

# Career Planning

## for Mid-Stage PhD Students

### Part 3: Building Relationships



**CLIMB**

Collaborative Learning and  
Integrated Mentoring  
in the Biosciences

**Steve Lee, PhD**  
The CLIMB Program  
Assistant Director  
Summer 2013

## Let's read and discuss Shotwell's story



Gwynne Rowley Shotwell

Read the story and answer  
the questions in red.

1. What professional skills helped Gwynne to succeed?
2. How did Gwynne assess herself?
3. How did Gwynne obtain her jobs?
4. Do you think you might follow a similar career path?

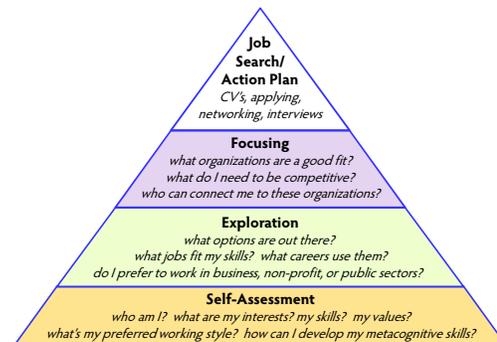
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## We're addressing these topics:

1. **Intro to Career Planning**
  - o professional self-assessments
2. **Exploring Options**
  - o resources and options for NU PhD students
  - o informational interviews
3. **Building Relationships**
  - o networking for extroverts and introverts
  - o managing your online profile; branding
4. **Panel Discussion**
  - o NU professionals with PhDs in the sciences
  - o Discussions on how they explored options

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## Peter Fiske's Career Planning Process



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## What exactly is networking?

- Networking is not schmoozing, gossiping, empty flattery, or tooting your own horn.
- Networking is simply building professional relationships to advance your career.
  - o to find your next job
  - o to explore options
  - o to seek new areas in your current job
  - o to seek advice and help
- Seek to present your authentic self – as you discover from self-assessments
  - o prevents negative associations of networking
  - o more likely to be accepted by new contacts

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## Career planning requires different types of relationships

- Social support group: close friends and family
- Contacts to serve as professional references
  - o your PI, professional collaborators, etc
- Contacts to connect you to new contacts and openings
  - o make sure to express thanks and reciprocate
- Contacts for informational interviews (see handout)
- Granovetter discovered that most people found jobs through indirect connections
  - o "The Strength of Weak Ties" (*Am J Sociology*, 1973)

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## Networking for extroverts and introverts

- Extroverts gain energy from large groups
- Extroverts often initiate connections and conversations.
- Extroverts usually express their ideas openly and easily.
- *But extroverts usually need help to maintain and deepen relationships.*
- Introverts gain energy from small groups or being alone
- *Introverts usually need help with initiating.*
  - *Tag along with extroverts friend to events.*
  - *Start building connections with extroverts.*
- Introverts are usually good with maintaining and deepening relationships.

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## Learning the "art of the ask"

- In networking, we are often asking for something.
- Your main goal: make it easy to say yes to your request
- Make your initial request as simple as possible
  - Don't start with open-ended questions
- Explain why you're specifically contacting that person
  - Use flattery appropriately and in a genuine manner
  - Mention how they'd be helpful to you
- Explain why your request is important
- Always express thanks for their response and help.
- See "The Art of 'the Ask'" article and examples.

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## LinkedIn : managing your profile

- LinkedIn is the current online network for professionals
  - replaced Career Builder
  - it's not Facebook; present a professional image
- Present a profile for what you want to become, not your current status as a student
  - Ex: don't use a photo that shows you as a student



- Write personal invitations to connect
- Branding: distinguish yourself
  - *What makes you stand out from the crowd?*

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## In-class Exercises:

- Create or edit your LinkedIn profile
  - We'll look at several profiles in class to give feedback
  - Build your network in LinkedIn
  - Send personal invitations to connect
  - Join the CLIMB LinkedIn group
- Search through contacts for an informational interview
  - Identify a specific contact or build a network to them
  - Write an email to first contact them
  - If anyone wants feedback, we'll read and give feedback
  - Email me your written summary for a collection

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## Our Final Session

### 4. Panel Discussion

- NU professionals with PhDs in the sciences
- Discussions on how they explored options
- Traci Galbaugh – Associate Director of IBIS
- Jennifer Hobbs – Director of Postdoc Affairs
- Mike Kennedy – Director of Science in Society
- Reminder: we're not meeting next week
- Schedule:
  - EV: Mon, July 29 at 4:30-6 pm in Pancoe 1-401
  - CH: Tues, July 30 at 4:30-6 pm in McGaw 2-322
- Light refreshments will be served
- No need to bring laptops

