



Career Conversations



Osborne Village
RESOURCE CENTRE

Word cloud © [LinkedIn](#)

Table of Contents

What is a Career Conversation and why should we have them?	3
What is a Career Conversation NOT?	3
How is this different from an Informational Interview?	4
Why would anyone bother to have a Career Conversation with me?	4
Seriously, what do they get out of it?	5
But I'm scared – won't people be mad at me for bothering them?	5
Step 1: Preparation	6
Finding Companies to Talk To	6
Finding Actual PEOPLE at Those Target Companies	7
Research, Research, Research!	9
Prepare your Personal Brand	10
Make sure your LinkedIn is current and up to date	10
Step 2: Making the Ask	12
Start with a Script	12
Prepare For Catastrophic Success!™ (a subset of YES)	14
Phone vs. Email vs. LinkedIn	15
Using AI to generate scripts	15
INTERLUDE: Active Listening Skills	17
Step 3: The Conversation	17
Conversational Etiquette and Mechanics	17
Career Conversation Framework	18
Small Talk and Introductions / Personal Brand	18
The Questions!	18
Things They May Ask YOU	20
Wrap Up, Gratitude, and Follow Up	20
INTERLUDE: The Career Conversation Video (abbreviated)	21
Step 4: Nurturing the Conversation (Gratitude and Follow Up)	21
Tool 1: The Thank You Card	21
Sample Text:	22
Tool 2: LinkedIn Connections / Endorsements	23
Tool 3: The Follow Up Email	23
In Conclusion	23

What is a Career Conversation and why should we have them?

At it's core, a career conversation is a **structured discussion** between you (a job seeker or worker in transition) and someone who:

- Is doing the kind of work you want to do next OR
- Is working at a target company you want to work for OR
- Is involved in a professional organization related to your industry or field and may be able to connect you with others



...where you are asking for advice or input in order to make informed career decisions and prevent mistakes, while letting them get to know you professionally in a casual environment.

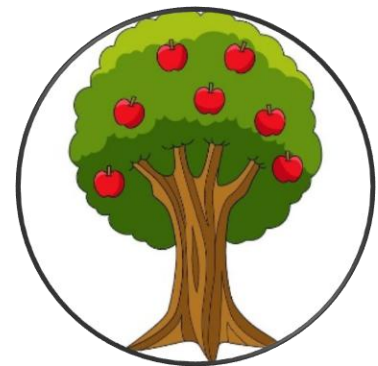
It's a conversation, where we ask someone we respect for advice – and we all know how to do that. We do it every day, including with people we don't know.

Career Conversations are a fabulous tool for those who are looking to make a change in their career, considering returning to further education, or who are new to a market for whatever reason. It's a way to really get under the hood and learn "the truth" about an industry or employer, by talking directly to people in the know.

If you were thinking of purchasing a new car, you would want to take a test drive to see if it met your needs. A Career Conversation is exactly like taking a test drive before taking the leap into another job or career. They are a wonderful tool for both career exploration and job search. Unlike a job interview, a Career Conversation is conducted in a relaxed atmosphere for you and the person you are speaking with. You are in the driver's seat asking specific questions about an occupation.

What is a Career Conversation NOT?

- A job interview or a way to ask for one directly
- A way to do an "end run" and sneak around the interview process
- A quick solution to get you a job right now
- A guarantee that you will be hired



Think of Career Conversations as a way to add people to your network that are not within your two or three degrees of separation. When we talk about the dreaded "networking", we are headed in this direction.

In the workshop, we talk about this process in terms of gardening; one has to grow the apple tree before one can make apple pie. You have to **build the relationship before you can make the ask** of the person you are talking to. It isn't a fast solution.

How is this different from an Informational Interview?

Frankly, it is not any different. However, the word “interview” tends to cause a lot of anxiety and misunderstanding with job seekers:

- People tend to get confused (they think this is a job interview workshop) OR
- They are intimidated by the idea of ANY kind of “interview”.



However, we all know how to have conversations with people we don't know. We do that every single day, and, we all know how to ask for advice from people whom we respect or who know things we don't.

Here's the Wikipedia definition of an “informational interview”, if you are curious:

*An Informational Interview is a **meeting** in which a potential job seeker seeks **advice** on their **career**, the **industry**, and the **corporate culture** of a potential future workplace; while an employed professional learns about the job seeker and judges their professional potential and fit to the corporate culture, so building their candidate pool for future hires*

...sounds a lot like what we said at the beginning. Just flowerier. ☺ So let's use the more accessible, less scary term for now.

Why would anyone bother to have a Career Conversation with me?

