEY KNOW, WHICH MEANS USING THEIR CONNECTION TO THAT INDIVIDUAL ON YOUR BEHALF. AT HEART, YOU ARE ASKING THEM TO TRUST YOU WITH ONE OF THEIR CONTACTS.

So how are these people likely to respond?

You may be surprised (and encouraged) to know that Target and Secondhand Interviewees are almost always likely to respond *positively* by granting your request for an informational interview. That's because people are always honored that someone would take an interest in their work, and also because seasoned veterans usually like to impart wisdom and insight to someone who is just getting into the game.

If a Target or Secondhand Interviewee agrees to be interviewed, then determine with them whether to meet in person (*always* preferred) or to talk over the phone, and set up a time for the conversation. If they say, "I have a few minutes right now," be prepared with your questions (see below). Or, if you need to schedule a different time, say so, and then suggest some general time frames for the person to consider, and ask what would work for them.

Obviously, you're going to have to accommodate your schedule to your interviewee's schedule, since they are putting themselves out to be available to you. If you have to change your own schedule to meet on their terms, do so (within reason). ***But whatever you do, show up at the time and place scheduled!*** Immediately get the date on your calendar. Get directions to the meeting place if you need them. Figure out how long it's going to take you to get there, and add 15 minutes for traffic or trouble. Then put in place whatever safeguards you need to make sure you show up at the appointed hour. The one unpardonable sin in informational interviewing is to be a no-show.

Where should you meet?

That depends a lot on your relationship to the person, and what will best accommodate them. In general, I recommend not meeting in someone's home: too many distractions, and it's not a particularly professional setting. Of course, if it's your Aunt Mabel who has known you from birth and used to serve you cookies and milk after school when

you were growing up, that's different.

Perhaps the ideal location is a neutral setting that is in public and is designed to facilitate conversation and allow you to take notes. In other words, someplace like a Starbucks, that blends the professional with the social. (By the way, in a venue like that, *always* invite your interviewee to order something, then you order and pay for the both of you.)

What about a restaurant? Not the best choice, unless the interviewee insists. Restaurants tend to be noisy, plus you've got the interruption of the waitstaff (or worse, you're dealing with poor service while trying to hold a conversation). You also have a harder time jotting down notes when you've got a plate of food in front of you.

Plus there's the awkwardness over paying for the meal. As the person asking for the meeting, you are obligated to pay. That can get expensive. But if the interviewee insists on meeting over a meal, that often means s/he is intending to pay. Depending on your relationship with the person, that may be just fine. They may feel honored to have lunch with you. But I recommend clarifying that issue when you're setting up the appointment, by saying something like, "Well, lunch sounds good, but only if it's my treat." Out of courtesy, your interviewee will likely reply, "No, no, I'll pay for it." And you can counter, "Well, let's just go dutch." Some people will accept it at that, others will insist that they are paying. In that case, accept their generosity, but then let them decide on the restaurant, and make the best of it. Again, restaurants are not ideal settings for informational interviews.²

One other possible place to meet an interviewee is at their place of work. That's a great idea *if* (big *if*) the interviewee suggests/invites you to meet there, and *if* meeting there would not interfere with the work of the interviewee or any of his/her coworkers. Meeting in someone's workplace may prove convenient for the interviewee, but it may present some distractions that interfere with what you're trying to accomplish.

² The one exception to this rule is the "unexpected interview," where you are in a social setting, such as a party, wedding reception, or banquet, and you encounter someone who knows a lot about the career option you're exploring. When that happens, seize the moment by asking if the person would mind answering a few questions, and then start firing away. If talking to them in that setting doesn't seem appropriate or workable, see if you can set up an informational interview at a subsequent time.

Of course, some of those distractions may be precisely what you need to see in order to appreciate the realities of what working in that job would be like. For instance, I once tried to hold a meeting with five lawyers in their firm's conference room. During the entire time, I never had the full attention of all five of them, as they all kept fiddling with their Blackberries. Whatever else I gained from that encounter, I learned that I myself could never work in a setting like that.