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## Resources

- *Opportunities Come Through People* (myIDP; pdf)
  - Clifford, Lindstaedt, Hobin, and Fuhrmann
- *The Informational Interview* (Science Careers; pdf)
  - David Jensen
- *The Art of 'the Ask'* (Chronicle article; pdf)
  - Rachel Toor
- Professional self-assessments for networking
  - Myers-Briggs: <http://www.humanmetrics.com/>
  - StrengthsFinder: Strengths Based Leadership by Rath
- *What Color is Your Parachute?* by Richard Bolles
  - the "bible" of career planning

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# CLIMB

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The CLIMB Program

[www.northwestern.edu/climb/](http://www.northwestern.edu/climb/)

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## Career Planning for Mid-Stage PhD Students: Workshop #3: Building Relationships

### Informational Interviews: Suggestions and Tips

- An informational interview is simply a brief conversation, as you interview someone to explore to advance your career. Questions often revolve around a general field of work and organizations, and then specific organizations and jobs.
- Some thoughts from Richard Bolles (author of “What Color is Your Parachute?” who first invented the term of “informational interviewing”) are summarized and quoted below.
  - Informational interviewing is exactly analogous to your going to a clothing store and trying on different clothes. The clothes that look terrific on the mannequin in the window, may not look great on you. Lots of pins are often used on the backside of the mannequin. On you, without the pins, the clothes may not quite hang right, etc. Likewise, the careers that sound terrific from a quick glance don’t always look great when you see them up close and personal.
  - “Throughout this informational interviewing, don’t assume anything. Question all assumptions... You will need to check and cross-check any information that people tell you or that you read in books (even this one.)” Many professions and organizations have rules, but there are also usually exceptions to those rules.
- When first approaching a potential contact for an info interview, consider if they are a cold contact (with whom you’ve had none or little previous connection) or a warm contact (with whom you’ve had some connection).
  - You may want to provide a generic CV, and/or link to your LinkedIn profile.
  - If you’re trying an info interview for the first time, practice with a “warm contact” first.
- The ideal time to do these info interviews, when you’re currently employed, e.g. when you’re in the middle of grad school.
  - Without an urgent, desperate need to find a job, you will likely be more authentic, so that the interviewee will also likely provide neutral and unbiased info.
  - But many people still seek info interviews when they are intentionally seeking a new job, so don’t let the timing of your job search hinder you from seeking info interviews.
- Prepare a list of questions to ask before contacting people.
  - Advance preparations will help you determine what info that you’re seeking, and whom to contact.
  - See the attached list of suggested questions from the myIDP resource.
- Critical reminders:
  - When contacting people for an info interview, state clearly that you’re not asking them for a job. This avoids the stress from the conversation, and you’ll likely receive neutral info.
  - After the interview, write down notes to keep a record of the answers and your impressions.
  - After the meeting, thank them for their time and their ideas and suggestions. Even if they weren’t very helpful for you, they still took the time to talk with you, and they may become more helpful in the future.

## General Questions You Might Ask In An Informational Interview

1. Can you tell me a little bit about your current responsibilities?
2. Can you describe a typical day?
3. How did you get into this field? What kinds of additional experience or training did you need to have in order to get a job in this field?
4. What are potential future career opportunities for someone in your position?
5. What types of skills and experiences are essential for succeeding in your position?
6. How would you describe the culture, management style, and organization of your company?
7. Can you tell me about typical compensation packages within this career field, including salary range and other benefits, as well as work-life balance?
8. What advice would you give someone in my position who wants to be successful in the field?
9. Can you tell me anything about other firms involved in this activity or sector? Do you know of any companies/institutions that might be expanding or hiring in the next year?
10. Are there professional organizations that I should consider joining or websites that I should be looking at to get additional information?
11. Would you recommend anyone else to speak with in this field? May I have permission to use your name when I contact them?

*It is also wise to ask questions specific to what is most important to you. Return to myIDP for a customized list of questions you may want to ask based on your top values.*

## Sample Letter Requesting an Informational Interview:

Dear Dr. Adams:

I have been reading about the work of ABC Bio, Inc. I am beginning to think about the next step in my career and would like to explore the potential career paths available in industry research. I am hoping that you will be willing to give me some career advice, from one former UCSF immunology postdoc to another.

