

Informational interviews are still a big part of the job market landscape, but nobody likes to talk about them. That's because the people giving the interviews fear being inundated with requests and the people looking to land said interviews probably want to keep anyone they find to themselves.

Still, you should do all you can to snag one ... or 10. In this tight job market, an informational interview can give you the edge you need to get hired by establishing a good connection at a prospective firm.

"At least some kind of personal relationship is critical to getting noticed," points out Allison O'Kelly, CEO of Mom Corps, a flex-time recruiting firm. This kind of interview can also give you a realistic idea of what a job at the company might entail – and whether it's a good fit.

People who like to give these kinds of interviews are out there; you just have to find them.

Position yourself as someone worth taking the time to meet. Ms. O'Kelly suggests trying to benefit your contact in some way before you even ask for help. You might email your contact a relevant article, let them know about an upcoming industry event or introduce them to a person at their level or higher. "It lets them know you are respectful of their time, a good resource for ideas and contacts, and serious about connecting for a mutual benefit," she says.

The best way to land an informational interview is via a personal connection. Ask your mutual contact to send an introductory email to get the ball rolling. If you don't have a connection, try a short but polite email. The cold call should be your last resort.

Marlisa Kopenski, brand director for Kahler Slater, a Milwaukee-based architecture and design firm, says she has given around 40 informational interviews in the nine years since she left business school with many of the requests coming via the alumni directory. "Use your personal and professional networks to make contact with people," she says.

Websites such as LinkedIn make it even easier. Roughly half the requests Ms. Kopenski receives these days come from her alumni network, the other half, through LinkedIn, she says.

When seeking an interview, contact individuals at the top ranks of the company and work your way down the chain of command -- and avoid the HR department when you can as it's just one more opportunity for someone to say no.

Once you've landed the appointment, don't go to the meeting unprepared. Read up on industry trends and talk with other professionals in the field and use the information as a conversation starting point.

Ms. Kopenski recommends preparing 20 to 25 questions, covering everything from strategy and industry news to your interviewer's story and necessary skills for the position you want.

It's OK to bring your résumé along, but don't take it out unless asked. "Remember why you're there," says Ms. Kopenski. "An informational interview is to seek information, not a job."

Another mistake people often make is to wear out their welcome. "Ask for half an hour—and don't go a minute over," she says.

And one final courtesy: The thank you note. Send it before you go to bed that night and not a day later.

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