

## INTERVIEWING FOR OCCUPATIONAL INFORMATION

### 1. WHAT IS AN INFORMATION INTERVIEW?

A half-hour to an hour meeting at the work place of a person about whose job you are interested in learning. You ask questions about the work tasks, environment problems the person's job is designed to solve, and the person's background and education and how he or she obtained the job.

### 2. WHY NOT JUST READ OCCUPATIONAL INFORMATION?

Written information must be general, in order to give a representative description of the type of work; whereas, each person's job is unique. Also, no written material is completely up-to-date. You can get answers to specific questions, see the work place, and look at examples of projects, obtaining much insight and information.

### 3. WHAT IS THE BEST TYPE OF PERSON TO INTERVIEW?

Interview someone who is actually doing or has recently done the type of job you want to know about.—usually someone close to the level you would expect to start at, so you get an accurate, detailed impression of what you might expect to be doing the first few years. Avoid the director or top person, as she/he almost always has less time and can be harder to reach.

### 4. HOW DO I LOCATE A PERSON TO INTERVIEW?

Use either the contact method or the direct method. The contact method tends to be easier but can be more time consuming because this method depends on tapping into your personal and professional network to identify someone with whom to speak. Ask family, friends, neighbors, present and past mentors, former professors, past employers, persons with whom you have professional relationships such as dentists, auto mechanics, financial advisors, etc. Ask, "Do you know a \_\_\_\_\_ I could talk to about his or her job? Do you know anyone who works at (specific place) whom I could contact to ask for the name of someone in the (specific field)?"

The direct method involves e-mailing, calling, or visiting an organization to find someone whose job is of interest to you. Get the phone number of the department where the job is located, then call and ask the receptionist whom she would recommend. If you are unsure of the department or job title, ask someone in the Office of Human Resources where a person doing the kind of work you are interested in works.

## 5. HOW DO I SET UP THE INTERVIEW?

Briefly introduce yourself—name, that you are a fellow at NIH, that you are considering \_\_\_\_\_ as a career and would appreciate a 30- to 45-minute appointment with someone who does that job to ask some questions about what the work involves. Stress that this is not a job interview but a request for occupational information, if you are told that there are no jobs available.

## 6. DO I TAKE A RESUME?

You do not want to communicate that your purpose is merely to obtain a job interview. But, it is useful to have a resume with you in case someone asks to see it. If requested, you may share it or send one after the interview. In some cases, if you have established good rapport with the person interviewed, you can ask for feedback on the resume.

## 7. TIPS ON HOW TO CONDUCT A SUCCESSFUL INTERVIEW

- Prepare ahead of time. Write out questions and refer to them, if necessary. Remember, you are the interviewer.
- Do not start by asking, “Tell me about your job.” That is too broad a question and the person may not know where to begin. Instead, ask a more focused question such as, “What are your most routine activities?”
- Follow-up general responses, such as “I write position papers,” with request for examples so you get more specific information and are not left wondering what the person meant.
- Take notes. It is easy to forget what you heard.
- Ask for a tour of the building and to see examples of the person’s work. Notice the work environment—how people dress, the way they communicate, how the work space is organized, etc.
- Be yourself—conversational and amiable—to make this enjoyable.

## 8. SOME SUGGESTED QUESTIONS

- a) What do you do during a typical workday?
- b) What do you like most/find most interesting about your work?
- c) How much flexibility do you have in terms of work hours, dress, etc.?
- d) What do you like least about the job?
- e) What kinds of problems do you face? find most difficult?

- f) What attributes and background are needed in people applying for this type of work?
- g) How did you get started in this field?
- h) What jobs did you have previous to this?
- i) What best prepared you for this job?
- j) What are your future career plans?
- k) Would you recommend any specific courses or experiences outside the lab to help prepare me for this field or to make me more marketable?
- l) What advice do you have for someone interested in this type or work?
- m) How suited is my background (interest, education, experience, personality) for this field?
- n) How do people learn of opportunities in this field? Internet? (which sites?) print ads? (which publications?), word-of-mouth? (from whom?)
- o) Who else would you suggest I talk to? May I say that you referred me?

## 9. WAYS TO OVERCOME ANXIETY

Since you have probably never done this sort of thing before, you may feel somewhat anxious. That's normal, but try not to let that stop you. Fellows who complete the process in spite of their fears report that their anxiety decreased greatly after the first interview of two, because they discovered that people usually enjoy the chance to talk about their work. To overcome being nervous, start with "low threat" people such as family, friends, or colleagues. Consider interviewing someone who you don't know in an area of interest where there is less to lose, such as a hobby, to gain practice with the process before you conduct a job information interview. Be prepared! By reading a little about the career area ahead of time and knowing yourself—your interests, abilities, and work values—you can formulate meaningful questions and tell a little about yourself if the other person asks.

## 10. BENEFITS OF INTERVIEWING FOR OCCUPATIONAL INFORMATION

- a) Helps you decide what type of work and setting you prefer.
- b) Helps increase your confidence for actual job interviews.
- c) Helps you to tailor your resume to your career objective, since you have a better understanding of the nature of the job you are applying for.

## 11. CAUTION: DON'T GENERALIZE!

Remember that work environments and jobs differ tremendously from one place to another; therefore, you need to avoid judging an entire field based on only one person's opinion. After the interview, take some time to reflect upon what you have learned—both your positive and negative impressions, the requirements of the job, and your interest in learning more about this field and possibly seeking employment in this field.