



Informational Interviews: Best Practices

myCHOICE 

Briana Konnick, PhD
Associate Director, Graduate Career Development
May 5th, 2020



About Me

Briana Konnick, PhD

- Vanderbilt BA, Molecular and Cellular Biology
- Scripps PhD, Virology - Hepatitis C Virus
- Scripps Postdoc
- Scripps Career & Postdoc Services Coordinator



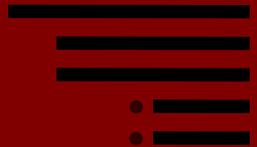
UChicagoGRAD

- Support PhD students and postdocs in all STEM disciplines
- Broad postdoc support



Workshop outline

- ▶ Informational interviews
 - What are they?
 - Why do them?
 - Who to meet?
 - How to arrange conversations
 - How to conduct the meeting
 - How to follow up effectively
- Success stories



**What are
these things?**



Defining Informational Interviews

WHAT ARE THEY?

- Informal conversations arranged at your request
- Common practice among job seekers, particularly those changing fields
- Essential networking tool
- The easiest way to network - especially for introverts

WHAT ARE THEY NOT?

- NOT A JOB INTERVIEW
- Robotic interactions with single defined objective
- Sufficient on their own for developing a real relationship
- A shady exchange intended to cheat an otherwise meritocratic labor market



**Why should I
do them?**



Why you should do them

- Make contacts in an organization
- Learn more about the field and the organization
- Learn examples of personal success stories
- Discover job openings before they are listed
- Demonstrate sincere interest in the company/job
- Have a chance to develop a mentoring relationship



Why people agree to them

- Common practice for nearly all professionals
- Opportunity to “pay forward” help/advice they received
- People like talking about themselves and are often flattered to be asked about their experience
- They may actually be looking for talent
- They know you could help them one day
- Some people are just really nice and like to mentor

