**Informational Interviewing (#2)**

**What is it?**

The informational interview is one piece of the job search strategy puzzle. The informational interview is part of a research process, one in which information and contracts are gathered from people who are already working in target positions or organizations. It is an excellent method of conducting market research. The structure of the informational interview is one in which you ask the majority of the questions and direct the course of the discussion, as opposed to a job interview in which you are answering the questions.

- to research job market information
- to find out about career paths that you did not know existed
- to gain interviewing experience; the more comfortable you become with the process, the less stress you will experience
- to become a more impressive job candidate by learning what is important to employers
- to get first-hand information and impressions from people who know the ins and outs of the profession
- to get additional leads to jobs and/or other informational interviews -to build confidence in your ability to discuss your career interests, strengths and goals
- to discover whether your strengths and personality would be well suited to a specific career based on information received
- to learn about professional organizations and publications which may be helpful to you in your career
- to help clarify, define and re-define your interests and goals, gaining self-awareness through the process
- to begin a process which will serve you throughout your professional life -to expand your professional network and become known by "players" in the field

Begin by looking at your personal network.

Think about all of the people you know (friends, family, classmates, former employers/co-workers, community figures, church/synagogue acquaintances, past or current faculty, etc.). Let these people in your network know about your interests. Ask them who they might suggest you talk with to learn more about the field in which you are interested. Remember that networking is not using people. Contacts are often very willing to provide information and share their expertise with others for the asking. You will find people enjoy discussing themselves and their work, especially with novices in the field.

Beyond your own personal network, there are many resources which will help you to expand your network. Utilize professional organizations, journals, faculty members, LexisNexis/Westlaw, bar associations, alumni, etc. to help identify others who may be helpful to you in exploring and expanding the depth of your interests. Explore the multitude of career planning resource guides which offer reference directories.

Create a card file or notebook listing all of your contacts. Include the contact's name, title, address and telephone number. Keep notes on how the contact can be helpful to you and the dates of your communication. Additional information to include: the
referral source, notes about your discussion, and the names of referrals you receive from the contact.

The most efficient use of your time will involve phone calls to introduce yourself and request a meeting. Let the person know how you were referred to him/her and let him/her know that you are not requesting a major time commitment. This can be done by saying, "Mr. Jones, my name is ___________ and I was given your name by _________."

I understand that you practice in the area of ___________ and I am very interested in learning more about that field. I'm looking for some general information and wonder if you might be able to find 10 or 15 minutes for me to drop by your office. I believe that you may have useful suggestions for me, and I'd like to brainstorm with you and hear your advice and ideas."

**Your goal is to gather information**, which means that you will be doing the interview and directing the discussion. Your discussions will vary with each specific interview. Your goals are to acquire basic information and impressions about work responsibilities, lifestyles, working conditions, educational and experience requirements, etc. Remember that the informational interview should be a low-stress, enjoyable conversation. Introduce yourself and establish a climate of relaxation through "ice-breaker" types of conversation (mutual contacts, the weather, the office environment). Express your appreciation that the contact is taking time to talk with you. Recognize that his/her time is valuable and that you don't to take up too much of it. Continue to develop rapport by asking the contact to tell you about his/her position, personal career development, and likes and dislikes about the field. Design your questions by first considering what you want to know. Your first informational interviews may be fairly general. As the search continues, you will ask more sophisticated questions about how to find a job in a particular market. Any of the following questions will provide you with useful information.

- Can you describe a typical day?
- What prerequisites are crucial to finding success in your field?
- What kinds of course work, additional training and practical experiences will make me most marketable in your field?
- How did you become interested in this area of the law?
- Which part of your job provides you the most challenges?
- What changes have you seen over the years?
- What do you believe the future holds?
- Are there any personal attributes which you feel are crucial to success in this field?
- What do you think of my experiences to date? Am I an attractive candidate? If not, what would make me more so?
- What motivates you to continue, despite the difficulties of this field? -Are there any lifestyle considerations of which I should be aware?
- If you could start all over again, would you choose the same path?
- Would you make any changes that would be useful to the novice?
- Which of my skills do you consider most appealing to those hiring in this field?

When you are nearing the end of the discussion you should always ask, "You have been very helpful. Who would you suggest that I speak with to tell me more about
(practice area)? May I say that you suggested I call?" Ask for permission to stay in touch to inquire about new developments and future leads.

End the interview with expression of thanks for the contact's time and candor. Remember to send a written thank you letter right away. Provide some positive reinforcement for taking their valuable (and billable) time with you. If the contact has given you additional names, explain how much you appreciate the referrals and let them know that you'll update them on your conversations with the new contacts.

An important final step is the evaluation of the information which you have gathered. What positive and negative impressions do you now have? How did this interview help you to clarify your own objectives? What are your next steps? With whom will you speak next? What more do you know about the legal market in your field of interest?

Maintain a positive attitude and you will automatically boost self confidence. Utilize all of the stress reduction techniques which have worked for you in the past. Approach the networking process as a large research project, remembering that not all paths lead to the same answers. Maintain contact with other job seekers for perspective and results-sharing. Set reasonable, achievable goals and pride yourself with your progress. Remember that career searches are work and reward yourself for a job well done!