Setting up and Conducting an Informational Interview

The Process

Here are the most important steps in the process:

* Write or email the person you want to meet, and emphasize that you are not looking for a job but researching their industry and types of jobs in it.
* Set up a schedule with the person and prepare questions.
* Research the person and the company the person is affiliated with before the meeting.
* Afterwards, send your contact a thank you note, and follow up when you have news or other relevant information, such as an article that the contact might enjoy.

Research, Research, Research

This aspect of interview preparation cannot be overemphasized: Do your homework. Research your contact, the company, and the industry. There are a variety of ways to do this:

* LinkedIn, Facebook, Google (third-party news references and previous interviews when available can be very illuminating)
* Information from company's website (Media Room, News)
* Annual reports (if available)
* Public library (books, periodicals, magazines, trade journals, etc.)

Become familiar with the company’s products & services, structure, financial status, competitors, reputation, and any recent or upcoming changes. Gather information about the person whom you will meet – background, style, education, affiliations and their hot button issues.

An interview by email is fine. If it’s by phone or in-person, get permission from your interviewees to record the conversations. Then transcribe the conversations. I’d like at least 3 pages of transcription, so get them to talk. If they offer a short answer, see if you can get them to elaborate.

Confirm the interview twenty-four hours in advance via email.

Choose eight Questions from this List to ask your Interviewee and then add four of your own Questions, for a total of twelve Questions.

Put your questions into a sequential order that makes sense.

- What was the biggest obstacle you had to overcome in your career?
- Who are your heroes? Why?
- What makes your company unique?
- Describe your ideal employee.
• What would you do differently – if you could turn back the clock?
• Day-to-day what gives you the greatest joy in your job?
• How is your business changing?
• What was the toughest decision you ever had to make?
• What is your definition of success?
• What would you say are the top skills that helped you to succeed?
• What will be your next challenge?
• I’m interested to know what is the most frustrating thing about your job (or, about running your own business)?
• Are you still having fun?
• Why did you start your own company? What was the thing that drove you to do it?
• What gave you your vision?
• Has success bought you the level of personal contentment that you thought it would?
• How did your potential customers survive all these years without your product or service?
• Who is your competition and how will they react to your new approach?
• What three pieces of advice would you give to college students on the brink of launching their own careers?
• What would you say are the top three attitudes or skills needed to be a successful careerist today?
• What have been some of your failures, and what have you learned from them?
• How many hours do you work a day on average?
• What motivates you?
• How do you generate new ideas?
• What is your greatest fear, and how do you manage fear?
• What do you do to stay creative?
• In your opinion, what is the best way to achieve long-term success?
• Where did your organization’s funding/capital come from and how did you go about getting it? How did you obtain investors for your venture?
• What would your number one suggestion be for someone who wants to do what you do?
• Are there any major misconceptions about your job or industry?
• If you could talk to one person from history, who would it be and why?
• Who has been your greatest inspiration?
• What book has inspired you the most? (or, What is your favorite book?)
• What has been your most satisfying moment in your career thus far?
• What motivates you to keep doing what you’re doing?
• What kind of culture exists in your organization? How did you establish this tone and why did you institute this particular type of culture?
• If you had to characterize your career in one image, what would it be and why?
• What sacrifices have you had to make to be successful?
• Excluding yours, what company or business do you admire the most?
• Where do you see yourself and your business in 10 years? 20 years?
• If you were conducting this interview, what question would you ask?