Because it's flattering!

No, seriously, look at it from their point of view. If someone who is new to the field or who is trying to learn useful things from the best in the business, then being asked to provide that advice is an enormous professional compliment.



It means you must be “doing something right” in your professional life.

“When you ask for advice, people do not think less of you, they actually think you're smarter. By asking someone to share his or her personal wisdom, advice seekers stroke the advisor's ego and can gain valuable insights. In their minds, advisors actually think, “I'm brilliant (of course), so this guy's smart for asking for my advice.”

Wood Brooks, A., and Gino, F. “Asking Advice Makes a Good Impression.” *Scientific American*, 7 Oct 2014

Slight humor aside, we can't stress enough how important a factor this is. Most people do like to talk about their experience and their story given a little encouragement.

Seriously, what do they get out of it?



Aside from the flattery angle, there's another issue to consider, and that's the "Wizard of Oz" factor. The person you are talking to does NOT exist in a vacuum, and they probably have at least some influence in their company. You have no idea, as a job seeker, what is going on "behind the curtain" at that potential employer.

In developing the Personal Brand, we spend a lot of time unpacking all the reasons why an organization might need someone but not have a job ad up yet.

(Wizard of Oz Line Art © The Progressive Magazine, Sep 2004)

This Career Conversation is an opportunity for that person to talk to a potential job seeker who has (a) shown initiative and (b) has a genuine interest in something they're good at.

We can NOT guarantee that this conversation will give you a job. That's like promising that every date will lead to a wedding proposal. However, we HAVE seen that building the relationship means that person is rooting for you when they hear about other roles.

Sometimes we learn we don't want to work there after all, for reasons, and that's also EXTREMELY valuable. That saves you a lot of wasted time and effort.

In having the conversation, you're getting to know the people who pull the levers behind the Wizard's Curtain, and more importantly, they are getting to know YOU. Without all that pressure of a job interview and check sheets and having to "make a choice".

But I'm scared – won't people be mad at me for bothering them?

It's natural to have a little anxiety around talking to strangers. After all, how many times did our parents tell us not to?

There are a few primary fears associated with any kind of interview – including a Career Conversation. Let's review:



1) Fear of the unknown

Well, the whole POINT is that you are using this opportunity to LEARN something, so you not quite knowing what you don't know is to be expected. We're always a little insecure about taking a risk.

Nobody likes a know-it-all either – your job here is to listen, not to tell them what they're doing wrong. As the Greek philosopher Epictetus said, *"We have two ears and one mouth so we can listen twice as much as we speak."*

2) Fear of Rejection

YOU ARE NOT ASKING FOR A JOB!! Ergo, you can't be rejected *that way*.

The person you are trying to reach may not want to talk with you for any of a wide number of reasons, but it's not a rejection in the same way being blown off for a job is.

It might be likened a bit to asking someone for a date, but there's much less emotional overtone. Either they'll talk to you or they won't. It often has very little to do with you as a person and a lot more to do with corporate policies or non disclosure agreements.

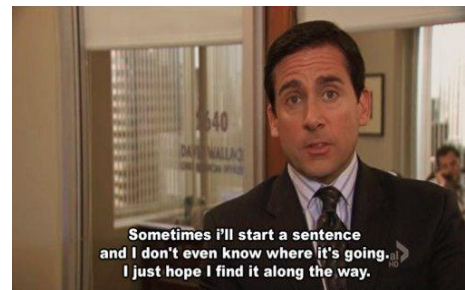
Don't take the no's personally and get on with finding the people who deserve to be in your tribe. Their loss, for real. Lose no sleep over it. There are 800,000+ people in Winnipeg.



3) Fear of looking stupid / silly / clueless / uninformed

Again, we can't stress this enough – the whole point is to LEARN. You are NOT the expert in this dialogue, so a little ignorance is to be expected.

However, this does NOT absolve you from doing the necessary legwork so that you can have an informed conversation. You'll want to research the company and the person VERY thoroughly before you make the ask so you know what to ask **about** and how to encourage dialogue.



Step 1: Preparation



Finding Companies to Talk To

In the Personal Brand workshop, we focus on figuring out who our circles of connection are. However, with Career Conversations, we're focusing more on reaching out to people we can't easily connect to that way.

