



## INFORMATIONAL INTERVIEWING

### Introduction

You've heard of "Networking" (also referred to as "Informational Interviewing"), but really don't know what these words mean. Networking is using your contacts to learn about options in the job market which will help you to ultimately find the job you want. These contacts will not be total strangers to you because they will be part of your network.

Once they learn that networking is not schmoozing, students are often still reluctant to start networking because they say: *I don't know any lawyers. My parents don't know any either. So, who can I possibly create a network?* You need to consider all of the people in your life who might know a lawyer. (Don't forget about all of those people you grew up with - some of them might have gone to law school just like you did!) Many students overlook the largest links in their network: alumni of their undergraduate institutions and the University of Wyoming. Plus, don't forget people that you see every day like your classmates and faculty.

Why should you network, since it seems like everyone gets their jobs from on-campus interviews and the job board? Actually, nationwide, it is estimated that as few as 5-10% percent of law jobs are ever advertised in any formal way. (The recruiting of second and third year law students through career offices is the exception to the rule.) Certainly anyone who is not interested in large law firms in major cities needs to learn how to network to find positions with all those employers who don't interview on-campus or at job fairs: mid-sized small firms, public interest organizations, government agencies, especially at the state and municipal levels, and judges. Further, even if you do get your first job out of law school through on-site interviews, there are no OCIs or job fairs for your second job. Networking can make the difference when you are looking to transition. Out there in the "real world" most people get jobs through people who know people who need to hire someone. This makes networking a lifetime skill worth developing.

### Brainstorming your List of Initial Contacts

#### **Getting Started**

Begin with family members, friends, social contacts, previous work contacts, and recreational contacts. Don't forget service contacts (your doctor, insurance agent etc.), as well as contacts via professional affiliations, religious affiliations, and volunteer organizations and activities. Don't prejudge or exclude people from your list of initial contacts. Write down everyone you can think of and fine tune your list later.

## **Classmates**

You don't have to leave the law school to begin networking. Many upper class students have indicated that they would be willing to share their job search information. Find out why (if) someone had a great experience with a particular organization or firm (but remember that what makes something a good or bad experience for someone else might elicit a different response from you. Always put the information you receive in context based on your own goals and needs.)

Don't wait for a formal invitation - network with your classmates over lunch. Talk to people who grew up in an area you'd like to explore. Chat with folks who worked as paralegals before coming to law school. Find out where their family and friends have worked. Don't be afraid that your classmates won't want to share their contacts. Most students are happy to share their connections, knowing that they can ask you for the same help when they need it!

## **Alumni**

The job market wisdom and loyalty of Wyoming alumni can lead to valuable career advice. Alumni of the University of Wyoming College of Law, other professional schools you've attended, and your undergraduate institution can all be good resources for both informal interviews and actual job searches.

To assist you in contacting someone who truly wants to help, and to let you know what kind of assistance a particular alumnus is prepared to offer, please contact the CSO Director to learn about our alumni network. Hundreds of alumni from a variety of private and public sector practice areas in a variety of geographic locations have volunteered for the network, which is constantly expanding. These alumni are willing to discuss their careers, provide information about the job market, and assist with arranging informational interviews if appropriate. There is also a "find alumni" feature through LinkedIn which can serve as a wonderful resource to discover alumni in a specific geographic area.

## **Faculty/Administration**

Another source of information about specific areas of legal opportunity is the faculty and administration of the UW College of Law. Students are encouraged to pose questions in specific interest areas, rather than asking for general job-search advice.

## **Volunteer and Part-time Work**

If you want to work in a particular field of law, one of the best things you can do is to get experience in and make a point of meeting people who are already practicing in that field. Part time and volunteer work can help you get to know, and be known by, people who may become vital links in your networking chain.

## **Other Sneaky Tricks {to generate contacts}**

Read. By reading newspapers, bar association publications, magazines, and relevant web sites, you can reap two different types of contacts. First, when an attorney's work is highlighted in an article, you can contact that person and talk to them about the work that was featured. Also, you can reach out to the author of the piece. Especially in bar publications, the writers are volunteers who actually practice law for a living. You can contact the author, letting him/her know that you liked the article and wanted to learn more.

Another great place to cultivate contacts is within bar associations. Even the smallest towns have bar associations. Many of them also maintain web sites, so you can find information about them easily. These organizations are always led by volunteer lawyers who actually like to talk to people. Bar presidents or heads of bar sections (e.g. Litigation Section, Criminal Section, etc.) are a great source of information. They can tell you about the kind of work they do and how they got there, and they can also connect you with other members who might be helpful contacts.

## **How to Ask for Help**

*Informational interviewing is not interviewing for a job.* It is a method of exploring career options and discovering opportunities that are not publicly advertised.

