INFORMATIONAL INTERVIEWING

WHAT IS IT?

The informational interview is one piece of the “job search strategy puzzle.” It is part of a research process, one in which information and contacts are gathered from people who are already working in target positions or organizations. It is an excellent method of conducting market research. The structure of the informational interview is one in which you ask the majority of the questions and direct the course of the discussion, as opposed to the job interview in which you are answering questions about yourself.

WHY DO INFORMATIONAL INTERVIEWING?

- To research job market information
- To find out about career paths that you did not know existed
- To help clarify, define, and re-define your interests and goals, gaining self-awareness through the process
- To prepare for job interviews – the more comfortable you become meeting with attorneys to discuss the legal profession, the less stress you will experience when you interview for positions in the legal profession
- To get first-hand information and impressions from people who know the ins and outs of the profession
- To get additional leads to jobs and/or other information interviews
- To learn about professional organizations and publications which may be helpful to you in your career
- To build confidence in your ability to discuss your career interests, strengths, and goals
- To discover whether your strengths and personality would be well suited to a specific career based on information received
- To become a more impressive job candidate by learning what is important to employers
- To expand your professional network and become known by the “players” in the field
- To begin a process which will serve you throughout your professional life

WHERE TO BEGIN?

Begin by looking at your personal network. Think about all of the people you know (friends, family, classmates, former employers or co-workers, community figures, acquaintances from your place of worship, past or current faculty, etc.). Let these people in your network know about your interests. Ask them who they might suggest you talk with to learn more about the field you are interested in. Remember that networking is not “using” people. Contacts are often very willing to provide information and share their expertise with others for the asking. You will find people enjoy discussing themselves and their work, especially with novices in the field.

RESEARCH

Beyond your own personal network, there are many resources which will help you to expand your network. Utilize professional organizations, journals, faculty members, LexisNexis/Westlaw, www.martindale.com, bar associations, Loyola alums, and alums from your undergrad institution to help identify others who may be helpful to you in exploring and expanding the depth of your interests.

GET ORGANIZED

Create a spreadsheet listing all of your contacts. Include the contact’s name, title, address, telephone number, and email address. Keep notes on how the contact can be helpful to you and the dates of your communication. Additional information to include: the referral source, notes about your discussion, and the names of referrals you receive from the contact.
HOW TO GET THE INFORMATIONAL INTERVIEW

The most efficient use of your time will involve phone calls or emails to introduce yourself and request a meeting. Let the person know how you were referred to them and that you are not requesting a major time commitment from them. On the phone, this can be done by saying:

“Mr. Jones, my name is ________. I am a 1L/2L/3L at Loyola, and I was given your name by ________. I understand that you practice in the area of ________, and I am very interested in learning more about that field. I’m looking for some general information and wonder if you might be able to find 10 or 15 minutes for me to drop by your office. I’d love to hear your advice and ideas for a student in my position.”

Or, you can send an email along the lines of:

Dear Ms. Jones:

I am a 1L/2L/3L at Loyola, and I was referred to you by Professor __________ when she learned of my interest in tax law. I’m very interested in the field, and would love to get your insight on how to make myself most marketable to firms with a strong tax practice. If you could spare 10 or 15 minutes for a brief meeting in your office or a phone call at your convenience, I would appreciate the opportunity to get your best advice for a student in my position. Please let me know if there is a convenient time to reach you, and I will follow up by phone next week.

Sincerely,
Susan Student

If you do send an email stating that you will follow up by phone – do so! And be prepared in any initial contact by phone for the attorney you have reached to say, “I’ve got 10 minutes right now – why don’t you go ahead and ask me your questions” – you will want to have your questions prepared in this case! Also be prepared to email your resume to the contact on the spot (and always have a polished resume with you at any in-person meeting), so that they have background information about you while you talk. However, be careful how you present your resume – you don’t want to appear to be job seeking. If you have a time scheduled for a meeting or a phone call, send your resume the day in advance with a quick email letting the contact know you are looking forward to speaking with them, and that you’ve attached your resume “to provide a bit of background on my educational and professional experience to date.”

WHAT TO DISCUSS IN THE INFORMATIONAL INTERVIEW

Your goal is to gather information which means that you will be doing the interviewing and directing the discussion. Your discussions will vary with each meeting. Your goals are to acquire basic information and impressions about work responsibilities, lifestyles, working conditions, educational and experience requirements, etc. Remember that the informational interview should be a low-stress, enjoyable conversation.

Introduce yourself and establish a climate of relaxation through “ice-breaker” types of conversation (mutual contacts, the weather, the office environment). Express your appreciation that the contact is taking time to talk with you. Recognize that their time is valuable and that you don’t want to take up too much of it. Continue to develop rapport by asking the contact to tell you about their position, their personal career development, and their likes and dislikes about the field.

Design your questions by first considering what you want to know. Your first informational interviews may be fairly general. As the search continues, you will ask more sophisticated questions about how to find a job in a particular market. Any of the questions that follow will provide you with useful information:
- Can you describe a typical day?
- How did you become interested in this area of the law?
- What part of your job provides the most challenges?
- What motivates you to continue despite the difficulties of this field?
- What changes have you seen over the years?
- What do you believe the future holds?
- Are there any lifestyle considerations I should be aware of?
- If you could start all over again, would you choose the same path?
- Are there any personal attributes which you feel are crucial to success in this field?
- What kinds of coursework, additional training, and practical experiences will make me most marketable in your field?
- What do you think of my experiences to date? Am I an attractive candidate? If not, what would make me more so?
- Are there any professional organizations or publications that I should look into to learn more about the field?

When you are nearing the end of the discussion, you should always say, “You have been very helpful, thank you so much for taking the time to speak with me. Do you have any ideas about who I could speak with to learn more about ________? May I say that you suggested I call?” Ask for permission to stay in touch to inquire about new developments and future leads.

End the interview with expressions of thanks for the contact’s time and candor. Remember to send a written thank you note or email right away. Provide some positive reinforcement for taking their valuable (and billable) time with you. If the contact has given you additional names, explain how much you appreciate the referrals and let them know that you’ll update them on your conversations with the new contacts.

**EVALUATION AND FOLLOW THROUGH**

An important final step is the evaluation of the information which you have gathered, and following up on any leads that you have been given. In terms of evaluation, be sure to ask yourself the following questions: What positive and negative impressions do you now have about the practice area/setting you just learned more about? How did this interview help you to clarify your career objectives? What more do you want to learn about this practice area/setting? What are your next steps?

After each informational interview, you should also make notes about your conversation so that you can be sure that you follow up on each lead and suggestion you were given. If you were given additional names of attorneys practicing in the field – follow up with them! It would be embarrassing for a contact to let a friend of theirs know that they referred “a really terrific Loyola 2L” to them – and that really terrific Loyola 2L never even bothered to call. If a contact suggested groups to join or publications to read, make sure that you check them out. Following up on the suggestions you were given will also create opportunities to get back in touch with your contact to say thank you – for a personal referral that turned into a job offer, for a book recommendation that you found particularly helpful in your job search, etc.