A few useful resources to get you started:

If you want companies that have a "good reputation":

- Manitoba's Top 50 Managed Companies: <https://www.canadastop100.com/manitoba/>

If you want companies that are "big enough to move around in":

- Economic Development Winnipeg: [Data Tables | Economic Development Winnipeg](#)
 - (specifically you want the Winnipeg's Largest Employers spreadsheet)
- This website is a **goldmine** of information about Manitoba's Industry Sectors

If you want to focus on Winnipeg / Manitoba Companies:

- Winnipeg Chamber of Commerce Member Directory (all categories):
<https://web.winnipeg-chamber.com/atlas/directory/all-categories>
- Manitoba Chamber of Commerce Member Directory:
<https://business.mbchamber.mb.ca/list/ql/corporate-members-27>
 - Also check out their publications, especially MBiz: [MCC Publications - Manitoba Chambers of Commerce \(mbchamber.mb.ca\)](#)

If you're looking for *industry specific resources*, check out the **Resources for Research** booklet for a more detailed list broken out by sector.



Make yourself a list of 10-15 companies you actually want to work at. Not hiring? Who cares – that doesn't matter at all. This is a wish list. Try to pick places that are different sizes – large, medium, and small – to allow you to get different perspectives.

Don't let your job title limit you, either. Maybe you want to work at Bold Commerce or Ubisoft but you're not "techy". They need accountants, marketing people, human resources folks, administrative professionals, and commercial cleaners too. **Be brave.**

Once you have a list, sort them from most important "I will die a happy person of indeterminate gender" if I could work there to "I may not work there forever, but it seems cool". NOTHING on this list should be something you hate, or that you could not see yourself giving your all to for at LEAST three to five years.

Okay so here's the big secret that nobody explains when they tell you to make a list. You don't start at the TOP – you start at the BOTTOM and work your way up. Because, real talk here, you might botch the first couple of asks you make. That's to be expected. Even if you get a conversation with persons three and four and five, that's still a win. Maybe one of them will KNOW someone in your top three. That's why we start at the bottom.



Finding Actual PEOPLE at Those Target Companies



Okay great, we have a list. Let's call Human Resources and....

NO – HARD STOP!! DO NOT PASS GO!!

Human Resources people are lovely folks who do a lot of hard work for their organizations. But they are absolutely (unless you WORK in human resources or recruiting) the WRONG people to talk to for two reasons:

- 1) They are there to hire people not to advise them and that is their primary lens
- 2) They cannot give you the names of anyone else because of privacy law

Because of this, they're usually the engine of absolutely last resort. After all, this is not a JOB INTERVIEW (which is what they're there for), it's a CAREER CONVERSATION (which usually, they are very much NOT there for).

The kind of people you are looking for are:

- a) Doing the kind of work you want to do next and a few years ahead of you OR
- b) Working at a target company you want to work for in a similar role OR
- c) Involved in a professional organization related to your industry or field and may be able to connect you with others



Sometimes there is value in speaking with a departmental manager or someone way over your professional level right now – especially in smaller organizations where the organizational chart is pretty flat. It's a good idea that for every leader-type you talk to, you chat with someone a little closer to where you are right now, a little ahead of you.

This is because the further up the food chain someone moves, the more disconnected with the challenges and opportunities the people that they manage face every day that they will become. ***It's just the nature of leadership – it's a different skill set than Doing The Work.***

Because of this, you're going to have to do a little investigating to find a Real Live Human Being to talk to. Here are some ideas:

- 1) Check the organization's website for an employee list
- 2) Ask friends and family if they "know someone" there (often the best way)
- 3) Try a search engine such as Google to look by company and job title
 - a. Sometimes the high-level people will be on the Wikipedia page
- 4) Check LinkedIn to see if they are there
 - a. It IS possible to see some high level stuff even without a membership by using a search engine, but the details will require registering



Once you have some people attached to that company list, we'll need to do some research about the organization and the person we want to talk to before we pick up the phone or touch the keyboard. We are wanting to come into the conversation curious, not clueless.

Prepare your Personal Brand

If you've already done the Personal Brand workshop or used the workbook to develop something, then great! The template below can act as a reminder:

- I am looking for work as a [job title] because I have ### years of experience in this field.
 - *I have education in AAA from BBB.*
- I am great at [skill] because I am [attribute] and I value [value].
 - *I am really proud at [action] at [place] where I [impact].*



Absolutely no idea what that meant? Attend the workshop, schedule an appointment, or ask for the Personal Brand workbook to help develop your own custom elevator pitch. (Not every brand will have lines two or four, which is why they are offset.)

You probably are not going to include your personal brand if you are making a phone call. It may take too long, so they might lose interest. However, if you're using email or LinkedIn, it can be helpful to include the first and third lines as a sort of self introduction.

