

Networking and Informational Interviewing

How to Find a Great Job

Contrary to popular belief, most job openings are not filled via online job boards or advertisements in newspapers. In recent years, nationwide, approximately 40% of law school graduates have gotten their first job as the result of self-initiated efforts, including referrals from friends and colleagues; and an even greater percentage have gotten subsequent jobs through informal networks. Particularly in this difficult job market, you will increase your chances of finding a position if you are able to gain access to what is known as "the hidden job market." If done properly, networking and informational interviewing can lead to job-opportunities.

What is Networking?

Networking refers to the process of identifying and contacting individuals who may be able to provide you with information, advice or job leads and/or the names of other individuals who may be able to provide you with such information. Informational interviewing is a type of networking.

Although you may not hesitate to ask for information or referrals for a good restaurant or a lead on an apartment, most of us are less comfortable doing the same as it relates to looking for a job. With a little guidance and practice, you can conquer this fear and learn to utilize this valuable job search tool.

What is Informational Interviewing?

An informational interview is a research tool and a type of networking. It is the process of meeting with practitioners for the purpose of gaining information and advice about career choices and the job search process. It is crucial to remember that you are not asking for a job. You are asking for a bit of that person's time in order to gain information. Meeting lawyers and other professionals who can provide you with advice and insight into your area of interest may prove to be the single most valuable resource in your job search.

Why It's Not as Scary as You Think

- People generally like to give advice and feel good helping others. Also, people generally like talking about themselves and an informational interview gives them a chance to do so.
- Your contacts will likely feel flattered that you are seeking out their advice.
- Most successful professionals have conducted informational interviews themselves at some point, and many will be willing to return the favor.
- The worst case scenario is that your contact is too busy to meet with you or never returns your follow-up call. Attorneys are busy people, and if a contact is not willing to meet with you, it is likely because they do not have the time. Do not take it personally.

Getting Started

To get started, you can break networking up into three steps:

- 1. Identify and develop contacts;**
- 2. Prepare for and conduct informational interviews; and**
- 3. Follow-up.**

Step One: Identify Contacts for Informational Interviewing and/or Networking

Effective networking begins with “contacts.” Potential contacts include any people with whom you have a relationship (direct or indirect), who may be in a position to provide you with valuable information.

Start With People You Know

As you begin to think of possible contacts, it may help to group people in three general categories: personal contacts (friends, family), professional contacts (previous and current employers), and educational contacts (faculty members, alumni of your schools). Start by making a list of people to contact. It is very important to remember that a contact does not have to be in a position of power (i.e., a hiring attorney), or even work in the legal field, in order to help you in your job search. Your initial list can include the following:

- Friends and acquaintances
- Classmates (current and former)
- Family members
- Neighbors
- Alumni of schools you have attended
- Former employers
- Former co-workers
- SULS faculty and undergraduate faculty
- SULS administrators
- SULS CDO staff
- People you know from your hobbies, sports teams, religious groups, or other activities

Identify People You Would Like to Know

Once you have identified people to contact whom you already know, you should identify people that you would like to meet. You want to identify people who you believe would be able to provide useful information, advice, job leads or names of other people in the field to contact. Try to find people who are doing what you want to be doing with whom you might have some sort of connection. This list can include the following:

- Alumni practicing in your intended field, intended geographic location, or in an organization that interests you.
- Friends and contacts of the contacts on your initial list
- Professionals who have been featured in legal publications such as *Massachusetts Lawyers Weekly*
- Individuals who have spoken at law-related programs you have attended or written articles you have read
- Professionals you have identified using a LexisNexis or Westlaw search of attorneys (your search can be refined to seek SULS graduates or graduates of your undergraduate school who practice in your area of interest)

Finding and Connecting With Additional Contacts (Networking)

You can find and develop contacts in a number of ways. Following are some of the best ways to meet others in the field and develop those relationships. Even if you do not ultimately do an informational interview with these contacts, doing these things will allow you to develop relationships with others working in your area of interest.

- **Use your alumni networks.** Most universities, including Suffolk, have searchable alumni databases to help you find alumni to contact. Sharing a tie to a particular university is a great “in” when requesting an informational interview.

