

Using Informational Interviews to Build Your Network

by Stephanie Mitchell

If you even whisper the word “network” in a law school, there’s a good chance most students will flee. Networking is seen as a frightening process that everyone thinks they’ll fail. What they don’t realize is that networking is just a way of meeting people — people who might help them find a job. I let students know that they don’t always have to attend crowded wine and cheese receptions to network. One of the best ways to network is actually meeting people one-on-one for informational interviews.

Here’s how I answer my students’ questions about informational interviews.

What is an informational interview?

An informational interview is just what it says: an interview you conduct to find information. In the context of a job search, law students conduct informational interviews to find out about certain practice areas and other factors that have to do with working life. Informational interviews can also be a helpful way to make contacts. This is *not* a job interview in disguise, although students should behave in a professional manner.

Generally, students meet with a lawyer working in the field they’re interested in for coffee or sometimes lunch. Occasionally, a student may go to the lawyer’s office. The student sits down with the lawyer and asks questions about how they got into their line of work, their work life, and what they think about their job. The interview can last anywhere from 15 to 30 minutes, and sometimes up to one hour.

Why should I do informational interviews?

Remember, many legal jobs are never advertised. Most people find most jobs because they know someone. How do they get to know the right people? By networking and conducting informational interviews. Even when jobs are advertised, you will have a much better chance of securing the position if you have already met someone in the firm who can speak for you.

You also do two important things when you meet for an informational interview. First, you learn about your chosen field. You’ll sound much more informed in job interviews if you have actually spoken to people in the profession about what the work involves. Second, you make an impression. Hopefully, it will be a good impression and the lawyer will recommend you to a colleague or other connection.

How should I approach people for informational interviews?

The best way to find people to interview is to ask the people you already know. Make a list of friends and family who might have contacts it would be helpful for you to meet. Tell them what kind of professionals you’re hoping to meet and ask if they know anyone you should meet. Make sure you tell them that you’re not asking these contacts to give you a job; you hope to meet with them to get advice and information.

Another way to find people to meet for informational interviews is to use the alumni network at your law school. Many career services offices maintain a list of alumni who are happy to connect with current law students.

You may either phone or email the lawyer you would like to interview. In either case:

- Introduce yourself as a law student who is interested in their field of work.
- Mention how you found them (through a friend or an alumni contact list, etc.).
- Note that they are probably very busy and ask whether they might have time to meet you for coffee for an informational interview to discuss their area of law, their position, etc.

Most lawyers will be happy to meet with you, although some will be too busy.

If you are in a different city, you may also conduct an informational interview over the phone. However, in person is best. Asking questions over email is NOT recommended. The lawyer does not have time to write you long emails, and meeting a new person is the whole reason for the informational interview in the first place.

How should I prepare for an informational interview?

Find out about the firm where the lawyer works by reading the website or checking any other readily available material. Think about what you would like to learn from the interview and which questions you should ask. Make sure you don't ask questions that are already answered on the firm website. Your questions might include:

- How did you find your position?
- What is a typical day at work like for you?
- What do you like about your job?

- What do you find challenging?
- What kinds of skills do you think are important for your field?
- Do you have any advice for me?

Finally, think about how you want to present yourself and be prepared to answer questions from the lawyer about the kind of position you are hoping to find.

How should I conduct an informational interview?

Wear appropriate business clothing and bring a pen and paper for taking notes. Arrive early and turn your phone off. Introduce yourself and greet the lawyer with a handshake. Offer to pay for coffee. (Some lawyers will not let you because you're a student.) Give a brief overview about yourself and explain why you would like to find out more about this kind of career.

Spend 15 to 30 minutes talking and discussing your questions. It is a good idea to finish the informational interview by asking if there is anyone else the lawyer recommends you speak to. Thank the lawyer for taking the time to meet with you.

What should I do after an informational interview?

Within one or two days, send the lawyer a thank you card in the mail. Follow up with any new contacts the lawyer suggested and do more informational interviews. Keep a detailed record of your informational interviews, including contact information.

And there you have it: you are well on your way to building a professional network!

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