

Gathering Information Before You Start Hunting

Meet with people who can give you insight and direction

BY TAUNEE BESSON

- Several years ago, Charlie Phillips was pursuing a distinguished career as an air traffic controller, which included a public relations position for his local PATCO union. Overnight, his world collapsed when PATCO struck and thousands of controllers were fired for breaking federal law. To make matters worse, Charlie faced a federal indictment for inciting the illegal strike. Today, he says with a measure of amazement, he thinks he's one of my most successful clients. As a vice president for Dataserve Equipment Inc., a Bellsouth Corp. subsidiary, he is in charge of computer sales and leasing for the western half of the country, and he loves his job.
- Lisa Brady taught elementary school for 12 years before she decided it was time to work with "big people." After a summer job search, Lisa was hired by the Dallas Times Herald as coordinator of education services to market the paper's training programs to local school districts. She also solicits corporate and foundation grants, plans promotional events and trains teachers. While it seems like a long way from the classroom to the newsroom, Lisa says her job uses the skills she's developed in both her career and volunteer activities.
- Mike Benton and I first met at an American Society for Training and Development meeting. He was there for two reasons: to find sales recruits and to look for a training position. Before becoming a branch manager for a large insurance company, Mike had been responsible for creating and implementing the firm's management training program. In evaluating his experience, he realized that selling something immediately helpful to people (training) was a lot more fun than convincing them to buy a product (insurance) that wouldn't be useful until they died.
- Margaret Hensley, a former teacher and real estate agent, has built a thriving business as a certified financial planner with Financial Network Investment Corp. Several years ago, when she was looking for a career change, Margaret knew she wanted to work with people and numbers, but wasn't sure how to combine the two in a

satisfying career. Apparently, she's found a perfect match.

These four people have very different backgrounds, skills and interests, but they also have an important similarity: Information interviews were critical to finding the right jobs.

Some critics will tell you that information interviews (meetings with potential employers to get information about job descriptions, company philosophy, etc., without asking directly for a job) have fallen out of favor. A few potential employers see them as wastes of time. While this perception may be in vogue, it fails to consider four important aspects of human nature:

- People love to play "the expert."
- They enjoy discussing their careers, companies and industries.

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- Their altruistic tendencies are tapped by persons who genuinely need their insight and advice.
- They are intrigued by someone who is pursuing information in a systematic way and has the potential to become a terrific employee.

Information interviews are mutually beneficial. The job seeker gets the background he needs and the employer feels good about her role in helping someone make a critical life decision. Charlie, Mike, Lisa and Margaret all remarked on their surprise at strangers' willingness to share time and expertise. In fact, according to Lisa, the only person who didn't agree to see her right away was the woman who eventually hired her.

What can information interviews do for the job seeker? Their benefits include:

- Providing job descriptions, required qualifications and skills, company "buzzwords," corporate hierarchies and a host of other tidbits invaluable to writing resumes and preparing for interviews.
- Offering new contacts. If you ask interviewees for other people to talk to, they usually suggest names and say, "Tell him I told you to call."

- Broadening horizons and brainstorming new options. If you're picking the brains of an expert, take advantage of his or her background to get suggestions about additional alternatives you hadn't considered.
- Uncovering jobs not available through the usual channels. Very often, company managers don't advertise or use search firms to fill open positions. Instead, they prefer to rely on friends and business acquaintances, whose judgment they trust, to suggest good candidates. Even if there isn't a position available, you may be able to create one. Good people are hard to find. Smart companies know this and will make a place for a talented job seeker if they can.
- Practicing for employment interviews. Most professionals have relatively little job hunting experience. Their interviewing skills are rusty or undeveloped. Low-stress information interviews give them the opportunity to become more comfortable with strangers, polish their techniques and recognize that good questions are as critical to selling themselves as good answers.

Making Connections

Once you're ready to begin informational meetings, you need to identify the best people to interview. As Charlie Phillips says, "There are people worth talking to everywhere, but few job seekers capitalize on their availability." The best information interviews usually are with people who have hiring power. However, you never know who will be a key contact, so talk to all seemingly useful prospects.