In either case, it should be there and ready to go, in case they ask about you or they decide they want to talk to you right now. You NEED to have a polished, professional introduction ready to go before you even THINK about having these conversations.

Make sure your LinkedIn is current and up to date

While it is not absolutely necessary to have a LinkedIn to do Career Conversations, it is a very useful tool for a couple of reasons:



- It is one of the FEW places on the Internet where you can create and curate your story in exactly the way you want it, short of a portfolio and a website
- Potential interviewees WILL Google you, for better or for worse. A LinkedIn account, if it exists, will be prioritized over other results containing your name.

While this manual certainly cannot cover every aspect of LinkedIn preparation, here is one of the checklists we use during appointments to get you started. We will be happy to sit down with you and help you optimize your profile in a one on one appointment.

LinkedIn Checklist

- ☐ Professional photo / headshot
 - This does not actually have to be a professional photo, but some guidelines to follow are – make sure you are facing the camera, smiling, have a neutral background, and are not backlit or heavily shadowed
- ☐ Background photo
 - The background photo is a visual cue to the kind of work you do – IT professionals may want an image of a circuit board where educators may want a pile of textbooks for example
- ☐ Headline: job objective
 - This is a short, direct explanation of your job direction. It can be a job title, an industry, or a statement about what you do. Think an advertising tagline.
- ☐ About / Personal Brand
 - Have a personal brand? Great, there's your about section. About is a friendly explanation of your professional identity, critical skills, background, and goals.
 - Remember to include your industry related primary skills for the search engine
- ☐ Employment history
 - Typically, the last two or three industry related jobs you've done, with a little bit of detail about your most critical skills and accomplishments
- ☐ Education + Training
 - Post secondary education (university, community college, business college, trades or vocational training) and other relevant coursework
- ☐ Ideal Company List / Target Companies
 - Follow the companies you want to work for so you are getting their content in your news feed to find out about new projects or expansions
- ☐ Professional groups + Associations
 - Follow any professional associations or organizations that are important to your field, like your industry sector councils or legislative bodies
- ☐ Activity + Engagement
 - The ENTIRE point behind LinkedIn is networking, and **you can't network with the door closed and the lights out**; make sure you are active
 - If someone looks at your profile and you have no activity for months, they won't talk to you or follow up on your request because you clearly are "not at home"
 - At least once a week, check your News Feed. Like or comment on or even repost content that you find valuable to show you're actually involved!
- ☐ Settings + Privacy
 - Check your Public Profile URL – it's probably got a string of gibberish at the end you can't remember anyway; try tweaking it to make it easier to recall
 - Most things can be disabled under this setting; you probably want your Experience and Education to be visible but not the details

Step 2: Making the Ask

Start with a Script

After running this workshop for years, we have seen one consistent thing over and over – if you try to improvise because you are “good at talking”, **you are likely to fail at the ask.**

Starting from a script means you know what to say when your mouth goes dry and your hands get all cold and clammy. It means you know what you have to get out in the first few seconds.

At a very high level, it looks a bit like this:

- Who are you? (brief introduction)
- How did you find out about them?
- Why do you want their advice?
- Request the career conversation
- Confirm date / time / location / method



Who are you?

- This can be as simple as “Good afternoon, [person]. My name is [name].”
 - You may want to add something like “I am making a transition into *Field X*.” or “I am new to the Winnipeg market and I’m trying to learn more about working at *Company Y*.” or “I’m looking to go into *Education A* and I’m doing some research into the field first.” to provide some context.

NOTE: Try to resist the urge to rattle off your branding statement. There’s time for that later. You just need enough to keep them from hanging up on you in the first three seconds.

How did you find out about them, specifically?

I tend to prefer starting with “You don’t know me, I got your name from...”

- If it was the company website or LinkedIn or an industry site, let them know
- If it was a personal referral, ask permission before name-dropping
- If it was from a news article, mention that

You need to get over the hurdle of being an unfamiliar voice.

Why do you want their advice?

This is the really important part – why did you pick them to talk to? Sometimes they’re the only person we could find at that company, admittedly, but you should at least make an effort.

- Maybe it was their career trajectory on LinkedIn and you want to know how they got there and what you can do differently

- Perhaps there was a specific project they (or their company) worked on that seemed really cool or interesting
- Or something in the industry recently changed and you'd like their thoughts on how it's going to affect things going forward (e.g. new legislation)
- What if you're going back to school? It's really important to talk to people actually doing the work in the Real World [tm] first before spending a lot of money and time.

Request the Career Conversation:

- I was wondering if you might have 20-30 minutes for a quick discussion to discuss your journey and insights.
- I'm flexible and can adjust to your schedule. Would it be possible to arrange a meeting at some point in the next week or so?