### **Talk to People**

When you have decided whom you want to contact on your preliminary list, let them know you are looking for help and mentorship, not a job. When you are talking to family, friends, faculty or anyone else you feel comfortable with, all you have to do is tell them what you are looking for:

*I'm interested in working for a small firm in Colorado and would like to learn more about what it's really like. Do you know anyone working in Colorado? In a small firm? Who might have some advice for me?*

If the answer is "Yes," ask if they can call and introduce you, or if you can use their name when you call. If the answer is "No," ask them to please let you know if they do think of a referral. (Don't hesitate to take the conversation further by asking more questions like those listed below.) Most people want to be helpful to others, and if they know you want advice, not a job, they are usually happy to talk to you.

Especially when speaking with lawyers you don't personally know, an informational interview is a great way to make contact. As an informational interviewer you can:

- Develop your contacts
- Set up the interview
- Ask the questions you want answered
- Draw on someone's experiences and contacts

## Write a Letter/Email

In general, people feel most comfortable writing to their contact to request an appointment for an informational interview. This gives the contact person a point of reference for your later phone call/meeting and will help you to be perceived as businesslike and professional.

You can send your letter via regular mail or via email. If you contact people by email, you must maintain the same high standards of grammar and punctuation as you would in any business correspondence. Just because the medium is more informal does not mean that the message should be as well.

Your letter should tell the person:

- Who you are
- Where you got their name
- What you want
- When you will call
- Thank you

Letters should be personal, reflect your style, and sound natural. All letters should be in standard business format, carefully checked for appearance, spelling, and grammar.

Should you send a resume along with the letter? Here we have a split of authority. On the one hand, since you are asking for information and not a job, including a resume may send a mixed signal as resumes are typically only used in job applications. On the other hand, if you don't include a resume, you have less opportunity to get the contact interested in talking to you. So, if you decide to include a resume, be sure to include some language in your letter which says something like, *To give you a bit more information about my background before our meeting, I've attached my resume.* If you do not send a resume, you should write a slightly longer letter which includes a little more information about you. An alternative to sending the resume with the initial email would be to attach it after you've confirmed a meeting to solicit feedback or comments from them during the meeting.

See sample emails at the end of this packet.

## Call Directly

If you would like to call without sending a letter, you will be making essentially the same request, but will try to find out:

- If they are free to talk now
- When you could call them again
- When you could meet with them
- Where they would like to meet

You would usually benefit from a meeting at their office where information for additional contacts is readily available.

Note that when you call to arrange an informational interview, you need to be prepared to deal with some additional issues like:

- The person who answers the phone
- The person who screens your contact's calls
- Leaving a message
- Explaining your request
- What to say to someone who is busy or brusque
- Your response to being turned down
- What to say when someone says they'll see you

While you may want to write out your telephone script, remember that this is simply a normal conversation. Always treat the person who answers the phone with respect and care. Be polite, considerate and clear about what you want.

When setting up the appointment, bear in mind that you are asking busy people to give up time to talk to you; their convenience, not yours, should be paramount. So, be as flexible as you reasonably can be as to time/date/location of the meeting. Also, be prepared for interruptions and last-minute rescheduling, as lawyers are often called to manage client emergencies without much notice. Remain calm and pleasant no matter what happens.

---

## How to Conduct the Interview & Sample Questions

If you are meeting in person, dress as you would for a job interview (but remember, you are asking for advice, not a job). Be prompt. Observe as well as listen. Be prepared with open ended questions such as:

- What are some of the particular advantages and disadvantages of this kind of practice?
- Could you tell me what a "typical" day is like for you?
- What do you like about your work?
- Are there things you dislike about your work?
- Is there any sort of path in terms of course selection that is particularly important in your work?
- Are there particular skills or personality traits that you think are needed in your kind of practice that might be different from other kinds of lawyering?
- What's the future outlook for \_\_\_\_\_? (small firms, environmental law, prosecutors, whatever is appropriate).
- What would you see as the best way to get the skills and experience to best qualify me for this kind of Law/Legal Practice/Job?
- What do you suggest as the best way for someone with my experience to approach prospective employers?
- How should someone with my lack of experience approach prospective employers?
- How did you go about finding this job?
- Would you suggest any ways in which I could improve the content or appearance of my resume?
- Do you think there are things on my resume that prospective employers might object to?
- Can you think of anyone else that I should talk to? Would you mind if I used your name when I contact him/her?

You are in the "driver's seat" in this interview, so you need to keep the conversation going and be ready with the next question. As the interview proceeds, you may find that you need to re-focus, if the interviewer does not want to go in the direction in which you would like to go. Also, if this meeting becomes a job interview, you may have to switch gears and field more traditional interview questions. So, make sure to bring a copy of your resume, if you didn't send it initially, and practice answering typical job interview questions before the meeting. Don't be afraid to arrange for another interview if necessary to continue with the job interview. 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.

Be sure to *send a thank you letter* as promptly as possible. Also, once you've left the meeting, be sure to make notes of your conversation. This will help you write your thank you letter and will give you topics to refer to when you speak again. Keep in touch with your contact through quick notes or emails to let them know of new achievements or your job search progress. After working so hard to build your network, you need to give it a little attention every once in a while to ensure that it remains healthy.

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?

