



OFFICE OF CAREER SERVICES

GSAS: Building Professional Connections

Harvard University • Harvard College and Graduate School of Arts and Sciences
54 Dunster Street • Cambridge, MA 02138
Telephone: (617) 495-2595 • Fax: (617) 495-3584 • www.ocs.fas.harvard.edu

GSAS: Graduate Student Information

Building Professional Connections

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WHY START NOW?

A network of professional connections will help you:

- Explore career options and interests.
- Get career advice about how you might prepare yourself for a certain field or position.
- Obtain information about organizations for which you might want to work.
- Identify contacts for informational interviews.
- Discover potential job or internship opportunities.

**Meeting people in your field of interest is the single
MOST EFFECTIVE method of finding a job or internship!**

THE BASICS

You have a much better chance of getting an interview through your own interpersonal connections than other means (such as job postings and company websites).

You need just a few things to get started:

- An idea of what you want at this point in your career exploration or job search.
- A brief personal introduction.
- A system to manage contacts (for example an Excel spreadsheet).
- An interest in learning and an openness to meeting new people.
- A handshake and a smile.
- A few questions to get the conversation going.

Interact with people who have interests similar to your own:

- Get referrals from other people in your network.
- Join social networking websites such as Facebook and Twitter, and professional networking websites such as LinkedIn. Also be sure to use LinkedIn.com/alumni to find additional Harvard alums who might be willing to speak with you.
- Meet Harvard alumni and alumni from other institutions you have attended. The “Crimson Compass” database is available to Harvard students and graduates via the Harvard Alumni Association website: www.haa.harvard.edu.
- Talk to academic faculty and department staff to identify alumni in your field.
- Attend professional organization meetings (try the Associations Unlimited database, available through HOLLIS).
- Join networking groups, such as Versatile PhD Meetup Group .
- Get involved with community organizations and do volunteer work to interact with people who share your interests.

Start simply: Set a goal to meet one new person whenever you travel!

WHAT IS AN INFORMATIONAL INTERVIEW?

In an informational interview you talk with a professional, typically employed in your particular field of interest, to gather career-related information and to add to your professional network. It is NOT a job-seeking interview. Instead, you're seeking to answer questions like:

- Is there a typical career path in this field? If so, what is it?
- Do I have the right background and abilities for the career I'm considering?
- How do I get my foot in the door once I've made a decision?
- What would you do differently if you were to do it again?

A Mutually Beneficial Process

Building a network doesn't come naturally to everyone. There are a variety of reasons people use to rationalize why they don't need to (or can't) build their professional network as they explore career options, search for a job, or develop their careers. One of the most common misperceptions holding people back is: Why would they want to talk with ME? I'd probably be wasting their time!

The benefits of informational interviewing:

BENEFITS FOR YOU

- Get insider advice on entering a field; learn whether specific credentials or more practical experience is necessary.
- Get first-hand impression of work environment.
- Learn about current trends and vocabulary of the field.
- Have a professional in the field critique your resume.
- Practice presenting yourself in a low-stress situation.
- Ask questions that would generally be considered too direct in a job interview
- Gain visibility in the field.
- Expand your network of contacts – maybe even develop a mentor.
- Build confidence in yourself and your decision to move into the field. – OR –
- Learn that this field is not for you.
- Refine your career options, generate others.
- Develop and maintain relationships that may help you in your job search and professional development.

BENEFITS FOR THEM

- Share information about their job and career path – people like to talk about themselves!
- Pass along wisdom and advice.
- Give back – they probably got started the same way.
- Recognize you are a potential new colleague – a professional contact for THEM when you enter field.
- May gain valuable information, resources, or contacts from you (now or in the future).
- Increase understanding of what potential employees in your demographic are interested in or looking for.
- Strengthen professional relationships with colleagues, e.g. by referring you to a colleague who eventually hires you.
- Invest minimal time.
- Potentially earn a referral bonus if you are eventually hired.

