Washington University in St. Louis
CAREER CENTER

Networking & Informational Interviews

Networking: A Treasure Hunt for Information

Talking to people is the most effective way to explore careers, learn about specific jobs or organizations, and search for internships and jobs. Networking is simply talking to people to gain information and ideas. It is about building connections and learning from the insight and experience of others.

In a way, think of networking as a treasure hunt. It is unlikely that any one person will lead you to the perfect opportunity, but each person you meet will probably give you ideas, advice, and insight that will lead you to your next contact. If you are gracious and proactive, the relationships you build will eventually lead to great referrals and opportunities.

It is important to note that networking is not about using people or expecting them to find you an opportunity. And it does not have to be scary. The truth is networking is a chance to meet new people and learn. It is a lifelong process of involving people in your life and work. If you are truly interested in learning from others and show them respect, they will probably want to offer you support. In turn, be sure to express your appreciation, use good follow-up skills to nurture the relationship, return the favor when you can, and pay it forward when others ask for help.

Why Networking is Critical to Success

Ask anyone and you'll see just how many people have landed a job through networking. Research consistently indicates that approximately 80% of jobs are found via networking. That is a significant percentage! It means that you should plan to spend at least that percentage of your search time reaching out to people rather than sticking to posted positions. The majority of positions are filled before they ever get posted to the public. Smart networking will ensure that you know about the "hidden job market" of un-posted positions that may open up or are being created. And if the position you desire is posted, networking can make the difference between being selected for an interview and being left out.

Not ready to actually apply for internships or jobs? Not sure what kinds of jobs you would enjoy? Start networking now! It is the best way to learn. And the best time to build your network is when you are not actually looking for a job.

Get Inspired by the Success of Others

We hear great networking success stories from Washington University students every day. Here are some examples of how students were rewarded by their efforts:

- Rebecca wanted to find a job at a nonprofit organization in Washington, D.C., where she could use her Spanish speaking skills. Before an upcoming trip to D.C., she called organizations on her target list to set up informational interviews for when she would be in town. While in D.C., she met with her contacts, and even stopped by the organizations that were unresponsive to her previous requests. During her research, she noticed that a guy from her high school worked at one of her target organizations. She worked up the nerve to contact him, and they ended up having a great meeting. The friend passed her resume along for an unadvertised position at the organization. Rebecca is now working at the nonprofit.
- Jeff applied for a job at Bloomingdales through a posting on eRecruiting. He was not accepted for an interview, but attended the on-campus information session. After the session, he introduced himself to the recruiter. Due to his efforts, he received a first round interview on campus, followed by a second-round interview in New York.
- Caryn went to several Career Center panel and roundtable events related to her interest in careers with a writing focus. She introduced herself to a woman from Wells Fargo who came for Lunch with a Pro and a man from SPi Publisher Services who came for a panel at Career Camp. Caryn asked each professional if she could meet with them to learn more about their jobs and entry-level positions, and continued to keep in touch over email. Because of her contacts, she ended up with interviews at both companies. Caryn eventually accepted a job as Assistant Project Manager at SPi.
- John wanted to explore working at a museum or a law firm. His Career Advisor gave him the names of some people at the St. Louis Art Museum. John also had a friend working in a law office in Chicago, who told him that some legal assistants would be leaving. John was nervous to call the museum contacts, but after encouragement from others on his Job Search

Team, he finally scheduled an informational interview. Through the meeting he realized that museum work was not a good fit. Encouraged by this realization, John decided to apply for the legal assistant position. He mailed his materials to human resources and also asked his friend to pass them along to the hiring manager. His friend helped him prepare for the interview and provided him with some insight on the firm. Due to his inside connection, John was interviewed well before they interviewed other applicants, and got the job.

You are Already Connected!

You might feel nervous about the idea of networking, but it's actually very natural. Simply find someone doing something related to what you want to do and talk to them. Believe it or not, you (yes, you!) already have a network. Brainstorm a list of people in your world, beginning with your family, friends, faculty and staff. Remember, they might not do exactly what you're looking for, but they might know someone who does. Just make a phone call, ask them how they're doing, tell them what you are interested in doing, and ask, "Hey, do you happen to know anyone who might know anything about _____?"

Try it with your roommates or friends today! You'll be surprised by how close you probably are to great resources. Here is a list of people already in your network:

- Parents, friends, family members, friends' parents, parents' friends, neighbors, classmates
- University staff, faculty, academic departments
- Faculty, friends and alumni from high school
- Current and past supervisors, employers, coaches, religious leaders, doctors
- Keep brainstorming! This list could go on and on.