And that's really the best reason to meet someone at their place of work: you get to see the species in its natural habitat. You get to see what it really looks and feels like to be in that workspace. Is it bigger/smaller than you imagined? Nice place to work, or a dive? High energy, or pretty boring? Regimented and hierarchical, or laid back, entrepreneurial, and/or clubby? Coat-and-tie and dresses sort of place, business casual, or jeans? Indoors or outdoors? A place that feels like home to you? Or a place that repels you and makes you think, *I'd never want to work there?*

What if a Target or Secondhand Interviewee does not agree to an interview?

As stated above, that is unlikely to happen. But there is no guarantee it won't. In the rare case that it does, you are probably going to take that "no" as a rejection. I can almost guarantee it is not. In all likelihood, the person's decision has *nothing* to do with you, and everything to do with them.

So if that happens, you just let it go. Whether or not they give you a reason for not meeting, you say something like, "Well, I understand. No problem. I appreciate your even considering it."

But then add one other question: "If I might ask, is there someone else you would recommend that I talk to?" This question is key for you, because it seeks something valuable from the person which they almost certainly have, and that is a lead to another source of information. But the question is also key for them, because it lets them off the hook, and allows them to save face. Few

people want to disappoint someone else. So having disappointed you by refusing to meet, they now can at least save the day and send you to someone else. That's something.

Maybe one in a thousand people in your network will turn out to be a "dry hole," as they say in the oil and gas industry—meaning a person who will neither grant you an informational interview nor send you to someone else for information. So it's really not a likely possibility. The far more likely outcome is that your network will yield you a rich set of contacts, each of whom turns out to be a goldmine of information.

Contacting Leads to Target or Secondhand Interviewees

So what about the other people in your network, who may be *leads* to Target or Secondhand Interviewees? You'll have to adjust your expectations a bit with those folks, because unless you're just looking for someone to give you a basic introduction to a given career field, most of your network will not immediately be able to come up with any names of Target or Secondhand Interviewees. That doesn't mean they don't have people to suggest, or that they're not interested in helping you. It just means they don't have those contacts in the forefront of their minds, waiting for someone to ask about them. That's why they are most likely to respond by saying, "I don't know. I'll have to think about that." In other words, they need to buy time to reflect on their own network, and see if anyone fits what you are describing.

So just expect them to say they'll have to get back to you. That's fair. Your response at that point is to say something like, "I understand. I know I'm hitting you cold, and to be honest, I didn't really imagine you would just rattle off four or five names off the top of your head. My real objective was just to let you know what I'm considering, so that if any names come to mind, you can let me know. I appreciate your willingness to even think about it."

And you should be appreciative, because they *will* think about it. You see, unless you've burned a bridge with that

person somewhere along the way, it's almost certain they want you to succeed. If they can help you do that by coming up with a name or two, believe me, they will. The more people you can enlist in that kind of who-do-you-know exercise, the more leads you're going to get to Target or Secondhand Interviewees. It's just how it works.

After you've finished the conversation, follow up with an e-mail, thanking them for their time to talk and their willingness to give your situation some thought. I suggest giving a *brief* (i.e., one sentence) recap of who you are looking for—namely, someone who is actually doing the job you are considering (or used to do it), or who works in the same basic area as the job you're considering (or who used to work there). Again, be as specific as you can about the career option in view. Then offer to circle back with the person at some point in the future, to keep them posted and see if they've had any ideas.

Don't be surprised if most of the people you talk to don't get back to you anytime soon. That's okay. They get distracted. They forget. They have other things on their plate. Basically, they are exactly like you in that they are just trying to get through life. In that pursuit, guess what—you are not their first concern! That means you have to find ways to let them know you're still here, still on

your learning odyssey, finding out about a given career.