- **Do some volunteer work in your field.** Not only does this get you valuable experience for your resume, it is also a great way to meet people and get your name known in the legal community.
- **Join a bar association.** Some bar associations have networking events and/or mentoring groups that you can attend. Student memberships are generally inexpensive but provide a means to meet people in the legal community. Consider joining a section related to a particular area of interest, attending meetings, and volunteering. The more involved you become, the more likely you are to make valuable connections.
- **Use LinkedIn, Facebook, Twitter and other social networking sites to your advantage.** For example, find and join your schools' alumni groups on LinkedIn. Once a member of a group, you can search for alumni using keywords and even send messages to alumni (see sample at the end of this handout). You can also start following lists for Massachusetts attorneys on Twitter. If someone on the list says something that catches your attention, you can write back and engage them in conversation. Keep in mind that you want to present a professional image at all times.
- **Attend alumni events** hosted by the SULLS Alumni Relations office.
- **Attend Continuing Legal Education programs.** CLEs generally offer student discounts and may even have scholarships for their educational programming. Attending programs related to your areas of interest can be a great way to meet practitioners in your intended field.
- **Be prepared to discuss your goals and interests at a moment's notice.** You may meet a great connection while walking your dog or playing basketball at a neighborhood court. Be ready to use the interaction to your advantage.
- **Do not focus only on attorneys.** You never know who your connections know. Just because a person you meet is not an attorney, that does not mean they won't know attorneys that could be helpful to you.

Step Two: The Informational Interview

Setting up the Informational Interview

Once you have developed a list of contacts, you should begin arranging informational interviews. Initially, it is likely that you will be more comfortable setting up meetings and networking with people with whom you already have a relationship. Meeting with these individuals first will help you build momentum before you start contacting people who you consider to be strangers. In arranging an informational interview, you are simply asking the person for an opportunity to meet to get information and advice. You should not request more than 20 minutes of your contact's time. You will need to think of how to succinctly introduce yourself and describe what type of information you want. You should be clear and specific about the type of information you are seeking. It is easier to do this if you have a focus and are able to articulate that focus.

You should develop a three-minute story to use when networking and requesting informational meetings. Your three-minute story is a response to the infamous interview question, "Tell me a little bit about yourself." It may also be used when introducing yourself to others in networking situations. This is a statement that needs to be well thought out before you make contact with someone, written or spoken, to ensure that you make a good first impression. You should provide the listener with the following information:

- Your education/experience level;
- A brief summary of previous, relevant employment, including the type of work you performed and skills you have developed; and
- A short explanation of your desired career path.

Ideally, your three-minute story will not only provide your contact with the necessary information to form an impression as to what type of work you would be well-suited for, but it will also lead them to believe that you are focused and have your act together.

Sample Three-Minute Story

“Hello, my name is Lucy Powers and I am a third-year evening student at Suffolk University Law School. I am very interested in pursuing a career in Health Care Law and have been focusing my studies in this area. Since graduating from college, I obtained my Masters in Pharmacology from Ohio State University and then spent two years working as a pharmacist at a CVS located in Cambridge. I am currently working as a pharmacist at Mass General Hospital, where I am responsible for ensuring that our drug distribution system complies with Federal and State regulations. At Suffolk, I have taken several courses in Health Law and it is my goal to eventually work as in-house counsel for a health care facility.”

Email or Letter

Generally, requests for informational interviews work best when they are made in writing (see examples at the end of this handout). Writing allows you to be careful and thoughtful and is generally less nerve-wracking than making a telephone call. Writing also avoids the possibility of catching the person off-guard or at a bad time. If you write, the contact will be able to attend to the correspondence and respond when it is convenient for the contact. Because an email is easier to respond to than a letter, most people use an email, followed by a telephone call if necessary. If you do want to make a telephone call, it is easier if you are able to refer to previous written correspondence.

