

Inside information

Researching your career? There's no substitute for a face-to-face chat with someone in the field

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When it comes to making big career decisions, like choosing a career path or a new workplace, we all know that accurate information is critical -- but few of us bother to do the legwork.

"Many people make compulsive decisions, or they're influenced by other people," says Michele Waters, a Victoria-based career coach (careerquestcoaching.com).

Few of us consider speaking to people in the know in order to get first-hand information. But Waters argues that there's no substitute for a face-to-face meeting with someone in your field.

Informational interviewing can provide perspective about how the industry works, how to get a foot in the door (including what education is required), and whether a company is right for you.

Thorough research also helps ensure your investment of time and money (in the event you require further education) is worth it.

"You may just find out that you may want to do something different, or it's a poor fit for you, or there's a slightly different aspect that might be better suited to you," Waters explains.

Waters herself conducted a number of informational interviews in the 1980s before deciding to pursue a career in career counseling. At the time, the term "informational interview" didn't exist. But, unsure about what the field was like and what training was required, Waters informally chatted with a wide variety of professionals at all levels.

"I wanted to know -- and I knew these people had information. So I saw them as valuable resources. And I think they responded to my enthusiasm," she adds.

While she was told it would take 10 years to launch a career, Waters aimed for two -- and achieved her goal. She attributes her early success to informational



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Looking for a career with loads of bread? A chat with the Earl of Sandwich, left, might prove useful.

interviewing, which helped her expand her network, find job-shadowing opportunities and even mentors.

Waters recommends chatting with a variety of people to get a good "cross-section." To set up the appointment, she suggests calling specific individuals directly, rather than going through a company's HR department.

If you're researching a company you may be interested in working for, don't try to turn the meeting into a job interview unless the employer pushes it in that direction. It is fair, however, to ask when they may be hiring, as well as what they look for in candidates. You might also ask how employees are rewarded for their achievements, and how the company fosters diversity in the workplace (make sure to keep all questions open-ended, in order to get more specific information).

Be wary of your interviewees' time constraints. Keep the meeting to about 10 minutes long, unless your interviewee has more time. Prepare a list of questions in advance to keep things rolling. Break the ice with a question like, "How did you get involved in this career area?" to set people at ease while revealing industry information.

Waters also recommends asking labour-market-specific questions, what the person would do differently if they could do it all over again, as well as the different routes for getting into the field.

Don't forget to ask whether your interviewee can recommend others to speak to as well. This provides both "a free lead," and a conversation starter ("Mr. X suggested I give you a shout").

After your meeting, make sure to follow up immediately with a thank-you card (preferably in the mail), as well as an update about how you've applied the advice.

It can be an uncomfortable process to ask for a meeting that will take up someone's time, but Waters warns people not to see it as a major inconvenience. After all, people generally like to help newbies, and are usually happy to talk about themselves, their career, and even the company they work for.

"See it as a win-win, where both parties benefit."

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