



A Guide To Networking Meetings

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You have identified the names of people you would like to contact, carefully composed a letter, and followed up with a phone call scheduling a time for your meeting. After that preparation, the meeting itself is nothing more than a friendly conversation asking for advice, but the flow of this conversation should not be left to chance.

Just as you would prepare for trial by making notes before a meeting with a major client, so too should you prepare adequately for your informational meetings. Remember that at these self-marketing meetings, you're not a lawyer interviewing a client. You are having a friendly conversation and asking for a little advice so that you can better market yourself to obtain a new job. This article offers an easy guide for your informational meetings. If you follow its general outline, you will benefit enormously. You will gain the information you need to meet your goals and find your new direction. We all have our own conversational style. Adapt this script to your own needs and your own idioms.

The Elements of an Informational Interview

There are three obvious stages of the informational interview, and they are not hard to remember:

ENTRY → BODY → EXIT

The Entry Phase

1. Rapport

When you first meet your contact, as when introduced to anyone for the first time, make a real effort to put that person at ease. Don't plunge into your agenda until you have first established a human contact. Exchange a few natural pleasantries. Any complimentary icebreaker will do.

One easy way to begin is with a quick scan of the room. Something in the office environment will suggest a commonality, a conversation opener: family pictures, a view out of a window, or a desk ornament. If you live in an area known for its passionate sports fans, such as Philadelphia or Chicago, then maybe you can make a comment about a particular team's recent success or failure. Above all else, make it genuine:

I want to thank you for taking the time to see me... I'll try to be brief and to the point...

2. Disclaimer

This step is crucial to the whole process. You let your listener know at the outset just why you are there, what you are seeking, and what you are not seeking. Most people will still be under the misapprehension that no matter what you wrote in your letter or what you've said during your phone call to schedule the interview, you're going to ask them for a job. So you must take great care to put these assumptions to rest.



Before we begin . . . I want to make it clear why I'm here . . . I'm not looking for a position with your firm (or, I don't expect you to have a job for me) . . . Quite frankly, at the present time, I'm more interested in receiving some good advice - in hearing how you'd evaluate my credentials and how I should go about marketing myself within the legal community . . .

3. Rationale

You have told the person what is not your reason for being there. So now, explain to your contact why you are there. Say:

As I mentioned over the phone, you might say that I'm doing some "marketing research" on myself . . . You see, I'm at a crossroads . . . I'm making some major decisions about the direction of my legal career . . . and it's important that I have enough input to make valid choices . . . That's why I'm seeking feedback from significant people in the legal community such as yourself . . .

4. Introduction

Let me begin by telling you a little bit about myself, for the past ____ years I've been . . .

If you're talking to a friend, or a law school classmate, whom you have not seen recently, then you might use these words as an opener:

It has been a couple of years since we have seen each other; so let me briefly bring you up to date . . . For the past . . .

5. Transition

After your introduction, use some short transitional phrase to move you to the Body of your informational meeting:

I guess my first question is pretty straightforward . . .

Body of the Meeting

First Conversational Level - TOPICS

These question areas are sometimes described as "pump primers"-themes to start the conversation, carry it along, and help the other person offer the information you need. Use just two or three of the topic areas suggested below. Adapt these questions to your needs and the chemistry of the moment. Remember, you are not taking a deposition or cross-examining a witness. Keep the conversation low-key and informal. Always present yourself during an informational interview as reasonably focused, even if you are not quite sure of your direction. Never dump your uncertainties on another person during a self-marketing meeting or ask what you should do with your life. Never.

There are two possible scenarios: either you are staying within the legal community and looking for a better position or you are using your legal experience as a credential and seeking to transfer your skills to another venue.



a) A Job Search Within the Legal Community:

3

1. Compatibility

Are my legal career objectives realistic in terms of today's market?

Do I have the kinds of credentials that legal employers are seeking?

In light of my goals, do I need any other credentials to make me a more marketable candidate?

Would my chances be better with a larger or smaller firm? Why?

