INFORMATIONAL INTERVIEWING

Networking is the development and fostering of personal relationships for employment or business. Networking permits you to:

• Gain advice about a career field, an industry, or an organization
• Connect with more people who are doing the things you want to do
• Learn about possible job opportunities (not necessarily immediately)
• Develop mutually beneficial relationships with other professionals

Skillful networking is a planned, structured, and time-consuming campaign that usually starts with family, friends, and acquaintances, but rapidly moves onto conversations or meetings with people you don’t know, who refer you to still more people you don’t know. Think of networking as a long-term investment in your career.

If a professional in a field that interests you is open to meeting with you, an informational interview (or “Career Conversation” in the UMD Alumni Advisor Network) is a great way to learn about possible career paths.

An informational interview is a conversation driven by you, so you should prepare questions, and bring a pen and paper to take notes. You should not ask for a job. Instead, your goal is to learn what skills and experiences are valuable in this career.

Whom Should I Ask?

WHOM DO YOU ALREADY KNOW?
Is there someone among your family, friends, friends-of-family, neighbors, faculty, and former employers that works in an industry that interests you?

UNIVERSITY SPONSORED EVENTS
Campus events, such as Career Fairs, Employer Information Sessions, and Resume Clinics (where employers critique students’ resumes) will give you wonderful opportunities to meet employers and/or alumni working in your field.

USE YOUR ALUMNI NETWORK
A number of UMD alumni “Advisors” are available for “Career Conversations” with current UMD students through the UMD Alumni Advisor Network. To find an advisor, sign up with your UMD email at www.umd.evisors.com.

LINKEDIN
This valuable tool is a more acceptable way to connect with people in the professional setting than using Facebook or other social media platforms. Attend a LinkedIn 101 and Job Search 201 workshop before you start reaching out to strangers. Register at http://ter.ps/engrworkshop. Have a profile? Ask us to give you feedback next time you come in for a resume critique.

PROFESSIONAL ASSOCIATIONS/MEETINGS
Joining a professional association enables you to attend meetings with people who share similar professional interests. See the list of student societies on the Clark School web page for a list of web sites.
**SMALL TALK/CHANCE MEETINGS**

Never underestimate the power of “chance!” Perhaps one weekend your roommate’s cousin comes for a visit and you find out that she is a mechanical engineer working at a company that interests you. Take that “chance” opportunity to set up an informational interview.

**Preparing for an Informational Interview**

Before you reach out to a new contact:
- **Know yourself:** Be ready to talk about your engineering skills, interests, and experiences.
- **Know basic information** about the career you wish to explore (through books, Internet, classes).
- **Determine what you want** from the people you contact. Advice? Information about their organization? Other contacts?
- **Start slow:** To gain confidence, approach familiar people and less desired organizations first. But, don’t be afraid to initiate contact with people you don’t know.

**Requesting an Informational Interview**

If you have found someone you would like to speak to for career advice (through a personal reference, LinkedIn, the UMD Alumni Advisor Network, a chance meeting, etc.), you will want to be prepared for your next conversation.
- **Practice what you want to say**, even record yourself, before you call a new contact. Have a script ready for voicemail and another for actually speaking to the person. If emailing, make sure you proofread your message before you hit “Send.”

Describe who you are, who referred you, and why you are contacting this person:

“Hi, Ms. Taylor, my name is Jennifer Woodford. I was referred to you by my former co-op supervisor, Mark Richards, in the Integrated Circuit Design office at Annapolis Microsystems. I am calling you because I am graduating from University of Maryland next May with a Bachelor’s degree in Electrical Engineering, and I am interested in continuing my work in circuit development. Mr. Richards recommended that I speak with you about your work at the National Security Agency.”

Then, ask for a meeting:

“I would like to set up a time to speak with you further about your organization and your experience in electrical engineering. Are you available for about 30 minutes sometime next week?”

“Thank you so much for your assistance, Ms. Taylor. I will look forward to our meeting next Tuesday at 10 a.m.”

**Be patient yet persistent:** things may take a while to develop, and you will sometimes hear “No.” Be prepared to respond to a less than warm reception, in case your contact says:

“Well, we’re not really hiring any computer engineers at this time.”