Allows them to assess your:

- Personal chemistry.
- Initiative (sometimes, the only way in!)
- Communication skills.

REMEMBER

Never ask for a job directly.

ETIQUETTE and GUIDELINES

Be well **prepared** for each conversation. When you ask for advice or help, and you know what you're looking for, it's easy for people to say "yes." Develop a list of questions ahead of time. See the list at the end of this booklet.

Find a **connection** to make introductions easier. Look for Harvard alumni through the Harvard Alumni Association's Crimson Compass database, or through LinkedIn.

Always be **professional, courteous, and considerate**.

Be **genuine**. Possess a sincere desire to learn. Be honest in asking for advice.

Be **interested** in the people you meet. Most people enjoy having the chance to tell you about their own careers and activities.

Don't explicitly ask for a job. Let the contact decide if he or she is willing to pass on job leads to you. But do ask for advice on how to obtain jobs in that field.

Do **ask for names** of other people in the field.

Give back. Learn enough about the people you meet to keep their needs in mind as you continue to meet people. You may be able to pass on ideas, articles, and contacts that will interest them.

Be **gracious**. Appreciate the time and effort of your contacts and send a **thank you note**.

Stay in touch. Check in periodically. Update people in your network when you make significant progress in your research or job search.

Have faith that building a professional network will ultimately result in job leads.

HOW DO I GET STARTED?

A. Who Should I Contact?

Create a list of potential contacts within your fields of interest. Look for people doing a job you'd like to do, in a field you'd like to investigate, or working for a company that interests you. Contacts can be people you already know (through an internship, job, or community activity) or people you have never met. Obtain names of new contacts through:

People you already know. Career advisers, friends, relatives, faculty, past and present work associates or supervisors may be able to refer you to professionals in a variety of fields. Don't be afraid to tell people what you're looking for—you never know who has a great connection. Utilize your LinkedIn network.

Alumni/ae Contacts. Alums have a common bond and often find it quite gratifying to be able to provide assistance to those following in their footsteps. Harvard's Crimson Compass database (available online to Harvard students and alumni/ae through the Harvard Alumni Association website: www.haa.harvard.edu) houses the contact information for alumni who have indicated that they're willing to speak with students about their career paths. Also see LinkedIn.com/alumni.

Industry directories and trade associations can help you identify organizations that may interest you. Contacts within these organizations can be professionals in positions that interest you or managers of departments you might enjoy working in. Avoid personnel offices (unless you're considering jobs in human resources!) since you are seeking information, not a job. Call the main number to secure the names/titles of appropriate individuals.

Associations Unlimited is a database of national and local trade associations, accessed by visiting <http://eresearch.lib.harvard.edu>. Databases like Lexis/Nexis and Factiva (also available through the link above) are also helpful for searching trade journals for mentions of organizations, key people, trends, and events in different fields.

B. How Should I Prepare?

Research: Read career literature, trade publications, company information, and biographical information. Find out as much about the individual, the company, and career field as possible before you meet. It's better to use your expert contact as a resource for specific information rather than the basics. Information directly from your contact's employer is a great place to start.

Questions: Think about what you hope to learn, and develop questions that will elicit that information. Write a list before you begin to contact advisers, to help you prepare. Questions you may want to ask include:

A detailed description of the job: What challenges, rewards, or frustrations have you encountered? How do you typically spend your time on the job? What kinds of decisions do you make? What does a typical day look like?

Desirable skills, education, and experience: What training or experience is required? What did you do in preparation for entering the field? What courses could I take, skills should I possess, or internship experience might be valuable for me if I decide to enter the field?

Career paths and advancement: What are your career goals? What kinds of opportunities do you see this job preparing you for?

Other important areas of discussion might include:

Lifestyle implications of the work: e.g. travel, hours, pressure, flexibility, salary/benefits, family policy, security, etc. It's acceptable (and recommended) to ask about what range of salary you might expect upon entering at a specific level. Do NOT ask how much money the interviewee makes personally.

