Chapter 14

Research Your Destination with Informational Interviews

by Dorie Clark

Informational interviews with friends of friends, school and workplace alumni, and others in professions you're considering will help you explore career options and make connections. They provide a safe environment to ask pointed questions—which allows you to find promising possibilities *and* weed out choices that aren't a good fit.

But there's a risk: If you don't make a good first impression at an informational interview, you can torpedo

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the relationship. You may not know at this point exactly where you're headed, and that's OK. But as San Francisco–based executive coach Rebecca Zucker notes, "You still need to come across in a way that inspires confidence and makes other people want to help you." Here's how to do that.

Step 1: Be clear about the help you're asking for

When you aren't totally sure what you want, it may seem like a good strategy to leave yourself wide open. For example, you might say, "I'd like something in communications." But what kind of communications? Marketing? Advertising? Public relations? For a nonprofit? A big corporation? In health care? Consumer products? If you haven't even begun to focus your search, it becomes a monumental task—and a waste of time—for people to assist you.

Zucker suggests creating a brief "positioning statement" before you start to make your inquiries. "It can be tentative," she says, "but it should still be confident: 'I'm looking to make a change, and I'm not sure what direction I'm heading, but two things that intrigue me are X and Y.' Put it out in an organized manner that people can respond to and that will add to your research."

If you aren't sure what you want, or you're interested in more than one potential career, *just be as specific as you can for now*. This will expand your options, not limit them. Somebody may say, for instance, "I don't know anyone in New England archaeology, but if you like historic preservation, I know someone who works at the Victorian Society." You want to paint a picture so clear

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It's a lot easier to reach out to people who have some connection to you, even a tenuous one ("I'm calling at the suggestion of Phil, your former coworker"). But what if you don't have *any* connections in your chosen field? Take a page from Elizabeth Amini, who runs an online start-up.

After finishing college with a cognitive science degree, Amini—who'd intended to become a surgeon—discovered during a hospital internship that medicine was a bad fit for her. Using skills she'd developed working at her college newspaper, she started her own graphic design company. She eventually landed a consulting project—and then a full-time job—at NASA. But after several years, she realized she didn't want to make it a career. So, at 30, she quit her job and set out to find her next move. "I felt really lost," she recalls. "All my friends who were also pre-med had graduated from medical school and were practicing, and here I was, not knowing what career direction I should take."

Amini made a list of five professions that intrigued her: nonprofit management, art curation, real estate development, management consulting, and international business development. And then she did her research. Her goal was to gather five to 10 "data points" for each field. These are the steps she followed.

1. ***Choose your target companies.*** Based in Los Angeles, Amini decided to focus on professionals she could meet in person. Using the website www.infousa.com (you could also use various library

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databases), she created a list of the largest firms in her city in each of her target industries.

2. ***Identify the right executives.*** Next, she searched online to find the right people to talk to: She typed in names of companies, along with phrases like "international business vice president." Then she checked dates of news articles, press releases, and so on to make sure the people she found were still in these roles. And she tried to glean other salient information (for instance, that an executive was heading up an expansion into South America).

3. ***Research the contact points.*** Amini looked up the companies' press offices and investor relations departments online to deduce their standard e-mail patterns (such as john.doe@company.com). She also dug around for preferred nicknames. "When the name is Michael," she says, "search on the web to see if he goes by 'Michael' or 'Mike.' Otherwise, the administrative assistant is going to think, *Nobody calls him that—you probably don't know him.*" She then called the companies' main lines after hours to get voicemail directories and learn the executives' extensions.

4. ***Avoid the gatekeeper.*** Armed with this information, she was finally ready to make her move. She could e-mail or—even better—call. "When you call and ask

for an extension number directly, people never question why you're calling the way they do if you ask for someone by name," she says. They're more likely to put you right through. Also, she recommends calling just before or just after business hours, when the assistants may not be at their desks—but the executives may be around. "Assistants are there to screen you out, so you want to avoid them as much as possible," she says.