You can do that by sending them an occasional e-mail—maybe once a month. Don't make yourself a pest. On the other hand, don't just ignore them, because that's the surest way they'll forget about you. When you contact them again, let them know how your quest is coming, maybe mention some of the interesting people you've talked to, and let them know you're making progress in getting the information you need.

When someone does get back to you with a lead, *jump on it immediately*. First of all, thank your source for opening the door. But also make sure you're clear on the expectations they have set for when, where, how, and on what basis you'll be contacting their lead. Remember that when a source refers you to another person, they are doing so because they believe in you. But in doing so, they are also going out on a limb to some extent, because they are leveraging their relationship with the other person on your behalf. They are trusting you to make good use of that opportunity, and not screw it up. So don't screw it up!

Contact the lead and use the scripts given above for setting up an informational interview with a Target Interviewee or Secondary Interviewee.

Step V

Conducting the Informational Interview

Okay, so let's say that as a result of your diligence in working your network as described above, you're ready to meet with a Target or Secondhand Interviewee. How do you do that?

You start by showing up. Not only on time, but slightly ahead of time. Awake and alert. Prepared. Showered and cleaned up. Dressed appropriately. Ready to act professionally.

And if you do all of that, then take a deep breath and relax. You're about to have a very positive, even pleasant experience. Think about it: you're not there to ask for a job. You don't have to impress. You don't have to be the expert. All you have to do is be interested. You're there to get *information*. How difficult can that be, really? The odds are 99.9 percent in your favor that the person you're meeting with is excited to meet you, even if doing so is a slight inconvenience to whatever else they could have been doing during that time. But most people want you to succeed, and if telling you about their work can help, so much the better.

You see, this is where the psychology of informational interviewing really starts to work in your favor. You're asking this person about their job, which means you're asking them about their area of expertise. It's at least one area they actually know something about. So they get kind of honored and thrilled to tell you what they know.

And as a result, the half-hour that you asked for may well turn into an hour and a half, or more—although if it does, make sure it's because the other person wants to keep talking, not because you weren't sensitive to their time. Indeed, state the time frame at the outset: "I know you need to be on your way by [TIME], so I want to respect that."

Then start the interview by saying something like, "Thank you so much for meeting. As I explained when I set this up, I'm exploring my career options, and one area I'm particularly interested in is [NAME

OF THE OPTION, OR OCCUPATIONAL TITLE]. I'm looking for *information* about that job/career."

AGAIN, IT'S VERY IMPORTANT THAT YOU STATE THAT YOU ARE THERE FOR **INFORMATION**, NOT TO GET A JOB.

And then you begin asking your questions. **There is a list of suggested questions at the end of this article.** You don't have to ask all of those questions, nor should you feel limited to the ones given.

Keep the Focus On Your Interviewee

When you finish asking your interviewee a question, stop talking. Wait for your interviewee to reply. You're there to listen, not to talk. Of course, you may have to "warm up" a person who is a bit reserved, and gain some rapport. That may require a little bit of small talk at the beginning of the meeting. And some people, especially those who don't know you well, won't feel comfortable until you've laid down a few cards about yourself. They may even ask you, "Before I get into what I do, tell me a little more about yourself." Be prepared for that by having a brief (3- to 4-minute) summary of your background, your education, and how you became interested in the occupation or career in question.

Another way to break the ice with someone you are meeting for the first time is to describe how you know the source who put the two of you together in the first place. That has a way of establishing some trust by proxy.

But don't let the time get away from you. Don't get tempted into talking just about yourself, or you'll waste your time as well as your interviewee's.

This is a true story; I promise I am not making this up: I once worked as a consultant to a very intelligent, very connected, very influential, and very busy person. One day a man asked to come see this individual and ask for his input as to

career direction. At first my client put him off, saying he was too busy. But the man persisted, so finally my client granted him a one-hour meeting.

The appointed hour arrived. The man was shown into my client's office, and my client, one of his lieutenants, and I sat down to hear about this man's situation and offer input, as he'd requested. The hour began. The man started to tell his story. He went on and on telling his story. Then he went on and on and on telling his story. My client never interrupted him, but just kept smiling and nodding and listening politely—perhaps too politely, in my opinion. But I wasn't about to take control of the meeting.

