



Career Conversations

You will be interacting with professionals who may be in a position to advance your careers. Having a prepared, fine-tuned, concise, self-introduction will aid you when sharing your career ambitions with family, friends, alumni, trustees, professionals, or the general public you may meet casually or formally. The more people who know you, the more potential you have to make connections that give you access to the hidden job market.

A career conversation is an informal and non-threatening process of sharing about yourself and gathering information about people, positions, and occupational activities related to a field you know little about but in which you are interested. You can use this process to get a better idea of where you might use your skills, the environments that suit you best, and what job titles and industries may be relevant for you.

While a great deal of insight can be gained by researching careers and occupations through printed materials, career conversations allow you to research careers by speaking directly with organization representatives and professionals. What better way of researching careers than to actually discuss your interests with those in the field or organization? This process also offers you an excellent opportunity to build contacts and referrals for your personal network. Building a personal network is particularly important to your job search because it is directly related to increasing your chances of getting a job.

Another benefit of career conversations is that it will increase your self-confidence and interviewing skills. It allows you to take control of a conversation and to practice your presentation and communication skills. You can also learn the vocabulary that pertains to the particular company or field.

Career conversations should take only 20-30 minutes. The overall objective of is to:

- Gather information from the professional that might assist you in gaining a better understanding of the job/occupation
- Obtain sources of referral/networking
- Open a line of communication, through which a favorable impression is achieved

To begin the process, you can contact individuals within your personal network. This may include your family, friends, roommates, relatives, past employers, and professors. Ask these contacts for the names of people within occupations or organizations that interest you. Another way to establish contacts is to look for people who are interested in the same things you are. As you come across articles about interesting topics in newspapers and magazines, cut them out and put them in a file folder, desk drawer, etc. As you watch TV and movies, take notes and file

them away too. The articles and notes can contain job titles as well as names of people who are doing what you are interested in and where you can find them.

Setting up the Conversation

For more formal career conversations, once you have identified people to contact, several options are available. The easiest and quickest way to schedule an appointment is by email or telephone. Explain to the person who you are and why you are contacting them. You should mention that you are not seeking a job at this time, but rather, that you are gathering information. It is often helpful to ask when the individual whom you wish to speak with will be available, and then offer to call him/her later. If you leave your name and number, you may never hear from the person you wish to contact again. Therefore, be sure to follow-up with a subsequent telephone call if you haven't heard back from them in a reasonable amount of time. Here's how you might begin:

"Hello, I am _____, a student at Saddleback College. I am interested in learning more about _____, and I would like to set up a time to talk with you about what you do and about the field in general."

Most career conversations can take place in-person, perhaps over a cup of coffee at a location convenient for the professional, or you can also schedule these conversations as a video call on a platform such as Zoom, or as a telephone call.

Before the Conversation

After you have contacted the person and arranged a meeting time and place, there are a few things you should do to prepare yourself for the conversation. First, conduct some preliminary research on the respective field or organization. It is important to gather some facts beforehand in order to formulate intelligent questions. You will not make a favorable impression by asking questions that could be easily answered in the organization's literature or through other readily-available resources.

Also, there are some aids that might prove helpful: Consider taking notes in a notebook small enough to be carried with you at all times. Set up a document or file to keep record of all the people you talk with, and keep track when you've followed up with a thank you note.

Conversation Introduction

During the conversation, there will probably be some small talk and casual conversation; this should not take longer than 2-5 minutes. An effective way of starting the conversation can be:

"I appreciate your time. I'd love to share why I'm so interested in talking to you..."

At the beginning of the conversation, establish an "agenda" or direction for the discussion. The following are two different approaches, depending on whether you are a current student or already a working professional:

- *"I'm excited about meeting you and having the opportunity to discuss career options in a field in which you have expertise. In the field of..., I understand that experience will help you advance faster in a growing economy. I don't possess a great deal of experience, but the experience I have is specific to the field. Let me take a minute and explain."*

Discuss the career options you are considering.

- *"Presently, I'm considering going into (the career) and, since you have been so successful in this field, I would appreciate the opportunity to ask you a few questions. I hope that you don't mind if I take some notes."*

Take a few moments to discuss your education, skills, and experiences. You can also relay a few of your accomplishments so the professional can gain a better picture of you. This is an opportunity to share about yourself, but be careful not go into lengthy detail.

During the Conversation

You should have no less than 10 questions you are prepared to ask. These questions should start off with a general, open-ended response. As the questions continue, they should become more specific. The following are some suggestions (the first 5 are strongly recommended):

1. How did you get into this field?
2. What educational or experiential preparation is typical to get into this field? Of that which is typical, what, if any, is required?
3. What was different from what you expected? What was the biggest surprise when you went into this field? Any myths you want to shatter for me?
4. What advice do you have for someone like me?
5. Who else does this? What other companies? Who else should I be talking to?
6. What do you like most about your position?
7. What do you like least?
8. What is your typical day like?
9. What is the responsibility of your position?
10. Are these duties the same for everyone with this title?
11. What kind of individual (in terms of talent and personality) would be best-suited for this kind of job?
12. What are the prospects for someone entering your field today?
13. What advice would you give me on how to go about applying for and finding a position in this field?
14. Are there any other sources of information you might suggest?
15. What advice could you give me about where I might go to find someone who could use my skills?
16. What is a recurring problem for people in this field or in your office?
17. What kind of salary could I expect to make in the field?

Oftentimes, a response will lead you into another question. Be flexible, but make sure you are in control and focused on getting relevant information.

Ending the Conversation

Don't forget to ask for referrals and other networking sources and opportunities that may be useful or relevant. An important part of gathering information is asking for referrals and names of other professionals with whom you can network. This should come naturally. Get used to doing this!

If the professional asks for a resume, resist giving them a resume at the conclusion of your conversation. You arranged the meeting for information and as a conversation only. You can offer to send them a resume the next day as an email attachment with a note of thanks. If they are willing to give you feedback, this is a nice bonus.

Make sure you take the opportunity to thank the person and make a final appeal to the generosity of the individual. When ending the conversation, make a statement like:

"I've had a wonderful time discussing the field of... It was very informative. I hope you won't mind if I keep in touch with you."

It is unlikely the individual will turn down your request.

After the Conversation

Make sure you send a thank you note! Take a little time right after the conversation to write down the highlights of the meeting. When you write a note of thanks, likely via email, or via a handwritten card or stationary if that feels authentic to your style, it is very important to incorporate the major themes of the meeting. This note should be sent within 24 hours.

Reflect on the Conversation

After each conversation, be sure to reflect and ask yourself the following:

1. Does the person I just talked with use the skills I want to use?
2. Would I be qualified for his/her position?
3. Do I understand what the position entails?
4. Would I enjoy working in this capacity?
5. Did I get additional ideas for an alternative?
6. Do I have an idea about what my salary might be?
7. What positive impression do I now have about this area of work (in terms of myself - interests, skills, values, etc.)?
8. Would I enjoy working for this company?
9. What are the goals (needs, concerns, problems, issues) of this area of work/company?
How can I help meet those needs and accomplish those goals?
10. Which of my personal assets could I offer?

If you can answer most of these questions, you have gathered some good information. You will also be able to make a better decision about which direction you want to take with your career. Feel free to share the insight you've gained with others, as what you have learned will likely lead you into more content-rich career conversations in the future!