Would you be willing to meet in person or by telephone to talk with me about your own career path and about how scientists can transition successfully from academia to industry?

Thank you for your assistance.

Fred Jones, PhD  
Postdoctoral Researcher  
Department of Immunology  
UCSF

415-555-5555  
[fred@ucsf.edu](mailto:fred@ucsf.edu)

\* Keep your first email brief (2-3 concise paragraphs).  
\* Propose some possible times to meet or talk, to make it easy for them to respond.  
\* Specify that you're asking for about 15-20 min of their time.  
\* Clearly state that you're not asking for a job.

### NOTE:

In order to increase the likelihood that Dr. Adams will respond positively, Fred noted a personal connection to Dr. Adams. (In this case, they had both been postdocs in the same department.)

Other examples of a personal connection might be:

- They both attended the same university, as in the example above.
- Fred was referred to Dr. Adams by a mutual colleague, or through a connection on LinkedIn, in which case Fred should refer to the mutual colleague by name.
- Fred and Dr. Adams share a scientific interest, in which case Fred should refer to their common interest.

## Sample Thank You Letter (sent after an informational interview)

Dear Dr. Adams:

I thank you for the time you spent with me yesterday and your willingness to share information with me on your career. Your perspective regarding market developments in the anti-infectives industry was very helpful. I plan to follow up this week on your suggestion to contact Olivia Watanabe at PDQ Bio Corporation.

Again, thank you for your assistance.

Sincerely,

Fred Jones, PhD  
Postdoctoral Researcher  
Department of Immunology  
UCSF

415-555-5555  
[fred@ucsf.edu](mailto:fred@ucsf.edu)

**Good points:**

- \* The letter states specifically what was helpful from their meeting.
- \* The letter states a specific result or action item from the meeting.

## The Informational Interview

March 20, 2009

David G. Jensen



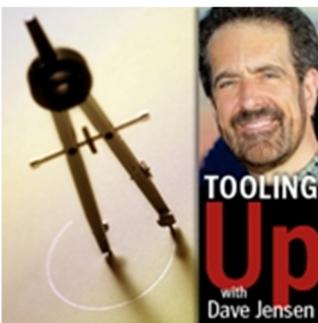
A week ago, I visited my son at his California college. There, students use skateboards to zip from class to class. Let me tell you right now not to get on one of those things until you've had someone show you how to use it. I had no such lesson, and I found it to be much, much harder than it looks. I'll kindly not include a photo of the resulting road rash.

Informational interviews are a lot like skateboarding: Both look easy, but when you step on, watch out! An informational interview is usually a short meeting, half an hour or less, between you and someone who works at a company you're interested in, or someone on your desired career path. This is *not* a job interview. The goals, and the rules, are different. If you go in with the wrong mindset, you're bound for disappointment.

The informational interview--especially if it's with an employee at a company you want to work at--is the endgame of professional networking, so landing one starts with good networking. I'm not going to cover networking basics here--there are primers on networking in this column and elsewhere on *Science Careers*. If you haven't read them yet, or if you need a refresher, see the links at the end of the article. In this month's Tooling Up, I'll focus on how to win that endgame by succeeding at the informational interview.

### The real goal of networking

(Image: Kelly Krause)



By definition, networking is about information exchange--providing information about yourself and collecting information about other professionals, professional opportunities, and so on. In this sense, the informational interview is very much a networking tool, perhaps the ultimate networking tool.

Although it's true that putting yourself out there will improve your chances of landing a job offer, during an informational interview the focus isn't on employment but on information gathering. Your real goal is to illuminate the path ahead of you, *not* to focus on job openings. The illumination you seek will come from those who have already treaded the same path.

As I wrote this month's column, I spoke with Brooke Allen, head of the Quantitative Trading Group for Maple Securities, to swap networking stories. Brooke, a self-described "advocate of promiscuous networking," gave a presentation at the AAAS annual meeting in February in which he roused the audience for a networking exercise in which everyone stepped outside their comfort zones and practiced networking promiscuously.

My approach to networking has always been to cultivate a list of professional contacts, people I know and whom I can call upon (and who can call on me), whereas Brooke's aggressive networking strategy places far more emphasis on the kindness of strangers. It seems to have paid off for him. "I may not know a person at all, but if they ask me to forward a request to a half-dozen of my LinkedIn contacts to help them arrange informational interviews, I have no problem forwarding on that request," he told me, showing a bit of the openness that he claims makes the Internet such a fertile ground for information gathering.