Your email or letter must not sound like a cover letter seeking a job. If it does, you may end the relationship before it ever gets off the ground. Most of your contacts will not have a job to offer you and may be apprehensive that a job is all you are after. Therefore, avoid using the word "interview" in your letter; it implies that you are seeking more than information and advice. Instead, introduce yourself and stress your desire to seek only guidance and information during a meeting with your contact. If you are contacting someone you have not yet met, be sure to mention how you got the contact's name in the first or second sentence. If the contact is not someone you know well, you should identify how you met or know the person within the first sentence or two. See the examples at the end of this handout for ideas. Finally, do not include your resume with your correspondence, although you might consider bringing it to your meeting and asking your contact to review it for comments and suggestions for improvement.

Telephone

If you choose to call the contact first, make sure you are comfortable, articulate and succinct on the phone with people you don't know well or at all. You should also be prepared with your introduction. For example, “Ms. Smith, my name is Lucy Brown and we met last week at the Massachusetts Bar Association meeting. As you may recall, I'm currently in my second year at Suffolk Law School and am interested in learning more about family law. I found our conversation very interesting and wonder if you might have 10 or 15 minutes for me to drop by your office. I'd like the opportunity to hear more of your advice and ideas about entering the field.”

Preparing for an Informational Interview

Because you are the one setting up the informational interview, you will likely be setting the agenda for what is discussed. In order to make a good impression, you will need to be prepared. Having a specific purpose and agenda planned for each meeting you organize will ensure that you leave the meeting with helpful information and that you make a positive impression on your contact.

Research your contact and your contact's area of practice prior to the meeting, using information in the Career Development Office or resources available online. Learning about the area of practice through published information will allow you to devote more time during your meeting to the personal insights of the interviewee and to develop a rapport with that individual. Doing your homework will impress your contact and it will be more likely that you will leave that person's office with names of additional contacts.

You should also develop a list of questions and topics to discuss during an informational interview. Again, your goal is to acquire basic information through an enjoyable conversation with your contact. Here is a sample of questions you may wish to ask during your meeting.

- How did you obtain your current position?
- What has been your career progression since graduating from law school?
- What do you like the most about your job? The least?
- How do you spend your day?
- How much time do you spend researching?
- How much time do you spend with clients?
- Do your work place obligations extend outside of the standard work week?
- What kinds of skills are most essential for success in this field?
- Are there particular law school courses that you suggest?
- If you were a law student again, is there anything you might do differently?
- Do you have any suggestions as to where I might gain the experience I need for a job in this field?
- How receptive is a private firm to a candidate who has gained most of his/her experience in the public sector? (or vice versa)
- Do you have any suggestions for improvements on my resume?
- Based upon my resume and our discussion, how suited is my background for the work you do?
- What types of experiences, paid or volunteer, would you recommend to me?
- What should my salary expectations be?
- What is most rewarding about working in this field?
- Is this legal area growing? How do you see it changing over the next few years?
- Are there any new developments or trends in this field of which I should be aware?
- Do you have suggestions regarding professional journals and associations that would put me in touch with people and information related to this area of practice?
- How do people learn about open positions in this area? Are such positions usually advertised, or are they often filled through word-of-mouth?
- Can you give me the names of other attorneys or people in the field that may be helpful to me?
- May I use your name when I meet with others in this field?
- May I call you again?

Conducting an Informational Interview

After having made your list of contacts, researched the contacts and their organizations, and prepared your questions, you are now ready to conduct your first informational meeting. Remember, you are not interviewing for a job, but rather the purpose of this meeting is to gather information that will take you closer to your goal of getting a job. In this situation, you are the interviewer, and it is your responsibility to direct the discussion. Your two main goals for each informational interview should be (1) making a positive impression upon your contact, and (2) leaving the interview with additional names of people you can contact.

- Present yourself as you would during an actual job interview: dress appropriately and bring your resume to the meeting.
- Have a purpose and agenda: state your purpose early on (e.g. to gather information on a career in corporate law).

- Be prepared to share your three-minute story.
- After giving a brief presentation of yourself (your “three-minute story”), focus on the other person and ask questions designed to elicit information.
- Feel free to take a list of prepared questions and do not hesitate to engage in conversation to show the interviewer you have done your homework.
- Ask for information and advice- not a job or leads on jobs.
- Keep the meeting to the time limit initially requested – no matter how well it appears to be going; your contact will respect that you are using his/her time efficiently. If you asked for 15 minutes of the person’s time and the meeting begins to exceed that time, indicate that you have already used 15 minutes of the person’s time and do not take any more time unless the person offers to spend more time with you.
- Always try to get a referral (name, place, organization or journal) before you end the meeting.
- Obtain permission from the contact to use his or her name when calling someone with whom the person suggests you speak.
- Remember to ask for the individual’s business card so you will have the correct contact information for writing a thank-you note and future communications.