If they say NO:

- Thank them for their time.
 - Ask them if they can think of anyone else you could talk to instead?
 - Ask if they know of a publication or industry organization where you could get more information.
- Gracefully exit the conversation.



NOTE: If they seem upset, flustered, confused or angry, just let it go. This isn't like sales where they have to say no five times before you give up. There are 800,000+ people in Winnipeg. The fact that this particular one won't talk to you is not the heat death of the universe. Especially in large corporations, they might be concerned about liability or privacy issues. It's NOT personal.

If they say YES:

- Thank them for their time.
- Ask them WHEN they would like to have the conversation.
- Ask them HOW they would like to have the conversation.
 - IN PERSON: Confirm business address or meeting space
 - VIRTUALLY: Confirm what system they want to use and the email you should send the invite to
 - PHONE: Confirm the phone number you should use
- Verify all of the information for your upcoming meeting.
- Ask if they would like you to send your resume before so they can see your background
- Gracefully exit the conversation.



Prepare For Catastrophic Success!™ (a subset of YES)

What the heck does that mean?

Well, we made you do all that research before you ever reached out to the person, correct?

The reason we do that is because there is the off chance that the person will have that half hour RIGHT NOW – and you're not going to miss the opportunity because you weren't prepared, right? Right.



There's a lot more preparation to do, so you're not quite ready yet – but it's important to understand that you have to be ready to go before you pick up the phone or touch the keyboard, just in case they're ready to rumble right this very minute.

(Ron Bartlette, the former Executive Director of the Winnipeg Transition Centre used to use this phrase a lot in his training and it's a funny way to remind you to be ready for anything.)

Here are some example scripts:

TALKING ABOUT A PROJECT:	TALKING ABOUT A CAREER PATH:
<p>Hi [name], my name is [your name].</p> <p>You don't know me, but I found you while I was doing research about recent projects at [company x], and I am really impressed by your contribution.</p> <p>I'm passionate about [your field or interest] and would love to learn more about your experience with this project. [Company X] is one of the places I'm researching as part of my own career journey and it would be great to hear about the process from someone who was there.</p> <p>I was wondering if you might have 20-30 minutes for a quick discussion to discuss your journey and insights.</p> <p>I'm flexible and can adjust to your schedule. Would it be possible to arrange a meeting at some point in the next week or so?</p>	<p>Hi [name], my name is [your name].</p> <p>You don't know me, but I recently learned about your impressive career at [Company/Organization], and I am really inspired by your journey.</p> <p>I'm passionate about [your field or interest] and would love to learn more about your career path and experiences at [Company/Organization]. I'm researching to make some decisions about the next steps in my own career journey.</p> <p>I was wondering if you might have 20-30 minutes for a quick discussion to discuss your journey and insights.</p> <p>I'm flexible and can adjust to your schedule. Would it be possible to arrange a meeting at some point in the next week or so?</p>

<p>TALKING ABOUT INDUSTRY ISSUES: Hi [name], my name is [your name].</p> <p>You don't know me, but your profile came up when I was looking for top specialists in the field of [industry].</p> <p>I was interested in getting your perspective on [industry specific issue or change].</p> <p>I am doing research on careers in this field and I was wondering if you would be willing to meet with me for 20-30 minutes to give me some career advice.</p> <p>I'm flexible and can adjust to your schedule. Would it be possible to arrange a meeting at some point in the next week or so?</p>	<p>TALKING ABOUT EDUCATION: Hi [name], my name is [your name].</p> <p>You don't know me, but I found out about you when I was looking for people with [company X] doing roles similar to what I was interested in moving into.</p> <p>I'm looking into a career change and thinking about going back to school to study [field]. Before I commit to that change, I'm trying to talk to successful people in the field at my target companies to get a sense of what the job is really like every day.</p> <p>I was wondering if you would be willing to meet with me for 20-30 minutes to give me some career advice.</p> <p>I'm flexible and can adjust to your schedule. Would it be possible to arrange a meeting at some point in the next week or so?</p>
---	---

Phone vs. Email vs. LinkedIn

The sample scripts provided are geared to a phone introduction. Why? Because quite simply, it's a lot harder to ignore a ringing phone if you can get their phone number.

They can be easily adapted to a LinkedIn message or an email. However, it is worth noting that unless they are forced to do so by their employer, most people don't pay much attention to LinkedIn if they're not actively looking for work themselves.



Sometimes people will make the ask digitally first and then try to follow up with a phone call if there's no reply. Again, if you message them a couple of times and get nothing back, try the next person on your list. Don't lose sleep over it.