5. ***Start at the top—but not the very top.*** "If you really want to learn what an industry's like, you have to talk to seasoned veterans," Amini says. She suggests starting with the COO's office—"because *that* assistant knows everybody." The goal isn't to score interviews with COOs; it's to get their imprimatur: "You can say to the assistant, 'I know the COO is probably not the right person to talk to, but who is your best salesperson' (or marketing person, or whomever you need to reach)? And then when you call those people, you can say the COO's office recommended them."

6. ***Make the right ask.*** Don't request an hour of someone's time, or even a half-hour. Busy executives aren't going to crack open their calendars for someone they have no real connection to. Instead, warm them up with context—let them know that you've read one of their books, for example. Then tell them, "I was impressed by XYZ, and I'd like to ask you some

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questions about how you became so successful. Is it possible to schedule a 10-minute phone call? Or, if you're free, I'd be happy to take you to lunch." Most people will opt for the phone call—which seems easy compared with lunch.

7. ***Schedule smartly.*** Many professionals' schedules are heavily booked for the next few weeks—so if you ask for a slot "in the next week or two," you're likely to get turned down. And if you ask to connect "sometime this year," your request won't seem urgent. Even if people agree to meet with you, they may eventually brush you off. Amini suggests asking to meet "this month or next," when unscheduled blocks are probably still available.

8. ***Don't get discouraged.*** Some executives tried to dodge her requests—but Amini persevered. "One guy said I needed to talk to someone more junior, so I said, 'I'd like insight from the most successful person in the department, and that's you.'" That line won him over. Another person—in real estate development—screamed, "I don't have time to talk to some #*$@ student! I'm up to my neck in lawsuits!" and hung up on her. "To me," Amini says, "that's a data point. I got the same information I would have in a ten-minute interview."

9. ***Pounce on opportunities.*** When browsing the *Forbes* 500, Amini read about a billionaire real estate mogul

who lived in Los Angeles. She called after 5:30 p.m. and got him on the phone—"and, oddly," she recalls, "he agreed to lunch." She was thrilled with the opportunity, but shortly after she got off the phone, she panicked. "I said, 'Pick your favorite place,' but then I thought, *Where do billionaires go for lunch? What if lunch is $1,000?*" She decided to proceed, despite the risks: *I'll put it on my credit card,* she thought, *and if it's more than my rent, I'll find a way to pay it off.* The mogul took her to a local deli—his favorite spot—and lunch for two came to $17. He spent 90 minutes with her and outlined "what it took to be him."

Today, Amini isn't working in any of the five fields she explored in her informational interviews. (Harkening back to her pre-med days, her start-up focuses on cutting-edge brain research.) But she learned invaluable lessons from the process. The real estate mogul told her that "he goes on vacation with his family for six weeks, and he turns off his cell phone and laptop entirely. He said that whatever falls apart in your business during that time is good, because you can see what parts of your business don't work without you." For Amini, that was a revelation: "I'm only going on vacation for a week, and I'm not a billionaire." She could disconnect, too, and the world could wait. "You end up with all these random lessons that are important," she says, "even if the person's field is not relevant to you in the end."

that your contacts will think of real-life people they know who can help you.

Executive coach Michael Melcher also emphasizes the importance of being up front about your motives for meeting. "It's an error to call up a former client, say you want to catch up, and then when you get together, spring on them that 'the reason I want to talk to you is that I, too, want to be an entertainment lawyer.' It's insincere." Instead, he suggests an opening along these lines: "'I'd like to get together, and I have an ulterior motive: I'm exploring a transition to XYZ, and I'd like to ask you questions about it. That way, they can say yes or no—and they'll probably say yes."

Step 2: Read up before you meet

Do some research on your contact's company and industry before you meet. By making a timely remark about a new product release, for example, or asking about the impact of some proposed regulation on the industry, you can show that you're well-informed and create a bond.

Melcher says to consider the "highest and best use" of the person you're interviewing. He's frequently contacted by people who want to become executive coaches. "What I won't do anymore is talk to people who say, 'I'm wondering where I can go for coaching training.' I feel like that's public information; they can look online." He's much more willing to help them choose between competing options, for example, or examine revenue models for a new coaching practice. "You want to show that you've done your homework—that you've taken it as far as possible before talking with the person," he advises.