Step 3: Follow up and Maintain the Relationship

Send a Thank-You Note

Send a thank-you note within 24-48 hours after the meeting expressing your appreciation for your contact’s time and advice (see example at the end of this handout). The note can be in the form of a typed letter, email, or a handwritten note card. Which form you choose will depend on your relationship with the person. When in doubt, err on the side of using a more formal typed letter in business format. In your note, mention something particularly informative you learned during the meeting and/or what further steps you plan to take in the near future as a result of your discussion. If the meeting went particularly well, consider asking your contact to keep you in mind if he/she hears of a position for which you might be well-suited.

Maintain the Relationship

If you feel like the contact was receptive to helping you, consider touching base on an intermittent basis to let him/her know you are still exploring the field (e.g. send an article that you think would be of interest to him/her, email him/her with a quick update about a summer job you’ve obtained). While we encourage you to keep in touch with your contacts on a regular basis, be careful not to come across as being too pushy or a pest.

Keep a Record

It is important for you to stay organized and keep a record of your networking activities. Use a notebook, index cards, or any other filing system that works well for you, to keep track of the following: the contact’s information (name, title, address, phone number, referral’s name if applicable), date of your meeting, names and addresses of additional contacts received, helpful information received during the meeting, and dates on which you touch base with your contact after the initial meeting.

After an informational interview, it may also be helpful to make note of what positive and negative impression you now have of the area of practice. 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 now know about the legal market in your field of interest? As you continue to meet with your contacts, you will become more educated on your chosen field, and your questions for contacts may become more specific.

Once You Secure a Position

Be sure to inform all of the contacts with whom you have met when you secure a position. They will be pleased to know about your success and will feel a sense of gratification that they have been able to help you.

Benefits of Networking and Informational Interviewing

- Gaining first-hand information on the day-to-day activities of a professional in the field
- Building confidence in your ability to discuss your strengths, goals and career interests
- Expanding your professional network and becoming known by those in the field
- Learning about career paths you didn't know existed
- Clarifying, defining and redefining your interests and goals
- Gaining interviewing experience: the more comfortable you become with the process, the less stress you will experience
- Researching particular firms or agencies through meeting with current employees
- Becoming a more impressive job candidate by learning what is important to employers
- Learning more about the job market outlook for your area of interest
- Obtaining new contacts for informational interviews and names of professional organizations and publications which may be helpful to you in your career
- Becoming familiar with salary structures within your field of interest
- Increasing your prospects of accessing unadvertised job opportunities
- Meeting people who may be able to put in a good word or ensure your application materials get to the right person once you do apply for a job
- Learning information about the field and various organizations that can enhance your interviewing
- Making connections you can use down the road for business development or job leads

Final Thoughts on Networking and Informational Interviewing

Networking and informational interviewing can help you develop a better understanding of the area of practice that interests you and may enable you to build your self-confidence in marketing your skills to employers in that area of specialization. As "practice interviews," informational interviews will enable you to meet employers and present yourself in a more relaxed atmosphere than in an actual interview. In discussing your career objectives with legal professionals, you will become more comfortable in presenting your qualifications. You will also learn more about what prospective employers are looking for in a successful candidate.

As you continue in this process, you will clarify and redefine your goals. It is therefore possible to become a more impressive candidate; you will know what you really want and why. In addition, you will have established a network that you can use again and again for a variety of professional purposes.

Sample Letters and Emails

Below are some sample letters and emails requesting an informational interview. Generally, you should not send your resume at the same time as the initial contact. You do not want to send the message that you are looking for a job or make your contact feel put on the spot. You want to make it clear you are seeking only information and advice. Once the contact responds and agrees to meet with you, then sending your resume along might be a good idea. You should make it clear you are sending it to give that person a sense of your background before you meet.