To develop a list of potential resources, start with friends, business acquaintances, fellow members of your church, social clubs, fraternal and professional organizations, hobby groups and volunteer colleagues. Then think about where you might find other sources beyond those you currently know. For instance, you might speak to people who teach continuing education courses in your field, executives whose promotions or accomplishments are detailed in local newspapers or magazines, and key managers in companies you've targeted to investigate.

As a rule, it's best to practice on those with whom you feel most comfortable, then move on to people suggested by your friends and to cold calls. By easing your way into the process, you become a

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Information interviews

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seasoned pro by the time you need the most self confidence.

While some gutsy people find "dropping in" for an informal discussion very effective, most job seekers save time and feel more professional by scheduling an appointment. In calling to set up a meeting time, your conversation should sound something like this: "This is Taunee Besson. Bob Jones suggested I give you a call. (Be sure to mention the person who referred you by name.) I'm new in town (or thinking of changing careers, or trying to expand my understanding of how businesses are using industrial engineers, etc.) and Bob said you would be an excellent person to see because of your expertise and background in _____ area. I'd really appreciate the chance to get together at your office for about 30 minutes to discuss your insights on the field."

Note that you aren't talking about job opportunities at this point; information, not a position, is your immediate goal. Should your contact say, "We don't have any openings," or, "Let me connect you

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with Personnel," clarify that you want the benefit of his expertise, not a job. After talking with him you may decide to pursue a position with his firm, but you don't know that yet.

Making the call to schedule an interview is the hardest part of the process, because potential rejection lurks in every contact. Remember, though, you are unlikely to be rejected because people love to talk about themselves. Promise yourself you will set up a given number of interviews before you put down the phone. Then keep dialing until you've met your goal.

Because first impressions are critical to your success, prepare carefully for each interview. Research the person, company, industry and career field. A couple of intelligent observations carefully placed in your conversation will impress your interviewee. Don't waste time asking basic questions with answers easily found in newspapers, books or magazines.

If you don't know how to research, put yourself in the capable hands of the reference librarians at a local library. They will help you pull together articles, annual reports and other materials to boost your information quotient.

Develop a short list of questions appropriate for each type of information interview. Your queries will vary according to your need for background on career options, company opportunities or more contacts.

If you're changing careers, Margaret Hensley's list is a good one. It includes the following:

- Tell me about yourself.
- What is your background?
- How did you get into the field?
- Describe a typical week.
- What do you like or dislike about your career?
- What skills and personality traits are most useful?
- What does the future hold for this career?

Company options require more specific questions, such as:

- What is a typical career path for _____ position?
- What role does the _____ department play in the company hierarchy?
- What does this firm look for when choosing new employees?
- Would my past experience be beneficial to your organization? Why? Why not?

People you call for contacts rather than jobs can be excellent sources of career ideas as well, because they usually possess a broad overview of the community. Be sure to offer them the option to brainstorm with you. They will enjoy it and you may be pleasantly surprised at their interesting ideas.

While you ask for 30 minutes, a good information interview can easily take an hour. Watch your time carefully. If you are really clicking along and building wonderful rapport but are running short of time, mention that, unfortunately, your 30 minutes are almost up. Then follow your interviewee's lead in choosing whether to continue or wrap up. Often, the discussion is so stimulating that both parties want to continue.

Before leaving, be sure to ask for other contacts. Without a continuing supply of new names, your networking will lose its momentum. Also try to find out salary ranges for the positions that interest you. You should never go into an *employment* interview without an idea of what the job is worth. In information interviews, compensation questions are easy to ask. In employment interviews, they're much stickier.

Don't ever take a resume to an information interview. It's a sales tool that sends a suspicious mixed message.

Finally, always send a thank-you note after each interview. It's the courteous thing to do, it gets your name in front of the contact again and it gives you a vehicle for detailing your on-going job search plans.

If your contact asks for a resume, offers to talk to colleagues about a potential position for you or suggests that you keep in touch, be sure to follow up with vigor. As Linda Jordan, Lisa Brady's manager told her, "Persistence is what got you your job!" Don't underestimate assertive self-interest. Good companies want employees who aren't shy about asking for what they want. ●