Expand Your List of Contacts

At some point, it will be important for you to break away from your comfort zone of friends and family and introduce yourself to new people. Here are some ideas you can use to expand your list of contacts:

- Get involved and speak up. Be an active member of campus and community life. Serve on committees in campus clubs. Volunteer for special events and work with nonprofit groups. Get to know people who live near you. Ask for advice from respected acquaintances, Washington University faculty and staff, and supervisors or co-workers. People will be happy to help if they know what interests you, so be sure to let folks in on your goals and aspirations.
- Establish a LinkedIn account and join the WUSTL Alumni Association group. This group is open to current students and is an incredible resource of 7,500+ people. Log on from our website.
- Reach out to those whose work has impressed you. Stick around after interesting presentations to compliment the speaker, introduce yourself, and ask for a card. Send a note or an email to people that you meet to follow-up on your initial discussion. Contact people you read about in articles to introduce yourself and tell them you enjoyed their comments.
- Attend conferences and professional meetings, receptions and events. As a student, you can join professional associations at a reduced rate and enjoy the benefits of hobnobbing with professional members. Link to professional associations from the Web Links section of our website.
- Join an Internship Search Team or a Job Search Team at The Career Center. Meet weekly with fellow job-seekers to report on your progress, share ideas and resources, and increase your chances of getting a job. New teams form throughout the year.
- Attend WU Summer and Winter Parties. We organize networking receptions for current students and young alumni in several cities around the country, including Chicago, New York, Los Angeles, Washington, D.C. and St. Louis. It's a great way for you to meet friendly, outgoing people who all have Washington University in common.
- Attend Career Center panels, roundtables and information sessions. We often invite professionals to campus to talk about their career path, their work, their organizations, and opportunities such as internships and entry-level jobs. Introduce yourself to form a personal connection.
- Work from your target employer list. What kinds of companies or organizations interest you? After researching an organization's website, call to ask for the name of a person you can call or email and request an opportunity to talk in person.

Informational Interviewing

Some networking happens in the moment- when you strike up a conversation with an alum at a reception or find yourself next to an interesting person on a plane. Other times, your first contact with a person will be to request an opportunity to set up a time to talk to them by phone or in person. This planned meeting is called an informational interview. It is an excellent chance for you to ask questions to learn about the rewards, challenges and typical characteristics of a career.

Most professionals are happy to meet with you. People love to share advice with young people, talk about their lives, and chat about shared interests. Think of it this way… would you mind telling a student from your high school about what it's like to be a student at Washington University? You'd probably enjoy it. Informational interviewing is the same thing, but with you in the role of the interviewer.

How to Introduce Yourself

Whether you randomly meet someone in an elevator or prepare ahead of time to send an email, you need to start off with a smooth introduction. You may have heard of a 30-Second Commercial, Pitch, or Elevator Speech. All of these things allude to the way you introduce yourself to another person. You will want to concisely say:

- Who you are
- Why you are approaching him/her
- What you hope will happen

Introducing Yourself in Person

When introducing yourself face-to-face, you'll want to sound polished, but natural and conversational. This is something you should practice with friends. It may seem simple, but the more you practice, the lower the chance that you will freeze up when trying it for real. Here is a sample face-to-face introduction after a Career Center panel:

> *Hi, my name is Kim Lee and I'm an English major at Washington University. I've become interested in public relations as a possible career, and hearing about your work really sparked my excitement. I enjoy writing and I got some experience when I helped promote a new image for an organization on campus. Would it be okay with you if I email you to set up a time when I could meet with you? I'm starting to look for an internship for this summer, and I would really appreciate the opportunity to talk to you about your job and what it's like to work in the field.*

Introducing Yourself in Writing

An email or a business-style letter is a great first contact for people you have not previously met. Professionals are very busy and receive tons of email. Make sure you strike a balance between providing enough information (who you are, how you got their name) while remaining concise and to the point. You will need to remain proactive and considerate throughout the process. Mention how you plan to follow up on this initial contact. Here is a sample email:

> *Dear Ms. Cochran,*
>
> *I am a rising senior at Washington University in St. Louis, majoring in mathematics. I got your contact information from LinkedIn. I am interested in pursuing a career path in the financial sector in New York once I graduate from school next year, and I would greatly appreciate an opportunity to talk to you about your professional experience.*
>
> *This summer I will be a summer analyst at Lehman Brothers in New York, and I would love an opportunity to meet you in person. I am interested in learning about your career path and your current work at Barclays Capitol. I understand that you have a busy schedule, and I am happy to meet you for 15-20 minutes at your convenience. Please let me know if there are certain dates, times and locations that work best for you.*
>
> *Thank you for your consideration. I believe that my analytical skills, previous internship experience and interest in banking make me a good fit for the field and I look forward to learning more this summer. I plan to contact you again in the next week to set up a possible meeting time that best suits your schedule.*
>
> *Sincerely,*
> *Ravi Patel*

