

# ACTIVITIES

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## SECTION 5

# Informational Interviews

More often than not, the best way to learn about something is to ask questions. Informational interviews offer students a one-on-one opportunity to find out more about jobs and careers in the STEM fields from the experts: STEM workers themselves.

## What Is an Informational Interview?

An informational interview is designed to help students learn more about a specific company or industry, as well as the job opportunities and career paths they offer. Unlike a job interview or a mock interview, the informational interview puts the student in the position of asking questions and leading the conversation. As with mock interviews, informational interviews generally are for students of high-school age who are beginning to think about college and careers.

Because the interview is not related to an immediate employment opportunity, it can be a low-stress way for students to explore job and career opportunities in various fields. Informational interviews can last anywhere from 20 to 45 minutes. While face-to-face interviews at the employees' workplace are most likely to be effective, interviews can also take place at the students' school, or by telephone.

Informational interviews are often initiated by schools or teachers who want to give their students career exploration opportunities. Companies can also reach out to schools to offer informational interviews with STEM professionals.

## The Benefits of Informational Interviews

### Benefits for the student:

- Students learn about jobs and careers in the STEM fields.
- Students make connections with actual professionals who can support them in their future job searches and careers.
- Students learn how to do research on companies and industries, and how to ask probing and appropriate questions so they can learn about job and career opportunities.
- Students practice important workplace behaviors—maintaining eye contact, leading a conversation, showing respect.

### Benefits for the employer:

- Employers have the opportunity to nurture student interest in jobs and careers with their company and in their industry.
- Employers can help students understand the education and skills they need to secure jobs with their companies.
- Employers advance their reputation as supporters of education and community leaders among school leaders, teachers, parents and students.

## Benefits for the employee/presenter:

- Employees have an opportunity to forge personal connections with young people as they help them understand what it takes to find good jobs and careers in today's workforce.

## Making It Effective And Educational

### BEFORE THE INFORMATIONAL INTERVIEW

**Coordinate with the teacher or school.** An informational interview can be a valuable experience if everyone understands how to make the most of it up front. Contact the teacher or school you or your company are partnering with to establish the goals of the informational interview(s) and to clarify student and employer rules. The key message is that informational interviews are led by students, so students need to come prepared. See "Supporting Students to Ask Good Interview Questions," below, for more.

**Pin down the logistics.** If the informational interview is taking place at the company, you will have to resolve some logistical questions well in advance. For example:

- Does the student have transportation? If not, who will provide it?
- What company entrance the student should use?
- Where will you meet the student?
- Have you met all your companies' security procedures to bring a student on site?

**Send company information.** Make sure the school and the student have information about the company so the student can prepare for the interview. Send links and/or print materials describing the company, its industry, and its workforce.

**Study up.** The purpose of the interview is to provide the student with information about the company and the industry you are in. Make sure you are prepared with good answers to questions like these:

- What does your company do, and to what extent is it operating in a thriving industry?
- Why is your company's work important and relevant? What key problems does the company address in the world?
- How does the company express its values through activities such as honoring diversity, supporting important community causes, protecting the environment, etc.?
- What are the job and career opportunities in your company and your industry?
- Are these job opportunities likely to increase in the years ahead, and in what job areas do you see the most growth?
- What is it like to do your work (including a description of your typical day and your responsibilities)?

- How does your work make the world a better place?
- What are the educational and skill requirements for people in your position? For others in the company and the industry?
- What are some of the skills you apply on the job on an everyday basis, including math, science, writing, or communications?
- How much do you work alone, and how much do you work as part of a team?

**Eliminate distractions.** Make sure you prepare for the interview by blocking off your calendar so you can give the interviewee your full attention. Plan to turn off your cell phone, put your computer in sleep mode, and put all calls to voicemail.

## DURING THE INFORMATIONAL INTERVIEW

**Watch the jargon.** You don't want to patronize or "talk down" to the student, but at the same time you shouldn't assume they know the ins and outs of the business and the industry. Students may be reluctant to tell you they don't know something, so lean on the side of explaining key issues, concepts and technologies. And try to avoid using industry jargon or acronyms; at the very least, explain industry terms as they come up.

**Use supporting materials.** Think about brochures, maps, organizational charts and other materials that might help the student gain a better understanding of the industry and what you do. Whatever materials you provide should offer a broad overview with minimal industry jargon.

**Show your gear.** Think about any special equipment you use in your job that might be interesting to show the students. This could include lab equipment, outdoor gear, protective equipment, cool software, etc.

**Be specific.** Make sure to tell the student about specific experiences and examples that give them an "inside look" at your work and the work of your company. Show them how you apply specific skills to specific tasks, or walk them through the timeline of a specific project to show how your work gets done. The more vivid your account of what you do on a day-to-day basis, the more valuable and memorable the experience will be for them.

**If you don't have an answer, don't sweat it.** Make sure you are prepared to answer key questions like those outlined above, but if a student throws you a curveball ("What's the average starting salary for people with bachelor's vs. master's degrees?"), tell them you will ask the right people and get back to them if you can find an answer.

**Ask a few of your own questions.** Students should be in the driver's seat during an informational interview, but toward the end it may be appropriate for employees to ask a few questions themselves. Inquiring briefly about a student's favorite subjects and college and career goals is a good way to engage the student. It also can provide an opening for a deeper conversation connecting the student's interests and goals to jobs and careers in your field.

**Make an impression.** Leave students with an exciting picture of what it is like to work at your company, and make sure they understand what skills/degrees/certifications they need to enter a career in your industry.

## Following up

**Look for a thank you note.** You should expect to receive a follow-up thank you note from the student who interviewed you. If you do not receive a note in a timely fashion, it may be worth contacting the school or teacher to remind them that a follow-up note is an important professional courtesy.

Remember: Do not contact students directly. If you need to reach out to students for any reason, always do so through the teacher or school.

**Evaluate it.** In your follow-up contacts with the school or teacher, evaluate whether the informational interview met the school's goals and your goals. For more ideas on evaluation, see "How Can You Put the 'Learning' in Work-Based Learning?" page 6.

**Think about what's next.** Speak with the teacher or school about offering follow-up activities to give students an even closer look at your company and jobs in your industry, such as job shadowing, company tours and other activities explored elsewhere in this guidebook.

## Resources

### Helping Students Ask Good Interview Questions

As noted above, employers can help ensure that an informational interview is a useful experience for all involved by reaching out in advance to a student's teacher or school. Remind them that you are expecting students to come prepared with good questions about the work you do, its importance, the skills or knowledge you need to do the work, and what classes you needed to take to prepare for your career.

Even as you provide pointers or sample questions, remind teachers and schools that students should be creative in their questions. Students should be encouraged to ponder up front what they really want to know about your job and your company, and to prepare their questions accordingly.