

Getting Their Ear: Understanding Connectors' Interests

(Excerpt from *Own the Job Hunt* by Carly Inkpen, Justin Wright, and Tad Mayer)

So, you've decided to link up with a connector using what has become a fundamental strategy in today's economy: the informational interview. Great, but consider this—one of the common misconceptions about informational interviews is that the prospective interviewer (you) is *asking for a favor*—i.e. for advice and guidance—without offering anything in return. This misconception can undermine informational interviews in a couple of serious ways. First of all, asking for a favor can be intimidating and therefore prohibitive: “You mean I have to approach this big wig and grovel for a chance to soak up their wisdom? Why would they want to talk to little old me? No thanks.” Or second, and perhaps more likely, this misconception will simply limit your notion of what the informational interview is, thereby compromising your entire effort.

If, however, you view the informational interview as a negotiation, then it plays out in a similar manner to all the other negotiations we discuss throughout this book. Hence, you'll be asking: “How do I get what I need from this interview, in a way that meets the connector's interests as well?” Yes, it's true that in a normal informational interview the information is mostly (though not entirely, we hope) flowing from the connector to you. But that doesn't mean that the connector has no interests that you can meet in return.

We've talked to hundreds of connectors over the years, and we've also functioned as connectors ourselves for people who've approached us for guidance or insight. In our experience, while individual connectors' interests vary, there are certain interests that are common to nearly all connectors, regardless of their field. When preparing to initiate an informational interview, try to put yourself in the connector's shoes, and consider some of the basic values that you're in a position to offer them, such as:

- Recognition: being valued for their expertise
- Reputation: being viewed as a facilitator or mentor
- Convenience: having their schedule accommodated (and therefore **respected**)
- Insight: understanding you and your perspectives on the field; and how their advice helps to advance an up-and-comer
- Utility: meeting a potential collaborator/employee who may fill their staffing needs in the future
- Affiliation: enjoying the opportunity to have an engaging interaction with an interesting (and perhaps likeminded) individual
- Status: distinguishing them as someone of prominence and importance in the field
- Appreciation: acknowledging the sharing of their time, attention, and wisdom

Some of these connector interests are practically universal human values¹, and there is overlap between them. You should be looking to engage some (if not all) of these interests by showing gratitude in your emails, by deferring to their needs around time and place, and by presenting yourself as a prepared, thoughtful person.

Of course, you don't want to be overly generic in your approach. Interests are specific to the person, and you should try to uncover a bit about these, either by listening attentively during your interactions with them or by speaking in advance with people who know them. What do you know about what these people *are* like or *would* like? For instance, some people truly enjoy mentoring for mentoring's sake, while others don't find it particularly gratifying. Does your connector have a reputation for mentoring newcomers and helping them to network? Depending on the nature of their job, some connectors don't often interact with colleagues in their field, or adjacent fields, and they may genuinely welcome the opportunity to learn from you or to hear updates about other people in their field who you've already contacted. Take one of Carly's experiences, for instance:

When I was working in the conflict resolution field and considering switching careers into mental health, a lot of the psychotherapists I met for informational interviews genuinely welcomed the chance to learn from me about dispute resolution and mediation. These topics pertain to psychotherapy, but the professional paths of mediators and therapists don't often cross. I was really happy to find myself adding something of value to those conversations. Don't sell yourself short and underestimate the value of fulfilling these types of orientational interests for connectors.

Thinking of informational interviews as negotiations and occasions to meet the connector's interests can also help ensure that your requests for informational interviews *don't come off as entitled*. Consider another of Carly's experiences:

When I worked as a communications coordinator at a non-profit organization, I constantly received emails from people who wanted informational interviews with our senior staff members. It was amazing how many of these emailers just assumed that they could waltz in and have an informational interview with anyone at any time. The emails often said things like: "I've read your website and I'm extremely interested in your work. I am writing to set up an informational interview with so-and-so about the possibility of working in this field," or "I will be in town on Tuesday the 10th and Wednesday the 11th, please let me know which day you could meet." The emails we received varied from polite to brusque,

¹ Dan Shapiro and Roger Fisher identify many of the values listed as "core concerns," which are "...human wants that are important to almost everyone in virtually every negotiation." Roger Fisher, Daniel L. Shapiro, *Beyond Reason: Using Emotions as You Negotiate* (New York, Penguin Books, 2006), 29.

but even the polite ones often read more like demands than requests. By not demonstrating an understanding that our staff was extremely busy, these emailers failed to show respect for our staff's time and responsibilities, nor did they advance any gratitude for the potential opportunity to learn from our staff. Furthermore, in demanding short-notice informational interviews, they demonstrated an off-putting ignorance of the landscape of this field, where it's common for people's schedules to fill up months in advance. In short, *they failed to speak to our staff's interests.*

Here are some useful guidelines for requesting an informational interview, followed by a sample email. We generally make these requests over email, so we're focusing on written requests; however, most of these guidelines apply similarly to a phone or in-person request.

Tone and content

- Do not write in a way that assumes they will say yes. You're *asking*, so your phrasing should make clear that the meeting is conditional on their response: "If yes, would you have any availability the week of the 8th?"
- Your tone should demonstrate that you're flexible and willing to make this as convenient as possible for them.
- Show gratitude and let them know you'd value their input: "I'd value the chance to ask you a few questions about your professional background and the field."
- If they don't know you, include a brief, engaging description of who you are and why you're interested in meeting them. Don't give your life story; give three or four sentences, max. In particular, mention topics or experiences that you value in common.
- If you've met them before or someone has introduced the two of you, remind them of this; they may have forgotten.
- If appropriate, offer to buy them coffee or lunch. (We discuss the idea of reciprocity in more depth below.)
- Use your knowledge of a given connector or your general understanding of the field or the industry landscape to speak to other interests. If status is especially important to them, perhaps use a deferential tone or include some gently flattering statements. If you know that they're concerned with leaving a positive legacy, let them know that their advice will help you positively influence the future of the field.

Logistics

- Think about their schedule depending on their job, their field, family situation, etc. Be sensitive to when they're likely to be free.

- It's fine to give them a general idea of when you might be available or even to suggest a few possible meeting times, but always make it clear that you defer to their schedule.
- Always offer to meet them wherever is convenient *for them*, even if this means you have to travel out of your way. If it's impossible for you to get to them, then ask if they'll be in your area on other business; don't assume that they'll travel solely to meet you.
- Make sure you nail down the specifics before the meeting: time (accounting for time-zone differences); location; whether or not meals are involved; phone vs. in-person; if by phone, who is initiating the call, and at what number.
- As a general rule, don't be late. Still, it's helpful to get their phone number and to give them yours in case either of you have any last minute delays.
- Once you have a meeting scheduled, it's good practice to send a confirmation email a day or two before the appointed date. This is a helpful reminder that busy connectors will appreciate. It shows them that you're responsible and lowers the likelihood that you'll be stood up without notice.

Sample email

Dear Betty,

I hope that you've been enjoying a wonderful spring thus far.

I am recently out of college and trying to work my way into the negotiation and conflict resolution worlds. I have been meeting with as many interesting and accomplished people as I can to hear their stories and gain their counsel. Both John Doe and Jane Smith mentioned that you would be a great person to speak with. They both spoke of your ingenuity in entering this world and, more broadly, in navigating the challenges and stresses of career-building for someone in their mid-twenties.

I would be truly grateful if you had time in the coming week to meet me for a brief conversation. I can make time during any of the days except Thursday and will happily come to you.

Thank you for your time and best wishes,

Justin