“I understand. However, my goal in arranging a meeting with you is not to discuss a specific job, but rather to talk to you about information and/or advice on entering the field of computer engineering. I was hoping to talk to you more about your perspective on what I can do to prepare myself for a career in computer engineering.”

...or...

“Unfortunately I really don’t have time to meet with you.”

“I understand that you are unavailable to speak with me about entering the field of biomedical engineering; can you recommend someone else in your organization that might be willing to talk with me about their experiences?”
- **Know when to move on.** If you are not able to set up a meeting with that person or someone in their company, you may need to let it go, and identify someone else in the same or a different company.

## Sample Informational Interview Questions

You can use this list as a guide when preparing your own questions.

### Work Environment

- How would you describe your work environment?
- How would you describe a typical day/week/month/cycle – regular duties, projects, etc.?
- What do you like most about your job? What would you change if you could?
- What is the most rewarding part of your job? Least rewarding?
- How much flexibility are you allowed in your job (hours, vacations, dress, etc.)?
- Does the organization have a mission? If so, how does it fulfill that mission?
- How much autonomy do you have on the job?
- How are you made aware of supervisory expectations?
- What portion of your job involves interacting with others, including co-workers & clients?

### Job Requirements and Experience

- What college courses have been most helpful to you in your position?
- Is there special certification, licensing, or an advanced degree required for your job?
- What personal qualities do you see as important for success in this job?
- How much outside or overtime work is required? Nights? Weekends?
- Is much travel involved in your job? If so, how much and what type?
- What are the toughest problems you deal with?
- Are there other industries, sectors, or roles to which you think my skills and abilities would transfer readily?
- Describe a typical day/week that you experience in the role of an _________.
- How do most people enter this field?
- What type of position in this field might I reasonably target given my background?

### Advice/Leads

- If you were in charge of hiring someone to assist you in your work, what criteria would you use to make your selection?
- Are there any professional groups in the field that you would recommend I join?
- Can you refer me to any other people in the field who might be willing to talk with me about their experiences?
- Do you know of any co-op or summer employment opportunities that would benefit me?
- Have you heard of any events or developments that suggest a particular company might have a need for someone like me?
- Are there any particular companies or employers you feel would be good targets for my efforts?
- Can you think of anyone else I might talk to who has _________ experience or who has done a lot of _________ work?
- Of the people you know who have moved from staff jobs to management, who do you think might be most receptive to a request for a networking meeting/informational interview?
- What was the best advice you received when you started in this field?
During your Meeting

- **Listen to what the other person is saying.** If you don’t understand something, don’t be afraid to ask – don’t guess! The goal of an informational interview is for you to learn.
- **Ask questions that demonstrate you are informed and genuinely interested in your speaker.** See sample questions below.
- **Take notes.**
- **How you speak is just as important as what you say:**
  - Be interesting & enthusiastic!! SMILE!
  - Be aware of how fast or how slow you are speaking
  - Watch for fillers/slang (um, like, cool, ya know...)

After your Meeting

Your work is not done once you’ve finished speaking with a new professional contact – it has just begun! Sending a thank-you note to a contact is always a good start.

- When writing the email, refer to the date and location of your meeting
- Proofread your letter carefully. There should be no errors (misspellings or typos). Consider having it reviewed by a staff member at Engineering Co-op and Career Services Office.
- See an email template on the next page.

Maintaining the Contact

There are many ways you can keep in touch with networking contacts. For instance, you can:

- Send a short note about how the discussion helped you in a given situation
- Seek out your contacts at professional meetings or conferences
- Invite your contact to speak or participate in a campus event
- Advise a contact of the results of a referral
- Let a contact know when you get a job

Thank you E-mail Template

Subject: Thank you for the career advice

Dear Mr./Ms. __________________:

Thank the employer for taking the time to meet with you. Mention where and when you spoke.

Mention something specific you discussed during the meeting (for example, a skill the professional mentioned would be helpful for you to learn). Indicate an action that you plan to take related to the professional’s advice.

Indicate that you will inform them of any new developments in your career. Thank the person again.

Sincerely,

Your name