Using AI to generate scripts

Maybe you're not the best writer in the world. Maybe English is your second, third, or even fourth language. While I'm not a huge fan of AI for most things, this is a situation where using it to give yourself a little boost is perfectly okay.

One of the prompts I use most frequently looks like this (fill in the bold bits):

Generate a request for an informational interview for [**linkedin URL**] based on research into [**topic y**] because I am looking to change fields into [**industry a**]. Limit response to 250 words and a grade eight reading level

Tweak a bit as necessary. For example if you're not changing fields, maybe say "*because I am really interested in working at [company x] and would like to get some insight from you*" or something. Or you may want to ask a couple of questions to narrow things down, like:

- Generate a request for an informational interview, maximum 250 words, for this person [linked in profile].
- In the request, talk about my interest in [project they're working on], [award they got], or [place they used to work].

NOTE: The business about word limits and reading level at the end is because all AI systems tend to be very "loquacious and highfalutin", as they say. Grade Eight is the standard reading level for a Canadian Daily Newspaper so it's a good guideline to use to keep things from getting too complex and hard to follow for the average reader.

IMPORTANT: It's important to double and triple check whatever name and company it gives you. Most AIs can't read LinkedIn directly so it guesses at the name and company – in my case it guessed very, very wrong. Hilariously so, in fact. As I said before, AI will MAKE THINGS UP, so it's on you to proofread carefully. Here's a real example using the instructor's LinkedIn page:

Hi Brittany, [WRONG]

My name is [Your Name]. I found your profile on LinkedIn and am really impressed by your work at Alberta Municipalities. [WRONG]

I'm thinking about entering the workshop facilitation field and am very interested in how the pandemic has impacted workshop facilitation and how online training has changed your programming. Your experience could really help me understand the challenges and opportunities in this field.

Could I ask for half an hour of your time to share your perspective? I am between positions right now and can adjust to your schedule.

Thank you so much for considering my request. I look forward to the chance to learn from you.

Sincerely,

Your Name



INTERLUDE: Active Listening Skills

If you attended the live workshop, there was a brief video about developing active listening skills, located here:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z_rNd7h6z8

To quote the author Stephen Covey, “Most people do not listen with the intent to understand, they listen with the intent to reply.”

So we get into the habit of waiting for our turn to say our bit, and not really HEARING what the other person is trying to say.

Active listening is a critical part of the Career Conversations process. It can be challenging to do correctly, however since we are here to learn (you are the interviewer, not the interviewee), it is a skill you need to develop. Here are some highlights from the video to remember:

- 1) Stay focused, keep natural eye contact, don't judge, and be patient.
- 2) Really listen. Don't think about your similar experiences and what you should tell next.
 - a. Neurodivergent folks; we understand that story sharing can be a primary method of relating and sharing information. Just be mindful.
- 3) Allow for periods of silence. Give time to digest what you are hearing.
- 4) Repeat key ideas or paraphrase (reword) things they are saying to make sure you understand their intent.
- 5) Understand the emotions behind the words. (This is part of Step Four.)

Active listening can be challenging and can often take longer than having a “normal” back and forth kind of conversation. It gets easier with practice. Start with friends and family.

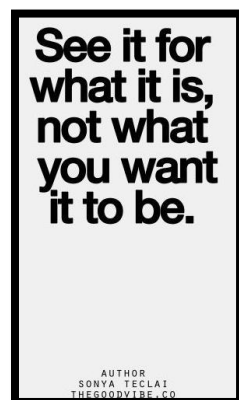
Step 3: The Conversation

Conversational Etiquette and Mechanics

A career conversation is above all a dialogue. It is not an opportunity for you to trap the other person and unload your life story on them in the hopes they will magically get you hired.

We're trying to build a mutually beneficial relationship here – and that never goes well when we start out by making demands.

This seems like it should be obvious, but in decades of teaching people professional networking, we have learned that it is **not** obvious and needs to be stated clearly and unequivocally so there is no space for misunderstanding or claims that OVRC promised you'd get a job. 😊



We also need to remember that this is an initial conversation. We want to keep things short enough that we are not intruding on their ability to do their work or taking up too much of their time. We have found that thirty minutes is about the sweet spot. Much less than that and everyone is rushing. Much more than that and everyone gets distracted.

In half an hour, we will have time to ask and listen carefully to the responses to three, maybe four questions. Therefore, it is important to choose them carefully to get the most of your time together. Your questions may, and probably should, be different for different people.