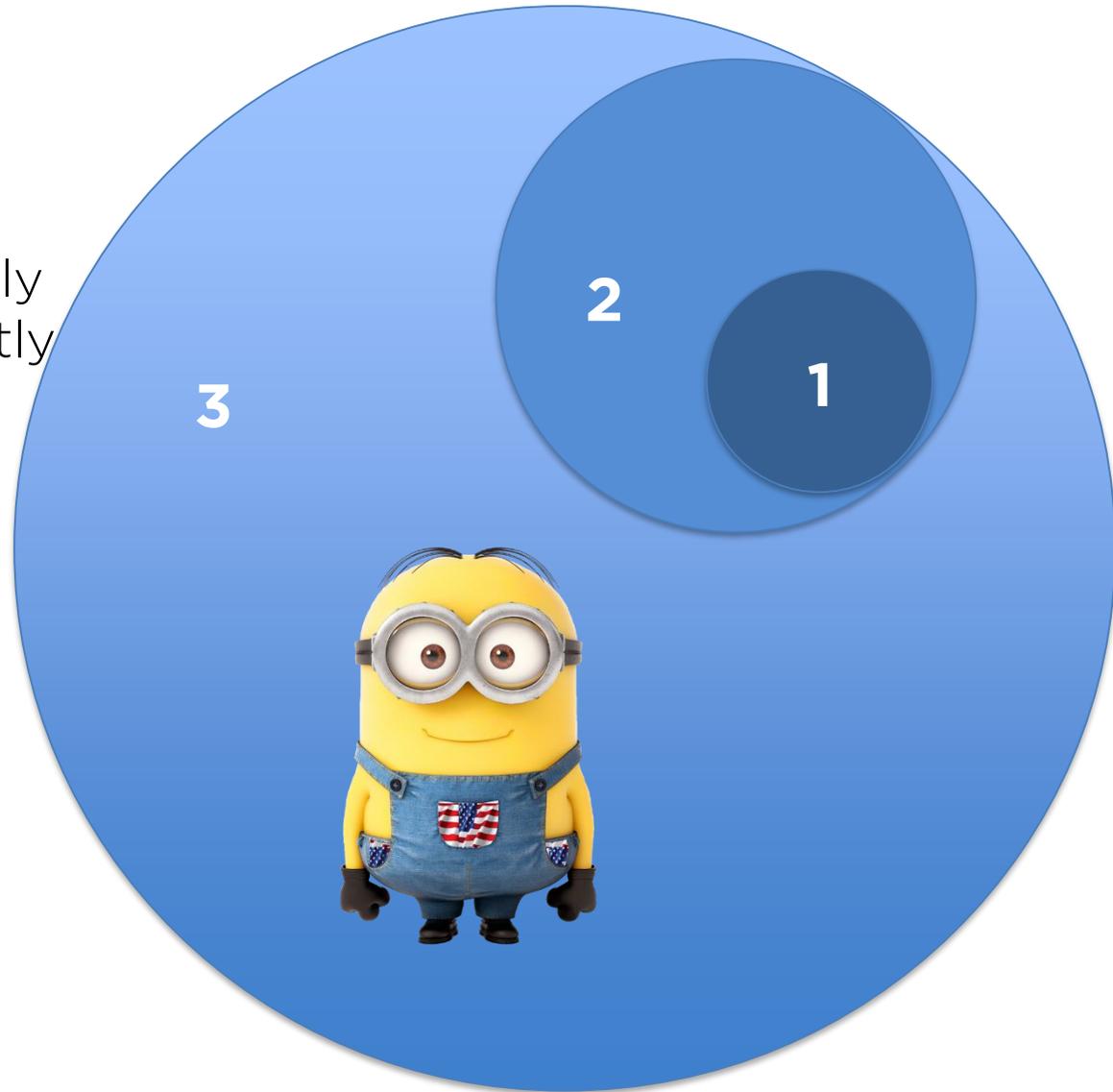


Who should I interview?



Your Entire Network

1. Immediate network
 - Current and former colleagues
 - Current classmates
 - Close friends and family
 - People you met recently
2. Extended network
 - Contacts of people in immediate network
 - Former classmates
 - Dormant professional contacts
3. Potential network
 - Alumni
 - Shared interest/background
 - LinkedIn
 - Company websites



How do I connect?



New Connections: Do's & Don't's

DO:

- Send brief, 1 paragraph email
- Express interest in their personal career path
- Ask for 30 min of time
- Prioritize video meetings when possible
- Follow up in 1 week if no reply

DO NOT:

- Write an essay
- Seem desperate
- Attach resume
- Ask questions by email that negate the necessity to meet
- Send two emails in <1 week
- Ask for a job



Example Outreach Email

Subject: UChicago Postdoc Interested in Cyberdyne

Dear Miles,

First name usually appropriate

Identify things in common or person who referred you to them

I am a postdoc at The University of Chicago studying human genetics and I noticed on LinkedIn that you work for Cyberdyne Systems Corporation. I plan to finish up next year and I am now starting to explore career options. The Skynet initiative at CDI is fascinating and I would like to learn more about Cyberdyne as well as your personal career path. Would you be willing to speak with me over Zoom or by phone in the next two weeks? I look forward to speaking with you soon!

Substitute "over coffee or lunch" for when in person things become ok

Sincerely,

John Connor

www.linkedin.com/in/johnconnor

Customize your LinkedIn url!



**Meeting set.
How do I
prepare?**



Preparing for the Interview

- Research person and the company thoroughly
- Prepare specific (and open ended) questions beforehand and have them written down
- Be prepared to organize flow of conversation but be flexible
- Practice elevator speech
- Dress professionally
- Respect their time
- (start & end on schedule)



Outline of Conversation

- Introduction
 - Thank them for agreeing to meet/speak
 - Small talk about how you found them
 - Elevator speech
- Questions about job/company/industry
 - Follow up questions demonstrate interest/attentiveness
- Questions about person
 - Opportunity to find out about possible career path
 - Allows person to open up and relate as human
- Make request(s)
 - Introductions to additional people
 - Advice for someone in your position
 - Resume help



Ask open-ended questions

When did you move to Chicago?

Do you like living in the mid-West?

Is AbbVie a good company to work for?



Ask open-ended questions

When did you move to Chicago?

“2013.”

Do you like living in the mid-West?

“Yes.”

Is AbbVie a good company to work for?

“Yeah, it’s great.”



