If you’ve ever applied for an engineering-related job or taken a good interview skills workshop at your alma mater, you are familiar with the standard technical job interview: start with some résumé-based questions, follow with some behavioral/situational questions, and perhaps work through some brainteaser or case questions. No matter how well you field these question types, however, potential employers expect you to be familiar with the company and possess at least a general idea of what work you want to do there. But what if you’re still trying to figure out what to do with your degree? What if you think you are interested in a company, but you aren’t sure it has what you want?

If you are asking yourself such fundamental questions—whether at the start of your job search or in the middle of an internship—don’t use a high-pressure job interview as a fishing expedition for answers. Revealing too much uncertainty on your part could do harm to your future prospects with the company. Instead, informational interviews offer low-pressure alternatives to ordinary job interviews; yet the rewards can be phenomenal. Informational interviews can increase your understanding of your career interest, help you gain access to a professional mentor, and even help you obtain a job application interview and subsequent job offer.

THE INFORMATIONAL INTERVIEW

Any time you talk with a professional about his or her field of interest, you are conducting a form of informational interview. The most common informational interview is the casual one that you don’t necessarily plan or schedule.

A casual informational interview could involve simply talking with company employees at a conference, career fair, or recruitment seminar. Some people like to call this networking. If you’re turned off by the term, just think of it as mingling.

An informational interview can also be done while sitting in someone’s office or nearby coffeehouse for 30 minutes, an hour, or even longer depending on how much time the professional has available for you. Informational interviews also can be extended to a full day, two-day, weeklong or even a month-long externship—an extended shadowing experience during which you observe your sponsoring professional in all aspects of his or her job. Within one of these longer programs, you and the potential employer have an enormous opportunity to get to know each other very well. This also means that you must be especially conscious that you are presenting a strong first impression of yourself at all times. Some engineering campuses have started to organize winter-break and spring-break externships with alumni, so inquire at your career center or engineering dean’s office if you’re interested.

PREPARING

No matter if the informational interview is spontaneous or pre-arranged, you still need to be prepared—especially if you aren’t fully comfortable initiating and carrying a conversation with strangers. The good news is there are certain basics that apply to most situations. Using the procedures outlined below, even if you’re uncertain about your future plans or are talking to a recruiter from an unfamiliar company, you can come away from the conversation...
with a better sense of both what you want and what that company has to offer.

**STEP 1: APPROACH THE PROFESSIONAL.**
If you are interested in the work of a particular person or company or are simply interested in the field, find a way to contact the relevant person directly by phone or email. This contact info may be available from attending a career event on campus, through an internet search of company websites or journal/conference articles, or through your other contacts, such as engineering faculty, campus career center staff, or your Tau Beta Pi chapter advisors and local alumni chapter.

Let’s say that you have discovered that Joe Smith does interesting work at XYZ, Inc., and you contact him by email. Your first attempt to contact Joe should be straightforward, indicating that you are exploring the field of work that he does at XYZ and that you would like to talk to him or someone in the appropriate department for 10 minutes, say, next Tuesday afternoon. Joe may not be available on the day you suggested—don’t worry. If you are considerate and you welcome the chance to talk at a different time or with someone else with whom Joe works, you maximize your chances of a positive response. Stick to your time limit, and thank each of your interviewees afterwards with a card or email.

Because professionals can be busy or may not respond well to an unsolicited message, be persistent about following-up. If you do not receive a response to your email within a couple of days, you may try calling and leaving a message. Usually, the voicemail will do the trick. However, do not be afraid of emailing or calling again after another week. As long as you do not send or leave messages more than once or twice a week, you will not be a bother.

If you contact someone in person, say at a career fair or company informational session, consider using the same approach as above, except ask for 10 minutes either right then or after the event as appropriate. Be flexible—he or she may have a tight schedule and prefer to save the conversation for a later day. Simply follow up as suggested above.

**STEP 2: PREPARE QUESTIONS ABOUT THE JOB OR CAREER PATH.**
The formal questions below are appropriate for an informational or formal job interview. In general, formal job interviews should include a few questions that demonstrate you’ve really done your research on the company. During an informational interview, however, you also have leeway to ask some more generic or mundane questions—such as the second set of probing questions below. In a more formal setting, you must impress interviewers with your advanced preparation. Here, you can impress professionals by showing your curiosity.

**Sample Interview Questions**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Formal questions</th>
<th>Appropriate probing questions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Does your/an entry-level position require that you work in a team?</td>
<td>• What does company XYZ do?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Does it require a lot of reporting? Are you using your degree?</td>
<td>• What can someone with my type of background do at XYZ?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Does it require travel? If so, how much?</td>
<td>• What do you do at company XYZ? What are your responsibilities?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Does the company/division/department foster camaraderie/team spirit with your co-workers?</td>
<td>• I’m used to using technology ABC in my courses—is XYZ, Inc./industry using it yet?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• What kind of training can I expect?</td>
<td>• Are there many recent college graduates in the department?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**STEP 3: REHEARSE THE DELIVERY.**
Confidence is everything! Prepare well enough so you can ask your questions and share your background information easily and naturally. Write the general questions you’d like to ask, and then write a few brief descriptions about the work and class projects that have been the most enjoyable and/or interesting to you.

Some people need little formal preparation. However, if you are uncomfortable talking spontaneously even in a casual setting, then practice your questions and descriptions in front of a mirror. Make eye contact as you ask the questions—both in practice and during the interview—and smile even if conducting the interview over the telephone. Although recruiters prefer that you attend formal job interviews with your questions memorized, at an informational interview memorized questions would be impressive, but are not necessary. Refer to your notes, but don’t read from them.

**STEP 4: DO NOT ASK OUTRIGHT FOR A JOB.**
Although you can mention that you are looking for a job—in most cases, this is obvious—do not ask for the job during an
informational interview because: 1) your contact may have influence over the decision, but it is unlikely in his/her complete control and 2) you want to provide the opportunity to get to know you first. If you make a strong impression, your contact may invite you to return for the formal interview or offer tips on how to apply for a job within the company or elsewhere.

STEP 5: ALWAYS SAY THANK YOU.
At the conclusion of an informational interview, you can summarize some of the things you learned and ask if you may contact your host at a later date with further questions. If your conversation sparked your interest in another department at XYZ, Inc., you may ask your contact to refer you to someone there for a similar conversion. Be sure to email a “thank you” to the professional you met casually or who hosted you. Keep emails short and sweet: highlight how you benefited from the conversation, and then express appreciation for the other’s time.

FINALLY . . .
Keep in mind that the informational interview is not just a way to identify your interests. It is also a great way to uncover any details about a position or company that may make a job offer undesirable.

As with any skill, initiating and conducting an informational interview gets better with practice. If you feel awkward or uncomfortable at first, practice at home before the mirror and at an on-campus recruiting event with a firm of little interest to you. That way, if things don’t go as well as you like, you can polish your delivery in time for the informational interview with a professional who really matters to you.

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