2. Shoes

If you were in my shoes, with the credentials I have described, how would you go about marketing yourself?

Do you think that I may have overlooked any other areas where I should market my skills? Are there any other bases I should cover?

3. Personalization

How has your own legal career developed? Was it planned or did it more or less develop on its own?

If you had it to do over, would you do anything different?

Did you have any significant mentors along the way, or did you do it on your own?

4. Employment Trends

How do you read the present local business climate?

How does the local legal scene compare with law firm trends on the national level? Downsizing? Hiring?

b) A Job Search Outside of the Legal Community

1. Compatibility

*Would you consider a law degree a good credential within the _____ industry?
To what extent are my legal skills transferable?*

Is such a move into _____ realistic?

Could you describe to me a typical workday?



2. Shoes

4

If you were attempting to transition into this industry, how would you go about marketing yourself?

What credentials best qualify a person for the position I am contemplating?

3. Personalization

How did you happen to become interested in this particular area of work?

Was your own career planned, or did it more or less just happen?

What parts of your job do you find the most enjoyable / least satisfying?

If you had to do it all over again, how would you go about it?

4. Trends

What kinds of changes have you noticed in the industry over the past five years?

Do you anticipate much growth within the industry in the coming years?

Any developments on the horizon that will affect future opportunities?

5. Employment

What are the current employment trends? Downsizing? Hiring?

For the positions we have been discussing, what matters more - experience or credentials?

What credentials best qualify a person for the position we have been discussing?

From what I've told you of my background and credentials, would you say that I have a reasonable chance of transitioning into this field?

What periodical resources, or employment listings, are available for the job seeker within this industry?

Second Conversational Level: STORIES

At the same time that you are discussing the above topics, you will also attempt to weave accomplishment anecdotes, or success stories, into the fabric of your conversation. Well-prepared career stories are used in informational interviewing, not only to make you and your skills memorable, but also to practice them for later use in actual job interviews.



Well-prepared career stories should be introduced naturally based on the flow of the conversation.

5

As you are talking with your networking contact, listen for conversational “openers,” or commonalities-experiences similar to your own. Use these openings as a way for you to contribute to the conversation by describing your own experiences.

Exiting Gracefully

How long should your marketing or informational interview last? As a rule, it should be shorter, rather than longer-20 minutes, 30 at the most. Pay attention to subtle nonverbal cues for closure: a glance at a watch, the repetition of a flat “uh-huh,” a look over your shoulder towards the door, and so on.

Remember the three “R’s” to the final stage of the informational interview:

Wrap-Up Referrals - Resume

1. Wrap-Up

If your contact is relaxed, seems to “lean” into the conversation, begins telling his or her own career stories, and genuinely appears to enjoy talking with you, then go with the flow. Sometimes interviewers are so flattered by the request for their advice, or become so interested in the process of an informational marketing meeting, that they will extend the time even up to an hour. But when you sense that your time is up, immediately wrap things up:

Well . . . you’ve answered all my questions . . . thank you very much for your time (patience, insights, courtesy, etc.) . . . I deeply appreciate your kindness and I would like to get back to you if something comes up in the future . . .

2. Referrals

After you have established your own credibility and thanked your contact for taking the time to meet with you, say something like this:

Can you think of anyone else I might talk to?

In addition, if your meeting has gone well, your contact should give you the names of a few associates and friends who might assist you in your career search. You might also say,

Would you mind if I used your name?

You will find that the name of a referral in your letter and in your meeting-scheduling call is a great door opener. Friends of friends will readily see you.

3. Resume

Because there is little danger now of a mixed-message, offer your resume as you leave:



By the way, in case some other referrals come to mind, my resume has my phone number and e-mail address.

6

Final Note

Send your contact an e-mail or drop them a brief line thanking them for their time and the advice you received from their meeting. And after you move on to your new direction, set some time aside, now and then, to help others along the way. You've benefited from the kindness of others; it's only right to return the favor.