Sample 1: Email to Alumni

Dear _____:

I am currently a third-year student at Suffolk University Law School and I am considering concentrating my practice on trusts and estates work. I am trying to learn more about the practice by contacting those working in this area. I found your name in Suffolk's alumni database and saw that you do the type of work I am interested in. I would very much appreciate the opportunity to meet with you for fifteen minutes to learn more about trusts and estates work and hear about your career path. If this is something you would be willing to do, please let me know and we can set up a meeting at a time that is convenient for you.

Thank you in advance for your time.

Name

Sample 2: Email to Contact

Dear _____:

_____ suggested I contact you about my interest in trusts and estates law. I am currently a third-year student at Suffolk University Law School and I am considering concentrating my practice on trusts and estates work because of my strong interest in this area. _____ thought you would be a good person to speak with to learn more about the practice. I would very much appreciate the opportunity to meet with you for fifteen minutes to learn more about trusts and estates work and hear about your career path. If this is something you would be willing to do, please let me know and we can set up a meeting at a time that is convenient for you.

Thank you in advance for your time.

Name

Sample 3: Email to Author of an Article

Dear _____:

I am a first-year student at Suffolk University Law School and I am considering concentrating my studies in corporate law. In light of your recent article in *Massachusetts Lawyers Weekly* regarding the implications of the Dodd–Frank Wall Street Reform and Consumer Protection Act on the corporate legal practice, I decided to write to you to request an informational meeting.

Given your experience, I would be interested in tapping into your wealth of knowledge in this field. I would like to hear your perspectives on the positive and negative aspects of the practice area, its future potential, and obtain any insight you may have regarding this field. I would appreciate any assistance you could offer in the form of a brief informational meeting, at your convenience. If you are willing to meet, please let me know and we can set up a meeting at a time that is convenient for you.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Name

Sample 4: Letter

123 Main Street
Boston, Massachusetts 02110

September 8, 2010

Suffolk Alumni, Esq.
Associate Counsel
Law Firm
1234 State Street
Boston, Massachusetts 02110

Dear Mr. Alumni:

I am a first-year student at Suffolk University Law School and I am considering concentrating my studies in corporate law. In light of your recent article in *Massachusetts Lawyers Weekly* regarding the implications of the Dodd–Frank Wall Street Reform and Consumer Protection Act on the corporate legal practice, I decided to write to you to request an informational meeting.

Given your experience, I would be interested in tapping into your wealth of knowledge in this field. I would like to hear your perspectives on the positive and negative aspects of the practice area, its future potential, and obtain any insight you may have regarding this field. I would appreciate any assistance you could offer in the form of an informational meeting, at your convenience. I will follow up within the next week to see if we can set up a meeting.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

[Sign your name here]

Sample 5: Message on LinkedIn

If you find someone you would like to meet through a group on LinkedIn, you will be generally be able to send that person a message as long as you are a member of the same group. When trying to contact someone you have never met on LinkedIn, if possible, it is preferable to send a message rather than trying to add them to your network. Some people are hesitant to add people they have never met to their network so your request could be denied. Once you have sent the message and eventually met with the person, then you can try adding them to your network.

Dear _____:

I am a third-year student at Suffolk Law and found your name through the Suffolk Alumni Group. I saw that you work at the Suffolk County District Attorney's office. I am interested in criminal law and am trying to learn more about the field. I would very much appreciate the opportunity to meet with you for fifteen minutes to learn more about your work and hear about your career path. If this is something you would be willing to do, please let me know and we can set up a meeting at a time that is convenient for you.

Thank you in advance for your time.

Name

Sample 6: Thank-You Note

123 Main Street
Boston, MA 02110

September 8, 2010

Jane Doe, Esq.
Associate Counsel
Law Firm
1234 State Street
Boston, MA 02110

Dear Ms. Doe:

Thank you for taking the time to meet with me last Thursday. I found our meeting very informative and helpful. It was great to gain more insight into the practice by talking with someone so knowledgeable. It was particularly helpful to hear about how you got your start in the field and your suggestions on courses I should take. I have also taken you up on your advice to join the Business Law Section of the Boston Bar Association. I am looking forward to getting involved.

Thank you again for your time.

Sincerely,

[Sign your name here]