Work environment: physical setting, people (colleagues and clients), organizational structure and culture—How does this job fit into the department's/ organization's structure? How does this department work with other departments, and which ones?

Current issues in the industry (beyond what you've read): What trends or changes are occurring in your field? Have these changes affected pathways into the industry? If so, in what ways?

Ways to get more information: Journals, professional organizations, names of 3-5 contacts, possible internship opportunities.

Be sure to avoid questions that can be answered "Yes" or "No." Open-ended questions (particularly "What" and "How" questions) will allow your contact to respond providing the most information possible.

C. How Should I Go About Obtaining an Interview?

Start with your least intimidating contacts first. **Write an email or call:** Call first if they have specified that they would like to be contacted by phone. Write first if you think the contact would appreciate having a brief introduction and a sense of what you're exploring or if you're not confident about presenting yourself over the phone. (See the sample introductory email.)

Remember, even when writing, it's preferable to have a personal conversation either by phone or in person to get the most out of the conversation. Experiment and decide what works best for you.

Explain what you want (NOT a job, just information), suggest a time frame (a particular week?) a specific location (preferably workplace), and a limited timeframe (perhaps 30 minutes). Be prepared to settle graciously for an over-the-phone interview if it's the only alternative. However if a phone interview is suggested, it's worth asking if Skype might be an option.

Sample phone introduction:

"Ms. Smith, my name is Emilio Sanchez, and I'm a graduate student in Sociology at Harvard. I got your name from the Harvard Alumni Association Crimson Compass database. I understand that you are a writer with *The New York Times*. I'd love to hear more about your career path, and perhaps see your office, and was wondering if you would be willing to set up a time to share your experience with me in a brief meeting."

Note: If you call and get voicemail, briefly introduce yourself and explain your interest in wanting to connect. Say you'll try calling back, but also leave both a phone number and email address where you may be reached. Follow up by email, referencing the phone message.

Sample Introductory Email

This email message is to request an informational interview to learn more about the field of investment banking. As such, Suzanne is careful to avoid asking for a job, or for anything other than the chance to listen and ask questions about the experience making the transition from academe to Wall Street.

Dear Mr. Ramos:

I found your name through the Harvard Alumni Association's Crimson Compass database, and saw that you completed your PhD in Applied Math before beginning your work as a quantitative analyst. I will be completing my PhD in Biology at Harvard next summer and am interested in learning more about how I might use my quantitative and analytical skills in investment banking.

Banking is a career option that I have been reading and thinking about for some time. While I do not have specific work experience in finance, I am an avid reader of the Wall Street Journal and the Financial Times. I have also spoken to a few former members of my department about their own decisions to leave academe and use their skills in the private sector. Working as a quantitative analyst appeals to me because I feel it might allow me to continue to use and develop my mathematical modeling and statistics, while indulging my fascination for the business world.

I will be in New York the week of October 9 and would greatly appreciate the chance to speak with you about your experience at Wall Street Bank. If this time frame is not convenient for you, I'm happy to arrange a time to speak on the phone.

Thank you very much for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Suzanne Smith

Note: Don't be afraid to follow up if you don't hear back from your contact within a week or so. Change the way you are contacting them. If you emailed the first time, try following up by phone. People are busy, and you will likely not be a top priority. **But this does not mean they are not willing to speak with you.** Persistence is important, and people often appreciate the reminder that they haven't returned your call, and that you are still interested in speaking with them. However, know that you won't have a 100% response rate, either. Don't take this as rejection—they don't even know you!—but as an indication of how demanding their job may be on their time. If you have not heard back after the initial outreach plus two follow-ups, focus your attention on other contacts from your list.

