

# CAREERS

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Informal chats with people in the know can help researchers to decide whether a career path is likely to be a good fit.

## COLUMN

# For your information

Sounding out people who are already working in a field that interests you is a great way to gain valuable inside knowledge during your job search, says **Peter Fiske**.

**A**s a scientist, you've learnt to be resourceful and self-reliant — to research your questions and solve problems with little or no help from anyone else. The culture of the scientific enterprise encourages this go-it-alone approach, and the research community often recognizes individual contributions more than it does group efforts. The emphasis on attacking problems single-handedly may serve you well in your research, but it can hold you back when it comes to exploring career options or investigating new pathways in your professional development. For example, many early-career scientists search for jobs without seeking help from a hugely effective career-development tool — informational interviewing.

What exactly is this? It is not a job interview: you are not selling your candidacy to the person you talk with. Rather, you're aiming to learn about that person's job, their remit and their field, and what it's like to work at their organization. The practice is one of the best ways to get inside information about a company, business, non-profit group or other organization where you might wish to work, and about the field or discipline itself. It is a common technique used by professionals outside the academic science enterprise to learn about opportunities, and about employers and industries that are unfamiliar to them. It's not unusual for these people to conduct 20–40 informational interviews in the course of a single job search.

Yet this type of meeting is barely discussed — and seldom encouraged — in academia. Even now, many faculty members are unfamiliar with professional customs beyond their campus, and may be resistant to their students exploring beyond the conventional PhD career pathways. And many PhD programmes still emphasize career paths in research science and academia, for which informational interviewing is not the norm. As a result, young scientists rarely consider, let alone arrange, any such discussion, and this puts them at a disadvantage, especially if they hope to move out of academic research.

Setting up and conducting an informational interview may seem strange and awkward. And it's true that talking to a single person gives ►

► you only a single perspective on a career or an employer. But the real value of an informational interview is learning what that person knows and has observed about their job, the organization that employs them and the field in which they work. And multiply one interview by 10 or 20 and you have that much more information about a variety of employers and industries. Just as importantly, many of the people you meet through such interviews will be willing to help you in your job search, offering advice and introductions. You gain not only insight but often supporters and advocates.

The best candidates for these one-to-one meetings are those who work in the field or for the employer that interests you, and with whom you have a connection, no matter how distant or tangential. Many universities' career-planning and placement centres keep a database of graduates who work in a wide range of disciplines and fields and have volunteered to speak to students and postdocs about their own careers and experience. Aim to find at least one person by this means whose educational background is similar to yours and who works in a field that you'd like to pursue. You can learn extremely useful information about how they made the move from research science into this particular career.

You should also try reaching out to members of your professional network, who will be able to introduce you to someone they know. The personal introductions that your network contacts can make on your behalf will create a crucial first impression with those interview targets.

### FIRST STEPS

To set up the informational interview, contact your target candidate through e-mail, introduce yourself and explain who referred you and why you seek an informational interview. You should also briefly describe why you are interested in that person's industry or field and what you hope to learn from the discussion. Don't give up if at first you get no response. A brief and cordial follow-up e-mail is appropriate if you have not received a reply after a week or so. Showing persistence and positivity in seeking this meeting is a good thing: don't be afraid to call the person if you don't get a response from your e-mails.

Once you've scheduled the discussion, you should provide a bit more information about yourself. Don't send a résumé or CV, because it could signal that you're seeking a job rather than information. Instead, send a one-paragraph summary of your background, education, key accomplishments and professional interests. Including the URL to your LinkedIn page will help your interviewee to become more familiar with you before the meeting.

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## QUESTION TIME

### How to get the most from your meeting

Informational interviews are a great way to get direct, candid feedback and advice on potential career paths long before you begin your job search. Here are some questions to ask during the meeting.

#### ● Why did you make the move from research and what drew you to this career?

This is a good way to start an interview because it invites the respondent to share their feelings and personal experiences. Although everyone's story is different, you can often uncover common drives and mutual interests in their response.

#### ● How did you make the transition?

Your host's answer to this question can help you to understand how someone identified

and researched their options and ultimately made their choice. Listen carefully to what they say about the key sources of information that they used, and the part that networking played in their job search and career transition.

#### ● If you could go back to graduate school and take one class, or develop one skill that would help you in your present career, what would it be?

This is a great way to solicit advice about the key skills, knowledge and experience that would make you more competitive for a job in this career field. You may be able to act on the advice immediately, perhaps by seeking out a class or short course on the subject that your interviewee recommends. **P.F.**

Keep things simple for your interviewee: ask to schedule the interview at their workplace at a time of their choice. Not only does this minimize disruption for them, but it also gives you the chance to see that work environment. Sometimes, the person you meet will be happy to show you around and introduce you to others in their organization. But even if that's not the case, you can learn things about their workplace (such as whether people work collaboratively or alone, how they dress and the general ambience) that can help you to decide whether the environment would be a good fit for you.

You should arrive on time for the meeting with a list of prepared questions and topics (see 'Question time'). And in this setting, unlike at a first interview for a specific job, you can freely ask about salary ranges, typical benefits, time off and other such delicate issues. Plan to meet for no longer than 30 minutes. Sometimes, however, these meetings can go so well that neither you nor the interviewee is ready to stop after half an hour. In this case, be courteous and check with your host that it's OK to continue.

It is professional protocol to e-mail your interviewee within 24 hours of the meeting, thanking them for their time and for the insights they shared. If specific follow-up items came out of the interview, such as sending a copy of your résumé or an article you referred to during your discussion, be sure to attend to those quickly. Contact the person again by e-mail 10–12 weeks later. Thank them once more for their help and update them on your career-exploration progress. I know several PhDs who took this tack with every person they had an informational interview with. In at least one case, the 3-month follow-up so impressed the interviewee that it sparked another discussion — which led to a job offer.

If you fear that you may have nothing to

offer the other person, don't use that as justification to avoid setting up a meeting. The person you contact will have sound reasons for wanting to meet you. Many professionals agree to meet because they want to do a favour for (or return one to) the person who introduced you. At times, your target may know that their employer will be hiring soon, and they may want to meet a potential candidate who has already expressed interest in their field or workplace. And sometimes people are motivated simply by kindness or curiosity.

Get comfortable with and embrace this practice: it has value far beyond the job search. Seeking out people who work in fields or organizations of interest and launching conversations with them is a key practice of successful professionals. Sometimes crucial insights and opportunities can emerge from conversations with people who have only the most superficial connection to your current career path. “Chance favours the prepared mind,” as Louis Pasteur said. And indeed, the best career opportunities often favour those who invest some time seeking out others and learning from them. ■

**Peter Fiske** is chief executive of PAX Water Technologies in Richmond, California, and author of *Put Your Science to Work* (American Geophysical Union, 2001).

### CORRECTION

The Careers feature 'Going for broke' (*Nature* **534**, 579–581; 2016) conflated the ideas of an emergency account and an emergency fund. The emergency fund would include an emergency account, as well as other subaccounts for unexpected expenses.