Additional Techniques

You can make contact with individuals who you are interested in meeting, but to whom you might not have a direct connection. Do you want to break into the production of TV documentaries? Note the names of editors and researchers shown at the end of your favorite documentaries. After seeing if there are any connections through your own immediate network or Columbia network, email them directly, try contacting them through their production companies, or send a message through Twitter.

LinkedIn Groups

Outside of Columbia-focused groups, there are thousands of groups on LinkedIn bringing together professionals in various industries. Not sure which ones to join? Start by doing a broad key word search under groups, and also looking up people that work at places you find interesting, to see what groups they’re part of. If you’re part of the same group as someone you want to outreach to, you can message them directly.

MentorNet

Columbia University is a member of the award-winning e-mentoring network, MentorNet (mentornet.net), for students interested in engineering, science, mathematics, and technology. This resource connects students to professionals in industry, government, and higher education.

Professional Associations (Columbia and External Chapters) and Student Clubs

There is a professional association for almost every career field. Membership dues for students (often discounted) and professional membership benefits include opportunities to participate in conferences and networking events; access to the latest industry information, job boards, membership databases, and listservs. Some professional associations have a student chapter on campus, like the Society of Hispanic Engineers or Society of Women Engineers. Other types of Columbia pre-professional student clubs also provide information and opportunities to engage with professionals in the targeted field through site visits, panel presentations, networking events, and conferences. A list of professional associations (Columbia Chapters) and student clubs is available at columbia.edu/students/org_gov_az.html. The American Society of Association Executives (ASAE) offers an online “Gateway to Associations Directory” which takes you directly to many of the associations currently operating nationally and internationally.

Meetup.com

Meetup.com is the world’s largest network of local groups. The site makes it easy for anyone to organize a local group or find one of the thousands already meeting up face-to-face. More than 9,000 groups get together in local communities each day, each one with the goal of improving themselves or their communities. Search Career, Business, and General Interest Meetups for events of interest to you in your area.

Volunteering

Volunteering on or off campus is a great way to build your experience and your network. Volunteering typically brings together groups of people from all different backgrounds, fields, and experiences, so your network grows while you give back. One way you can find opportunities on campus is by connecting to Columbia Community Impact. More than 950 Community Impact volunteers operate 25 programs serving more than 8,000 people each year. Off campus, New York Cares, NYC.gov (search Health and Human Services and see the Volunteer link), or Idealist.org can help to connect you to opportunities.
Getting Started and Preparing for Informational Interviewing

An informational interview is a 20–30 minute meeting, either in person (ideally) or by phone, where you have the opportunity to ask well-researched questions and start to build a relationship with a new contact. Because the primary purpose of informational interviewing is to gather information, you should never approach this activity as “getting a job” but rather as career research. Research leads to information, which leads to hearing about vacancies.

- Develop a strategy before you begin to network. Start with a clear idea of your industry or career areas of interest. Identify the type of information you wish to obtain, and the best people to obtain it from.
- Create a list of potential contacts and an organized way of tracking communication with them. To expand your list of potential contacts, follow blogs and Twitter feeds, join professional associations, listservs, and online groups through LinkedIn and MentorNet.
- Approach contacts—either in person, via email, or phone—for informational interviews. See guidelines below and sample outreach on page 78.
- Do not take it personally if people cannot or do not help you. If you do not hear back right away, do not “harass” the contact. If two weeks pass from your initial contact with no response, you can follow up on your request via email or phone.
- Be confident! Networking and informational interviewing are respected means of career exploration and the search for opportunities. It is likely that your contact has networked in the past and will applaud your initiative.

Sample Request for an Informational Interview

Your initial email should be brief and contain the following information:

- How you found him/her (alumni network, referral, online research, etc.).
- Your school, area of study, and expected year of graduation.
- Your current status (career exploration, industry research, job search, etc.).
- What you are asking them for (information about their organization, industry tips, job search techniques, etc.).
- How you would like to gain that information (an in-person informational interview, a phone meeting—at their convenience).
- How and when you will follow up (allow two weeks before doing so).

Prepping for, Conducting, and Following up on the Informational Interview

- Know as much as you can about the industry and organization before your informational interview. This is an opportunity to ask questions you cannot answer online and to show interest through your research.
- Know as much as you can about your contact and his/her position in the organization before the interaction takes place. Google the contact and check his/her profile on LinkedIn.
- Be prepared to talk about yourself with a brief introduction that shares your educational information, key involvements/experiences on- and off-campus, and career areas of interest. See our online tipsheet on developing a 30-second introduction.
- Before the meeting, devise a list of 8–10 questions and prioritize them, knowing you might only get to a few.
- Dress neatly/professionally (appropriate for industry) and bring along extra copies of your resume, in case it comes up in conversation. Asking for feedback on your resume is an appropriate part of an interaction. You can also offer to send along a copy of your resume prior to the meeting.
- Know where you’re going, and arrive 10 minutes early to the meeting.
- Always ask your contact if he/she can recommend other individuals with whom to speak before ending the interview. If the individual puts you in touch with other people, and you have a successful exchange, be sure to let the original contact know.
- Always ask if there’s anything you can do for the contact.
- Send a thank-you note after every exchange (see page 78 for an example), and maintain the relationship by initiating contact every few months to report progress, or to share information in which they might be interested (e.g., an article or upcoming event). Make the development of a relationship, rather than getting a job, your primary goal.
Sample Questions for Networking and Informational Interviewing

When networking or informational interviewing, ask open-ended questions that encourage description and dialogue as opposed to closed questions, which can be met with a one-word answer or, for example, “Tell me about your current position” is a better question than “Do you enjoy your current job?”

Tasks and Responsibilities

• Please tell me about your work.
• Describe a typical work day.
• What aspect of your job do you find most challenging/rewarding?
• Do you more often work individually or as part of a team?
• Can you describe the typical work/life balance in this field?

Preparation for Career Path

• What do you think is the best educational preparation for this profession?
• How did you become interested in and experienced in this field?
• What are the qualifications you look for in a new hire?
• What else should I know to make an informed decision about choosing a career in this field?
• Is there anything you wished you knew before entering this field? If you were not working in this field, what else might you be doing?
• Do you have any recommendations for other people I should speak with in the field to learn more? May I use your name when reaching out to him or her?

Industry Knowledge

• I read ______ every week. What else would you recommend to help me keep informed of developments in this sector?
• Is the advice you have passed on to me regarding ______ typical of the industry in general, or your particular organization?
• Are there any professional associations that you are part of or suggest I join?
• Where do you see this industry going in the next 5 years? 10 years?

I find as I move through my career that what has in many ways been most valuable are the personal and professional contacts I’ve managed to amass along the way. I’ve heard about countless opportunities through these informal channels and I encourage my students to keep their ears perked for them, and to be on their best behavior since they’ll never know where that person will be down the line!

– Nina Tandon, GSAS 2009

LinkedIn

LinkedIn is a tool for building and engaging with a professional network, researching career fields and companies, and finding opportunities. We focus here on using LinkedIn as a research tool and to connect with Columbia alumni and other professionals. First, use the tipsheet and sample on the following pages to develop your profile. Attend a LinkedIn Power Half Hour (see CCE calendar), set up a meeting to have your profile reviewed, or view a LinkedIn webinar on our website’s multimedia page to learn more.