Ask open-ended questions

~~When did you move to Chicago?~~

How did you end up in Chicago?

~~Do you like living in the mid-West?~~

What do you like about living in the mid-West?

~~Is AbbVie a good company to work for?~~

What parts of your job at AbbVie do you enjoy the most?



Ask open-ended questions

- Evoke more questions and keep the conversation going
- Stimulate reflective thinking
- Maximize information sharing
- Build rapport



Typical Questions

- Could you tell me what a “typical” day is like for you?
- What do you like about your work? What are the most challenging parts?
- What skills did you gain from your MS/PhD/postdoc that have helped you in your career?
- Would you mind telling me about your career path and how you got to your current position?
- What advice do you have for someone with my background who wants to enter this field/company?
- Is there someone here or elsewhere that you’d recommend I speak with?
 - (Goal: Gain 2 contacts from every interview)



**Meeting
Complete...
now what?**



Send Thank You Notes

- Always send one within 24 hours by email
- Follow up at least once, a few weeks later with a status update



Sample Thank You Note

Dear Miles,

Thank you so much for speaking with me yesterday! It was fascinating to hear about your personal career path in addition to learning about the internal structure Cyberdyne Systems Corporation. It sounds like I am in a situation similar to what you experienced when you were exploring careers, so it was both informative and encouraging to learn about your success. The innovative robotics programs like The Terminator will be key to ensuring our national security. I appreciate your willingness to speak with me and offer advice and I look forward to staying in touch.

Sincerely,

John Connor

www.linkedin.com/in/johnconnor



Staying in Touch

- Add contact on LinkedIn with personalized message
- Reply to original email
- Report back after following up with suggested contacts
- Send them articles of interest
- Offer to connect them with others
- Keep them updated on your job search
- Seek to develop mentoring relationship
- Look out for ways you can help them!



Workshop outline

Informational interviews

- What are they?
- Why do them?
- Who to meet?
- How to arrange conversations
- How to conduct the meeting
- How to follow up effectively

▶ Success stories



PhD Neuroscientist – Part 1

Approach for figuring out: “What I want to do next?”:

- Attending “careers in consulting” events
- Some pharma talks for bench research
- Informal conversations with other people wanting to leave academia

Self-reflection led to two main takeaways:

- “Academia was not for me, and more importantly, there is no shame on leaving it. Hater gonna hate, but it’s your life you are living, not theirs, so no need to feel bad about this process at all”
- Done with bench science, and was interested in something business or communications focused: consulting, equity research, science communications



PhD Neuroscientist – Part 2

First recruitment cycle: absolute disaster

- Lessons learned:
 - Your resume has to be extremely polished
 - They needed more business related experience

Lesson learned: “failing and rejection is super painful and can kill you inside, but do not despair and keep at it. There is a lot of BS in the recruitment process, so do not take any rejection personally. Honestly, their loss, and for your best!”

- Tech transfer office at UChicago
- Biotech analyst with Aspire Capital Partners

Long story short: 5 consulting interviews, 2 offers, and accepted a position at Simon-Kucher in Boston



PhD Physical Chemist – Part 1

Postdoc deciding between academic faculty and industry positions

Self-reflection led to two main takeaways:

- Really keen on teaching and mentorship aspects of academia, but not on creating and running a research program
- Enjoyed building systems and experimental design overall (more of a optics technical specialist)

Approach for figuring this out:

- Attended on campus recruitment events where technically focused companies were present
- Reached out to alums at teaching-focused institutions
- Attended academic job market workshops with faculty



PhD Physical Chemist – Part 2

Personal considerations:

- Specific geographic regions desired because of family
- Wanted good work/life balance

Conducted informational interviews with people:

- At teaching-intensive institutions
- In technical specialist roles
- At companies in their desired area of the country
- In industry research and optics-focused positions

Other steps taken:

- Polishing application materials with an advisor
- Prepared for interviews with mock interview practice

Long story short: Customer Support Engineer at Bruker



Questions?

bkonnick@uchicago.edu

Add me on LinkedIn!

www.linkedin.com/in/bkonnick

Events and Advising:

www.gradgargoyle.uchicago.edu



UCHICAGO GRAD

Helping you navigate your graduate and postdoctoral career