Following Up With a Phone Call

Do not be surprised or worried if you do not get a response to your email. The person probably has a million things going on at work and may have just forgotten to write back. A polite way to follow-up is with a phone call. You are likely to get voicemail, but be prepared to have a conversation if the person answers the phone. Here is a sample phone introduction:

> *Hello Ms. Cochran, my name is Ravi Patel. I am a student at Washington University. I emailed you a week ago about possibly setting up a meeting to talk to you about your work in finance. I know you must be very busy, so I thought I'd try to catch you by phone… (Proceed to ask about possible dates for a meeting.)*

Prepare for Your Discussion

Research and planning will help you make the most of your informational meeting. Advance preparation goes a long way toward helping you develop informed questions that will impress your contact. Spend some time learning about the industry and the organization where your contact works. Read the organization's website, learn about current events impacting the industry, and develop a list of open-ended questions. This is your chance to learn from an insider! What do you want to know about their education, first job, lifestyle and work culture? You'll want to build on the following basic questions.

Sample informational interview questions:

- What are some things you do on a daily basis?
- What do you like most about your work?
- What is the most challenging thing about your job?
- How did you start out? How did you get to your current position?
- What kinds of entry-level positions are there in this field? How do people advance?
- What can I do to prepare for entry-level positions in this field?
- What advice do you have for someone who is just starting out?
- What is something about your work that I couldn't learn from my own research?
- What kinds of books, websites, or organizations do you suggest I check out?
- Can you think of two or three other people that I might be able to contact to continue learning about this field?

Conducting Your Interview
When the time comes for your meeting, be sure to arrive 10 minutes early. Dress professionally- always a notch nicer than seems necessary. Appropriate dress or overdressing indicates motivation and respect; underdressing indicates the opposite. Bring copies of your resume printed on resume paper and your list of questions in a clean portfolio folder.

Your discussion will likely be conversational, with you asking intermittent questions. It is okay to take notes, but be sure to maintain appropriate eye contact as you would when talking to a friend. If it feels appropriate, you can ask for advice on your resume or ideas about where you can look for an internship or job. Keep your eye on the time, and begin to wrap-up after the agreed upon 15-20 minutes. Always end with a "thank you," ask for their business card and if it's okay for you to stay in contact.

Express Gratitude
Send a thank you letter within 48 hours of your meeting to express your appreciation for the time and information shared. Your gesture will make a great impression and remind your contact of your conversation. The kind of thank you letter you send will depend on the nature of your meeting. In most cases, a handwritten note on a card or nice stationary is very appropriate. If your meeting felt more formal, a typed, business-style letter is a smart option. An email thank you is sometimes okay, especially if you have spent most of your time corresponding by email. However, an email is less likely to have the same stand-out effect. When in doubt, go the extra mile to send a note through U.S. mail.

Follow-up and Keep in Touch
Networking is not a one-time event. It is about relationship building and reciprocation. Let your contacts know about your progress. If they passed along helpful information, provided you with insights or ideas for further research, or gave you the names of other people to contact, it is a great idea to update them on what you are learning. Particularly as you embark on your job search, have ideas to share, or make life transitions, you will want to touch base with the people in your network.

You can reconnect in a friendly email or phone call. Emails to your contacts should be conversational, but also concise and professional. Always use appropriate grammar, spelling and punctuation. Let them know what you are doing, and ask them about how they are doing. If they have mentioned specific projects they are working on, be sure to express interest in learning about their progress. Remember, you are trying to build rapport and learn about your field of interest.

Here are some ideas for staying in contact:

- Send copies of interesting articles from time to time
- Ask for advice on a project or paper
- Send greetings for birthdays, holidays or special occasions
- Arrange to say hello when you visit their area
- Make plans to meet for coffee at a conference you are both attending
- Volunteer to help with something they are doing in the community
- Drop them a line to update them on your life and ask how they are doing

Keep Track of Your Contacts
Keep names, addresses, job titles, contact information and details about how you met people in a personal database. You can use a notebook, Excel spreadsheet, PDA, card file, or whatever works for you. When you are in job search mode, keep a log of dates when you made contact with each person so that nothing slips through the cracks.

Close the Loop When You Land
Be sure to let your contacts know where you end up working. Imagine what it would be like to go out of your way to help a friend in the process of a job search and then never hear from that person again! Keep in touch for personal and professional growth. Besides, you never know when your paths may cross again. Here is a sample landing note:

Dear Mr. Smith,

I'm happy to report that I have accepted a position as Communications Specialist at the Volunteers for Kids organization, effective June 15. I want to thank you for your valuable help and assistance during my job search. Your consideration was very much appreciated and your support was instrumental in my joining the ranks of the employed!

I hope you are doing well. I'd love to hear from you when you have a moment.

Take care,
Tom