And he's got a point: We have all used the Internet to locate people who share our interests, whether it is to advance your skills in a hobby or to connect with professionals a few years ahead of you on the same career path. Cold contacts that begin via the Internet can warm up with a couple of e-mail exchanges, providing needed momentum to your research project.

On the Internet or off, that is precisely the right approach for setting up informational interviews: You are on a *research project*. You need help from people who are "in the know," whether it's to inquire about how long the workday is for a regulatory affairs manager or what the culture is like at a hot start-up company. And those people, or some of them, are likely to be people you don't know right now.

Before you begin converting your networking contacts into a round of informational interviews, think about the reasons that person would be open to have coffee or sit down with you in his or her office for 15 to 30 minutes. Here are a few thoughts to help you understand why an already employed--and possibly senior-level--person would make him or herself available to you:

- Most senior-level employees believe that there is intrinsic value in having connections and facilitating connections. It's a cheap, relatively easy way to make the world a better place, and they consider their actions "paying it forward." They know that new opportunities can be created--all by giving up a few minutes of their time.
- Many employers recommend that their managers conduct a certain number of informational interviews every month. This is standard practice in many companies, as it sets the tone for good PR in the community and says something about the company's culture.
- "Opportunity hires" occur even during a hiring freeze or in companies that have recently downsized. This happens when no specific opening exists and yet good people surface via informational interviews. So it makes good sense for both parties to reach out for informational interviews; for you, having a personal connection means you'll be in a better position for a job interview invitation; and for them, the possibility exists that you'll be a great "find."

### **Practice, then plan your approach**

Everyone you know has the potential to provide you with new knowledge of one kind or another, so *any* kind of informational interviewing can be a great learning experience.

Brooke and I discussed how similar this process is to an interview that a reporter would conduct--an interview with an agenda. "You can practice these anywhere," Brooke says. "Ask your spouse (or lab mate), 'I would like to interview you about how I might improve our relationship.' Don't simply have a conversation--actually interview that person."

When you feel ready to go, make your real-world, professional approaches. Most people do this by e-mail, LinkedIn, or another business or social-networking site. More adventurous networkers will pick up the phone right away. Either way, here's a tip: If you don't hear back after three attempts, you are

being ignored. Don't take it personally, but take that person off your list of prospective interviewers. Harassment is a bad idea in the midst of a job search.

Informational interviewing puts you squarely in the major leagues of networking. Aim high: You can reach out and conduct an informational interview with a vice president of research if you approach the situation diligently and honestly. You're *not* seeking a job right now, but if you make a good impression. ...

## **You're in charge**

The informational interview is not like an employment interview. Instead, *you* need to be in charge, and that means you need to be comfortable. You requested the meeting, so lead it. If you show the slightest, open-jawed "Why am I here?" gaze, the interview will end uncomfortably for both of you.

You're in charge, so have something to say, and have a good list of questions prepared. Good questions could include how that person's career has progressed, what the company's culture is like, or, broadly, what it's like to work at that particular company. Your questions may depend upon the location of your meeting. Off-site, questions about company culture may be answered more candidly than difficult questions asked in an office cubicle.

Most likely, anyone you meet with will know you're looking for a job, but that doesn't mean you should bring it up. Don't pull that card out of your sleeve until you are asked. And although the informational interview is not a job interview, it could become one quickly, especially if you're interviewing someone who makes hires. So, even though I've urged you to prepare differently for the informational interview than you would for a job interview, you should be prepared for the nature of the interview to change. You need to be ready for the "interviewee" and "interviewer" roles to flip-flop, when suddenly you find the usual job-interview questions coming back at you from across the table.

Finally, don't become frustrated when your first attempts at informational interviewing do not go smoothly. Just like my skateboarding experience, you may fall off and get bruised a time or two. But what an accomplishment it is to find a job or make a new friend simply because *you had the courage to try*.

A writer and speaker on career issues worldwide, Dave Jensen is the founder and managing director of <a href="#">CareerTrax Inc.</a> [1], a biotechnology and pharmaceutical consulting firm in Sedona, Arizona.
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### **Source**

**URL:** [http://sciencecareers.sciencemag.org/career\\_magazine/previous\\_issues/articles/2009\\_03\\_20/caredit.a0900039](http://sciencecareers.sciencemag.org/career_magazine/previous_issues/articles/2009_03_20/caredit.a0900039)

### **Links:**

[1] <http://www.careertrax.com/>