Finally, with about five minutes left in the hour, the man got around to asking for an opinion by saying, "And so, as you can see, I'm really at a loss as to what direction to go. I thought that maybe you could help me sort all this out and find some direction."

I forget exactly what my client said, but I think he only made an observation or two, and perhaps shared a brief anecdote from his own experience. Then, with the clock ticking down to the final seconds of the hour, he brought things to a conclusion by saying, "I appreciate your telling me about your situation. I can see that it's really a challenging set of factors. I'm not sure how to direct you, but if I have any bright ideas, I'll send them your way. Right now, I'm afraid I've got to get to another appointment. Thanks so much for coming by."

And with that the man was ushered out. After he was gone, the three of us just looked at each other and shook our heads. What an absolute waste that man had made of his golden opportunity!

Don't do that with your interviewee. Make *them* the expert and the star of the show. Ask *them* the questions. And then listen (and write down) what they tell you—their advice, their perspective, their experience, their cautions, and especially any additional sources of information they can put you onto.

When the time is up, thank them warmly for being so generous with their time and knowledge, shake their hand firmly, and then be on your way.

Congratulations! You've just conducted a successful informational interview. Which means you now have firsthand information about the job or career you are interested in. That's invaluable, because it can literally save you *hours* of wasted time and *years* of wasted effort.

You've also established a stronger connection with your interviewee, which is also invaluable, because every time you connect with anyone, you gain potential access to the hundreds of people in that person's network. Just imagine what all those people know—and whom they know. If you keep seeking out those people for good information, it won't take you long to determine how well a given career option fits you, and what it will take to go after it.

Bill Hendricks is founder and president of The Giftedness Center, based in Dallas, Texas. Since 1985, he and his colleagues have been helping individuals of all ages pursue life and career directions that fit their **giftedness**—the unique way in which they were born to live.

The Giftedness CenterSM

100 Highland Park Village, Suite 200

Dallas, Texas 75205

p 214-665-9581

www.thegiftednesscenter.com

BILLHENDRICKS.NET

Informational Interview Questions

- How did you get into this line of work? (Note: In the rare case that your interviewee replies, “I’ve always known that I wanted to do this kind of work, ever since I was a child/teen,” ask them to expand on that by asking, “How did you know?”)
- What exactly do you do on a day to day basis? How do you typically spend your time?
- Tell me what it looks like where you work? What does the environment or atmosphere feel like? Who else works alongside your position, and how do you have to interact with them? What’s the pace?
- Tell me about the authority structure in your line of work. Who do you report to? Who reports to you? How do decisions get made?
- How is success measured in your job? How does it get rewarded?
- What do you enjoy the most about your work? What brings you satisfaction in it?
- What do you like least about your work? What are the biggest hassles and headaches? How do you deal with those?
- What kind of people typically do well in this field/career?
- What would be the typical career “trajectory” for someone in this line of work? Where would they start, what would be their career path, and where would they end up?
- What sort of education or training is required to do what you do?
- What sort of degrees, qualifications, or credentials are required to do what you do?
- How long would it typically take for someone my age, with my education and experience to-date, to get into the kind of work that you do?
- How much do people typically get paid in your line of work—what’s the range?
- What’s the basis of compensation? (e.g., salary, commission, bonuses, stock options, equity stake, etc.)
- Where do you see this kind of work headed in the future? Is it growing/declining? Is it becoming more technical? Is it migrating overseas? Is it being transformed by technology or economics? Is it about ready to explode into “the next big thing”?
- How does this work affect your family? or, How does this work affect family life?
- What would you recommend to someone like me, who wanted to get into this kind of work?
- Are there sources of information about this field/career that you would strongly suggest I check out?
- **Make sure you always ask this final question:** Who else would you suggest that I talk to?