As part of your preparation, you'll want to write out or print out your questions so you have them ready to go during the meeting.

Career Conversation Framework

For those who have never done an information gathering interview (which is pretty much most of the population unless you are a journalist, some sort of lawyer, or a researcher), here are the basic phases of a career conversation.

Small Talk and Introductions / Personal Brand

Typically, the beginning of the conversation will revolve around thanking them for their time or mentioning the person who gave their name to you. Weather, sports scores, compliments on their outfit or some specific piece of art in their office all come under this gray area. Small talk is a way to grease the wheels and maybe try to find some common ground before you start.

Before you ask the questions, you'll want to tell them a little bit about yourself and your career goals, so they know what you're trying to get to, professionally. Your Personal Brand (or a variation of it) is a great tool to launch this part of the conversation. You can also explain why you are interested in the field or career.

Ask if you can take notes while you talk – it will make things easier to recall later.

The Questions!

Once you've managed your introduction, you're going to present your questions. (There is a list later in the workbook.) Remember, a maximum of four!



Go one at a time, and allow five minutes or so for them to answer thoroughly before you move on to the next one. Ask for clarification if needed. Make notes while they talk so you can remember what they said.

Make sure you have chosen your questions in order of priority so that if you only get through two or three, you are covering the most critical issues first.

Listen Actively! Summarize what they are saying to you and make sure you understand the intent and feeling behind their response.

The List Of Conversational Questions™

Your time at an informational interview will be limited, so go prepared with a prioritized list of about five questions. This will ensure that you get the information that is most important to you, and cover you if the small talk answered something.



Asking open-ended questions will create a friendly atmosphere, and encourage the interviewee to provide his/her knowledge and opinions about the occupation and industry.

Keep in mind that your list of questions will change as you speak with individuals and gather more information. The following list of questions is offered as a starting point:

1. Can you tell me about your background and how you got into this field?
2. Tell me about your job. Are there areas of specialization within this occupation?
3. What attributes and skills are required to succeed in your occupation?
4. What do you particularly enjoy about this occupation?
5. What does a typical day (typical week) look like? What are the typical daily pressures?
6. What challenges does the job present?
7. What are the education and training requirements for this position?
8. What other occupations could you pursue with the experience and skills you have developed in this field?
9. Are there many opportunities in this field?
10. What other skills will be needed in the future?
11. What would be a good entry level position for this line of work?
12. What advice would you give to a person looking for an entry level position in this field?

Things They May Ask YOU

In an informational interview, you are the interviewer, not the interviewee. However, the person you are interviewing may show curiosity about your objectives, so be prepared to answer some questions they may have for you.

Here are some examples of questions you may be asked. Prepare and rehearse your responses in the lines provided below.

How can I help you?

Why did you want to see me?

Why are you considering this field?

What is your job search plan? What have you done so far?

Wrap Up, Gratitude, and Follow Up

BE AWARE OF TIME! If you are getting to the 20-25 minute mark, it is only polite to remind them that you asked for half an hour and offer to wrap up and maybe have another meeting. Being respectful of their time is important and professional. (Often they'll have scheduled a whole hour since that's the way most time blocking systems work – but don't ASSUME that.)

In wrapping up, you will want to make sure you thank them for their time and help, and make sure that you arrange some way to follow up. If the conversation isn't finished, you may want to ask to set a time for a follow up and deal with any outstanding issues.

Sometimes in the course of your pre-conversation research, you might find something useful to that person that you can share as a way to show gratitude. It's always a good way to reinforce that you want to be of service to them and that you actually care about the industry enough to stay on top of things.

INTERLUDE: The Career Conversation Video (abbreviated)

In the live workshop, we watch a highly edited version of a career conversation (approximately 10 minutes as opposed to the 30 you would normally plan for). Because most participants have never done this before, it helps to show the “flow” of the conversation and give a sense of how you move through each of the segments.

Go to this link to review the video: https://youtu.be/DJ_yPCmpJm0

Listen for each of the parts we talk about in the conversation:

- Showing gratitude / small talk
- The Personal Brand (it's a bit longer than we do, but it's there)
- The three key questions
- The Wrap Up

Step 4: Nurturing the Conversation (Gratitude and Follow Up)

You survived the conversation and made a new connection! Go you!

Seriously though, this can be a little awkward the first few times, so congratulations on being brave. It's a really effective way to get you in front of people who can very likely help you break through the invisible wall of “not knowing the right people” but it takes some courage.

How do we feed and water this tiny new plant we have in the garden of our professional network so that it doesn't wither away from lack of attention?

