I am About to Graduate – What on Earth do I do now?

Focus on the Informational Interview

By Alaina G. Levine

Don’t panic: you just graduated (or are about to) and you need a job. Perhaps you haven’t developed an integrated career planning strategy that has garnered you job offers, because frankly you were too busy finishing up your degree. And that is ok. There is no time like NOW to get started. So let’s get you a job.

As I discussed in the accompanying webinar, you should look for positions on job boards like that managed by the AGU Career Center, as well as magazines like Science and Nature, and you should upload your resume or CV (depending upon what type of job you desire) in numerous places where decision-makers look for candidates in your field. Join relevant LinkedIn Groups and engage in conversation with many, many professionals.

But of all the tools in your toolbox, networking will and should be at the top of your to-do list. As I have written and mentioned before, networking is so critically important because it gives you access to hidden opportunities (jobs and opportunities that are not that 90% of jobs are clandestine only because of networking. the fact that networking (which self-promotion) makes you known once they recognize you and your brand (your promise of value) and your unique problems-solving abilities, will soon make decisions about whether to engage you as an employee. They not only will think of you first for an opening on their team, but may even create a job specifically for you based on your singular value proposition.

So go out there and network, network, network. Seek to craft win-win partnerships with individuals with whom you can offer some value and vice versa. Find out what their needs are and strategize how you can assist them with their problems. And as you identify people whom you would like to speak, either from LinkedIn groups, papers that your read, conference speakers, blogs and membership directories of your professional societies (like AGU) and your alumni associations, your next step will be to write them a short email and ask for an “informational interview”.

So what the heck is an informational interview?
The informational interview is the lifeblood of the networking strategy. You won’t be able to gain any new information or mutually beneficial partnerships with people without an informational interview. The aim of the informational interview is simple and clear:

- To open the lines of communication
- To exchange information
- To plainly elucidate and understand each person’s brand
- To learn how you could craft a win-win partnership
- To solve each other’s problems

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An informational interview is simply a conversation you have with another party that is designed to exchange information between the two of you. Most people in the business world know this phrase and the concept behind it. But scientists and engineers might not know it, and you should because it is an important tool in your networking and career exploration toolbox.
Unlike a job interview, which is designed to assess whether a candidate can solve the problems required of the position and add value to the organization, an informational interview is designed to bring to light information between and about two people. It is sincerely meant to be an exchange of information, in that you are providing something just as much as the other person is. The goal is to determine whether the two of you can help each other with your problems, something that cannot be determined until you have the informational interview.

Every time you initiate contact with someone, you should ask for an informational interview, or an informal conversation. The person to whom you are sending this request is going to see these words and most likely they are going to respond positively. Why? Because the phrase “informational interview” is a code word in the business world that clarifies you:

- Are not desperate for a job from this person,
- Are not trying to extract something from this person, and
- Don’t need something from this person,

Rather, you want to have a conversation to exchange information – they may provide information about their field, organization, career path, etc., and you can provide information about how you might be able to help them solve their problems.

Now of course when you do an informational interview I realize that often, especially if you are currently unemployed, you may actually feel like you want to get something from the other party – namely a job, or at least an interview or access to decision-makers working within their organization. So you may feel desperate. But you don’t have to demonstrate that to them. Because when you use the phrase informational interview in a cold email the other party is more likely to respond to your query than if you send me a frantic-sounding email pleading with for a job or an opportunity to interview as a postdoc in the lab or a manager in the department. So to be clear, the informational interview phrase sets the tone of your conversation and your needs – you want to learn more about what they do and explore ways in which you can add value and solve their problems.

So what the heck do you talk about?

One of the biggest stumbling blocks that many neophyte networkers encounter is determining what the heck they should speak about when they are meeting someone new, either for the first time, like at a conference, or have arranged an informational interview via a cold email.

Do some research in advance. Remember the job search is never about you – it is always about what you can do for me, the decision-maker. As such you have to do research on the other party, their organization, informational interview. They need to see that you are invested in the conversation and the relationship with the other person – that you are not just out to get something from them, but are truly interested in contributing. They want to see that you have thought this out and through thoughtful research have come to realize that your expertise very much aligns with the needs of the organization and you want to explore how you might be able to help them. This is called “synergy”. You can find information on the other party via:

- A basic Google search
- A LinkedIn search: examine their profile
- If they have a personal website, like if they are associated with a university or other academic institution, take a look at what’s on their site
- A “Google News” search on their name – have they been quoted in the media recently? Did they just win a big award or grant? Did their institution issue a press release about their accomplishments, or that of their organization?
- A journal search – have they just written a paper?
- A search of relevant conferences - Are they going to be or have they just given a talk at a major meeting?
These are a few ways you can obtain vital information about the person on which you can base your informational interview.

So you’ve now done your research about them and now you can start to assemble some questions you would like to ask. These may include:

- What’s the best part of your job?
- How did you find or carve your career path?
- What skills are the most useful to you in your current position and throughout your career?
- What skills do you wish you had had when you began your career or current job?
- What are some entry points for a career or job path that you have?
- What kind of information or experience should I especially highlight in my cover letter/resume/application?
- What are some of the biggest mistake applicants make when applying for or pursuing job opportunities in your organization/field/department/industry?
- Is there a typical day or does each day vary? Can you describe a day?
- What are some of the proudest accomplishments you have had in your career/current job?
- What advice would you offer someone who might want to transition into a career path similar to yours?
- What organizations/associations are most useful to be members of for your career?
- What conferences are the most useful to attend?
- What publications are the most useful to read?
- What LinkedIn groups are the most useful to belong to?
- Who else should I be speaking with about these topics?
- What is your mailing address? (So you can send them a thank you note.)
- If there is anything I can assist you with, don’t hesitate to let me know!

Keep in mind that although you are asking a lot of questions during the informational interview, it should not feel to the other person like you are frenetically peppering them with queries. Rather it should be a conversation. So you can feel free to inject information about yourself and your own expertise and interests into the conversation.

And of course these questions are simply the skeleton of a great chat. But don’t think that you have to stick to a script – if someone says x and that gives you an idea about y, then go on a tangent and talk about y. Furthermore, the informational interview works both ways – just as you might get ideas from speaking with them, they may get ideas from speaking with you.

The informational interview will probably serve as the first “meaningful engagement” that you have with a professional. It allows the other party to see that you are interested in a long-term, win-win relationship, so you more informational practice you to converse with problems are so you to solve them. You should gain in learning how to converse with someone to find out what their problems are so you can potentially be the person to solve them.

The more informational interviews you conduct, the more practice you will gain in learning how to converse with someone to find out what their problems are so you can potentially be the person to solve them.

And keep in mind that even if the informational interview doesn’t result in an offer right away, it can easily convert into that in the future. Now that the lines of communication are open between the two of you, follow up as appropriate, stay connected, and look for new ways to inject value. And again, don’t panic – because you are taking all the right steps to solidify employment!

This article is adapted by Levine’s forthcoming book “Networking for Nerds”, which is tentatively scheduled to be published by Wiley later this year.

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