D. Keep Track of Your Networking Contacts

When you're actively building your network for a job or conducting informational interviews, it's **NECESSARY to keep yourself organized!**

Set up a spreadsheet, a relational database, or just write relevant information for each contact on an index card. Here's the type of information you should track, and some example data:

Contact Name: Bill Gates
 Title: Co-Chair
 Organization: Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation
 Action Step: Send Thank-you note (always update with most recent action step needed)
 To-do by: September 19, 2016
 Referral Source: Crimson Compass
 Mailing Address: PO Box 000, Seattle WA 98102
 Website: www.gatesfoundation.org
 Email: info@gatesfoundation.org (preferably Bill's personal email!)
 Phone: 206-123-4567

Contact History:

	Contact 1	Contact 2	Contact 3
Date:	Sept. 1, 2016	Sept. 10, 2016	Sept. 14, 2016
Type:	email	phone, voice mail	On-site info interview
Notes:	introduced self Requested info intvw	polite reminder req'd info intvw	copious notes on entire visit!
Follow-ups:	phone	return call; set date	Thank you note
Status:	DONE	DONE	TO-DO by Sept. 19

Referred to: Madeline Albright, Kofi Annan, Warren Buffet
 (make entries for all these, using Bill Gates as Referral Source)

Do's and Don'ts of the Informational Interview Process

Do act as professionally as you would for any interview: call to confirm a day or so ahead, dress appropriately, arrive a little early so you can experience the work environment and also to relax before your appointment.

Do feel free to bring a list of questions with you as a means of guiding the conversation, and definitely jot down any suggestions or referrals during the interview, being sure to clarify any terms you don't know or anything you don't understand. Be sure to update these notes with what you have learned immediately after the interview.

Do respect your host's time. Stick to the time frame suggested in your letter or phone conversation unless you are invited to stay longer. Be sensitive to nonverbal clues that it is time to end the interview.

Do be sure to send your resume in advance and bring a copy along to your meeting (just as a way of presenting yourself and your background, not trying to obtain a job).

Do ask the adviser to review your resume with you. Ask for advice on how to best present yourself, what skills may need refining, which areas need attention or development to best qualify you for that field. Also be sure to ask for advice or other experience/knowledge needed for the field.

Do offer to pay, if you've gone out for lunch or coffee for your meeting ("He who invites offers to pay"). But you may accept graciously if he or she insists on paying.

Do ask about compensation in a general way, but **Don't** ask about the adviser's personal income package. You might say, "If I were to enter this field at the entry level, what salary and other forms of compensation might I expect?" Inquiring with individuals in the field, coupled with salary research on the web, will prepare you well for negotiating in the future.

Don't ask your contact for a job, even indirectly. That's not what you are there for.

Do open doors to additional contacts by asking "Are there other people you think I should meet as I continue to investigate this field?"

Do keep your contact network informed of your career development progress, particularly if they have taken an interest in your career or referred you to specific individuals. Maintaining professional contacts is an ongoing process that will benefit you throughout your career.

Do write a timely thank you note expressing your appreciation for the adviser's time. This is important regardless of how helpful you perceive the conversation to be.

Don't speak with only one or two people and assume their views are representative of the field. Continue to develop your network!

Developing your “Elevator Pitch”

Over the course of your job search, it will be critically important to communicate to people who you are and what it is you’re looking for in a position. An “elevator pitch” serves as an introduction when speaking with people about your interests. You may have a 15-second version to use at a job fair, a 30-second version for a networking event, and a 60-90-second one for kicking off a job interview. Below are some ways to start thinking about what you’ll say:

What are your current work roles? Student? Teaching Fellow? Research Assistant?

What is your current career interest, and how has that developed?

What transferable skills have you developed that may be applicable to this field?

What may be the biggest concern on the part of employers considering you for this type of job?

What is it that you want to know from someone in this field?

Remember that you won’t have just one elevator pitch. Develop your basic introduction, then alter it to be appropriate for different audiences and situations. PRACTICE delivering your introduction to friends (and to yourself). Once you feel comfortable and natural, it will be much easier to adapt your initial presentation on the fly.

With a **concise, articulate, and relevant introduction**, delivered with confidence, a firm handshake, eye contact, and a smile, you will make a **GREAT FIRST IMPRESSION**.