Step 3: Make it convenient for the interviewee

Let's face it: You're asking for people's time, so you want to make it very convenient for them. Invite them to pick the date, time, and location—and pay for their drink or meal. I've heard friends who are unemployed grouse about spending money to take out folks who are earning a healthy paycheck—which is exactly the wrong perspective. It's probably costing them hundreds of dollars in lost productivity to meet with you. So pick up the check.

Arrive when you say you will, and don't take up too much time. Karen Landolt—a former lawyer who switched fields and now heads up a career services office at a state university—estimates she's invited well over a hundred contacts out on informational interviews in the past decade: "If people say they have 20 minutes, I'll keep track. I'll say, 'It's been 20 minutes. If you have more time, I have more questions—but if not, I want to respect your time.'"

Step 4: Ask the right questions

Good questions reflect a basic understanding of the field and a focus on the interviewee's own experiences. Career counselor Phyllis Stein, formerly the director of Radcliffe Career Services at Harvard University, suggests the following:

- What is your typical day like? Typical week? (And if there's no such thing, ask about the most recent day or week.)
- What do you like most about your job? Least?

- What does it take to be successful in this field? In this company?
- I'm planning the following steps toward obtaining a job in this field (name them). Have I overlooked any strategy or resource you think might be helpful?

Don't ask, "Do you have any jobs for me?" Because if your contact doesn't, it'll shut the discussion down permanently.

Step 5: Leave with other names

You can learn from salespeople here: Ask interviewees who else you should connect with in their company or field, and see if they'd be willing to make introductions. And check LinkedIn to see if they have connections to other marketers, Comcast employees, specialists in Argentinean culture—whatever types of contacts you're looking for.

When you're trying to make connections, don't forget to tap your alumni network, whether it's from college, grad school, or former employers. Recalls Landolt, the former lawyer: "When I was making a transition, I was at a huge firm with 450 attorneys and a turnover rate of about 70%. There were attorneys all over who had worked there, and I used the network, because we'd been through the same war. We didn't know each other, but I'd talk to current employees at the firm and ask, 'Can you introduce us?' And they'd say sure."

Step 6: Keep the connection alive

You'll want to turn informational interviews into ongoing relationships, so look for key details you can follow up

on later. Maybe the person you're meeting with just got back from a vacation to Fiji, or you both like the Dodgers, or your kids go to the same school. That's your starting point. Then after you've sent the all-important thank-you note (it *does* make an impact), you can forward interesting travel articles, send an e-mail when your team makes the playoffs, or invite your contact to sit with you at the school fundraiser. With each interaction, strive to learn more about this person to add depth to the relationship. The process of learning someone's hometown, college, names and ages of children, favorite hobbies, favorite restaurants, previous jobs, and long-range goals provides a raft of opportunities to connect over shared interests and keep up a dialogue.

Periodically report back on your career development so the folks who have given you counsel can see that you're applying their advice. "Make it an open feedback channel," says executive coach Rebecca Zucker. "Let them know, 'Here are some of the things I learned, and I'd love to talk more with you as I progress.'"

Elizabeth Amini, the online entrepreneur featured in the sidebar "Mastering the Cold Call," suggests getting in touch around major milestones: "You can send holiday greetings ('Thank you for your mentoring this year') and updates on advice they gave you ('Thanks for recommending the University of Southern California—I applied and just got in')." Put reminders in your calendar to touch base.

Step 7: Add value to the relationship

Just as your contacts are helping you, add value to their lives by providing helpful connections of your own or simply offering encouragement.

For example, I make a point of congratulating people when I see they've been quoted in an article. In the wake of the 2004 Asian tsunami, Elizabeth Amini made $10 donations in the names of those who'd helped her out, and sent them a short note letting them know. "It wasn't calculated at all," she says, "but people were so thankful."

Conducting a slew of informational interviews might sound stressful, but you can actually enjoy the process if you keep it in perspective. When Karen Landolt felt demoralized in her job as a corporate lawyer, these conversations gave her something to look forward to: "It was almost therapeutic, and how I got through my days: At least I get to have lunch with this interesting person."

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