Tool 1: The Thank You Card

In short, **people delete emails and voicemails**. They keep thank you cards; they're little badges of honor. Besides, everyone knows what a thank you card “looks like” in the mail, it's clearly not a bill, and that makes them happy all by itself.



You don't need to spend a fortune to get decent thank you cards. Stores like HomeSense or Winners usually have a decent selection near the door. WalMart is pretty hit and miss – sometimes they have them, sometimes not. In a pinch, whatever flavour of Dollar Store you have near you probably sells them too. Heck, I've found boxes with one card missing at the thrift store.

Buying some quality thank you cards is an investment that you want to make in yourself and your network (you need them for job interviews anyway). Yes, buy the stamps too – sometimes you can drop it off in person but sometimes you can't.



It works like this. When you leave, go to your favorite thinking spot, draft something to put in the card (thank them for their time, mention a particularly juicy piece of information they helped you with), and fill it in, making sure you provide your contact information at the bottom. Fill in their name and address on the front and pop it into a mailbox or go back and leave it with the administrator at their office.

Yes, you can send an email or make the call too. But they DELETE those. *"Use the Cards, Luke."*

Sample Text:

Dear _____:

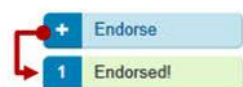
Thank you for taking the time to meet with me and answer questions regarding a career in _____. I definitely have a better understanding of the responsibilities and opportunities. I appreciate you referring me to _____ and allowing me to use your name when making initial contact. As you suggested, I will also contact the Association of _____, and sign up for the newsletter to get the latest news in the field of _____.

As we discussed, I will update you in a few weeks to give you an update on my research. Thank you again for your generosity and knowledge. It has been very helpful.

Sincerely,
Your Signature
(204) 555-1234
myemail@email.com

Make sure you tailor the content to what you ACTUALLY talked about.

Tool 2: LinkedIn Connections / Endorsements



If the person is on LinkedIn, now would be a good time to ask to connect with them so you can keep them up to date on your job search.

Sometimes it's helpful to Endorse them for skills they talked about in your Career Conversation – this shows them that you were actively listening.

If you aren't already, make sure you are also following that person's parent organization so that you can keep up with what's happening there. Like or comment on posts you find particularly engaging or helpful.

Think of this as a way of becoming part of their virtual community. When you DO apply for jobs, they will know who you are – in a good way – as a positive contributor.

Tool 3: The Follow Up Email

The last and most obvious – but most overlooked – tool in your follow up tool box is literally just to follow up! About two weeks after your Career Conversation, drop your new network member a line to let them know how your job search is coming along and thank them again for their advice and help.

If they suggested someone else to talk to, let them know if that conversation happened and thank them for their recommendation. You don't need to disclose the content of the conversation (and you shouldn't), however, letting them know their suggestion bore fruit and you benefited from it is important.



In Conclusion

Career Conversations are an incredibly powerful tool to build your professional network and learn from people who are out there doing the work in the real world. They allow you to learn from people who can help you avoid pitfalls and learn what the insiders know.

The biggest complaint we get from job seekers is that they know that most of the really cool jobs get found through word of mouth, but that they don't "know the right people" so they feel left out or excluded from those opportunities.

Career Conversations are the tool we use to build those relationships. People who are "good at" networking do this organically, but it is a skill that can be learned just like any other one.

Is this a fast solution to the problem of getting a Really Cool Job? Not really – again, we come back to the metaphor of planting an apple tree.

However, since we are not given to know what is going on behind the curtain at any given employer, you may luck into a situation where they're looking for or need someone but haven't gone public with that knowledge for any of a number of reasons. Or, the person you are talking to may know someone else who needs a person who needs your skill set.

Just like in the Personal Brand workshop, Career Conversations also leverage the two degrees of separation trick. BUT – and this is the important part – you are starting with someone outside your own natural circle, which expands your reach exponentially.

Generally, we suggest you need **at least** three Career Conversations – one with a person at a LARGE target organization, one with a person at a MEDIUM target organization, and one with a person at a SMALL target organization. You need more than one data set to make an informed decision, and if one person has Very Strong Opinions, that may skew the results.

Remember, people generally want to help, and most folks will be flattered by your inquiry. Now get out there and start building those relationships to get into the job you want as opposed settling for the job you can get. That looks different for everyone.

NEW PEOPLE IN YOUR NETWORK (from class)

(if you are attending our in person workshop, use this page to capture contact information for people you want to stay in touch with afterwards!)

Name: _____

Phone Number: _____

Email Address: _____

Name: _____

Phone Number: _____

Email Address: _____