

Approaching people for information

(from Finding Out: How to get the information you need to make the choices you want)

Your network

You may have heard the terms “network” and “networking.” You may think these terms sound too high-powered or pushy and that networking has nothing to do with you.

Think again! You have a network. Your network is made up of the people you know and the people they know.

Networking know-how

In your network you’ll find people with the information you’re looking for. You can gather that information from these people by:

- ✦ interviewing them by phone, in person, by mail or e-mail
- ✦ job shadowing, observing them as they work
- ✦ meeting them at gatherings like trade shows, association meetings and open houses related to your field of interest.

In a network what goes around, comes around. The people in your network will respond to you in the way you respond to them. Here’s how to keep your network working smoothly:

- ✦ Treat everyone you contact the way you’d like to be treated.
- ✦ Be open-minded. You never know who might help you or how.
- ✦ Don’t be afraid to ask for help. Just remember that you will be asked to help, as well.
- ✦ Share your contacts and information openly and others will do the same.
- ✦ Don’t overuse your contacts. Avoid asking for too much or asking too often.
- ✦ Always say thank you.

The information interview

If you want to find out about bee-keeping, talk to an apiarist. If you want to find out about culinary arts, talk to a chef. The best way to find out what it’s like to work in a specific occupation or field is to set up an information interview with someone who’s working in the field.

How to set up an information interview:

- ✦ Use your network to find the person you want to talk to.
- ✦ Call or write your contact to explain what you want to do. Set up the interview at a time and in a place that works best for him or her.
- ✦ Prepare your questions in advance. (For a list of specific questions, see the next activity.)
- ✦ Look your best and arrive on time.
- ✦ Keep notes or record the interview (with your contact’s permission).
- ✦ At the end of the interview, ask your contact to recommend someone else for you to talk to.
- ✦ Send a thank-you note the next day.

Job shadowing

Job shadowing takes the information interview one step further. When you job shadow someone, you observe that person at work. You gain a deeper understanding and a more detailed picture of what's involved. At the end of an information interview (if it goes well) you might want to ask your contact if you can job shadow him or her as a next step. Or you could wait until after he or she has received your thank-you note.

How to set up a job shadow:

- ◆ Use your network to find someone to job shadow.
- ◆ Follow the steps for setting up an information interview, above.
- ◆ As you job shadow, try to interrupt your contact's schedule as little as possible. Respect the fact that there may be activities and conversations that you won't be invited to take part in.
- ◆ Save your questions until an appropriate time.
- ◆ Remember to send a thank-you note.