

# Ultimate PhD Networking Guide: How To Create Opportunities Out Of Thin Air (Part 3)

Ryan The Grad Student

## Step 4: Start Asking The Right Questions

My best friend left his PhD with a Master's degree. Months later he landed a job as an Associate Product Manager in the medical field (with seemingly no business experience). I asked him how he did it. He told me through informational interviews. Then he sent me a list of questions that I tweaked and added to. A lot of the questions I created were position specific. **I would recommend doing at least 10 informational interviews until you feel comfortable (and feel good about the questions and the feedback you're getting).** Your goal is to become an expert informational interviewer. You will know the "right" and intelligent questions to ask. The deep ones.



On average, I started with 30 minute interviews. Most of mine lasted from 1-2 hours. Some went 2 hours and I had to cut them off. This will be dependent on your personality and the kind of conversation you carry, but it just goes to show that MOST people like to talk about their work. Who wouldn't? And a PhD student is taking notes? They are showing genuine interest (at least I hope you are), therefore they think "I will give this person my time because they value my time."

### Pointers:

- 1) Don't dress like a graduate student or post-doc. I wear what I think I would wear if I was working for the place that I am visiting! Dress shirt, dress pants and shoes. Don't overdo it with a suit and a tie. This isn't a job interview.
- 2) Smile when you meet the person.. Give the person a firm handshake and tell them upfront that you appreciate their time (and that it means a lot to you). Before you start the conversation, first ask how much time that person has. Since you brought this up right off the bat, they will be more likely to give you more time. And I'll just say that because you may feel like a socially inept graduate student (or post-doc) doesn't mean you have to act like one. You may be nervous at first, but don't worry they get easier.
- 3) Meet for coffee or lunch. Suggest a place that is close to that person's work. Propose a day, time, and place that is CONVENIENT for your network contact. Make it easy on them.
- 4) Bring paper and something to write with. By doing this, when they tell you something you can write it down (you won't remember everything anyways) and this demonstrates that you are responsible and are serious about learning. Also, have your questions already written out (not memorized).

5) **Do NOT bring your resume with.** I wouldn't even bring it up until the very last minute.

### **Basic Questions to formulate (Tweak and add to the list the more you do)**

**There are NO right or wrong questions to ask!** Make your own list as you see fit. Honestly, I came up with my own list after I found which questions got the best response or provided the most insight. You have to be the judge and become your own expert informational interviewer (don't just do one and walk away or lose faith in the value of informational interviews).

**Each and every person will provide you with a unique INSIGHT and EXPERIENCE** even if you ask the same questions over and over to different people! Why? Because no one is the same! They feel different about the thought of the questions. And I'll tell you what: You will have good interviews and you will have bad. But, you don't know what a good or a bad informational interview is like until you've done multiple. Some people may just be having a bad day. Some may even buy you lunch because they feel sorry that you are a poor graduate student. And I'm not even joking.

**But don't let setbacks discourage you. Do enough informational interviews to the point where you feel it is sufficient** (See Step 5).

### **Questions to ask:**

1) I'd like to understand your current position. What are your responsibilities?

2) What are the responsibilities of a \_\_\_\_ (Fill in position title here)? What were your least favorite aspects of the position?

3) How did being a \_\_\_\_ prepare you for the rest of your career?

4) Where do you see yourself going from here (you can get a sense of whether or not they are happy with their current job, room for advancement, and how the company is doing) or in the next couple of years?

5) What helped you in preparing yourself to be a \_\_\_\_? (if they transitioned away from the lab bench asked them HOW they did it. Did they do an internship? How did they make themselves stand out from the crowd? Did they have a unique experience, develop a marketable skill set and how, or did they get their foot in the door through a network contact?)

6) Which of my skills would be important for me to highlight in order to be an attractive option to companies that are looking for \_\_\_\_?

7) What would it be like working for your company? How do you think your company culture would change if your company was bigger or smaller in size? (get a feel for the relative growth of the company)

### **THE BIGGEST TWO QUESTIONS:**

1) Would it be alright if I sent you my resume so that you could provide feedback as to how I can improve it for companies looking for \_\_\_\_? Or help me better highlight my strengths for this particular position? (don't stutter on this one-ask it at the very end in a **very confident manner** as a means to get feedback/help)

2) Who else do you know that I could speak to about this? May I please have their contact information? Would you mind introducing them to me?

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Here is how the scenario will play out: **99% of the time, they will say yes to your last two questions** (at least it worked for me). I also sent them my resume for feedback and they introduced me to at least 2 contacts (I would aim for 2- don't get too crazy here because they are busy working professionals-many of whom travel).

**I had 5-10 different resumes for each position.** If I interviewed a Field-Application Scientist, I sent them a resume (with unique objective statement) that highlighted that skill set the best I could. If I interviewed a Product Manager, I sent them a resume tailored to that type of position.

A lot of times, from what I had learned at informational interviews, **I was able to identify weaknesses and address some concerns about developing more marketable skills.** That is why I decided to launch two online businesses (and audit an Entrepreneurial Management business class on campus) to fill gaps in my resume. It gave me the marketing experiences and business acumen. **It made me look not just like a science person** but also a business person.

Whatever those skills are that you need to highlight (based on the job market needs) **MAKE SURE YOU FIND OUT!** And guess what? At the end of the day, **it got me an internship position my last 6 months of my PhD studies** (I have multiple offers from multiple companies-technical writing, sales, associate product manager, etc.). The same can happen for you! That way you will come out with both the education and real-world experience.

## **My Story Continued**

**I'd say only 10-25% of the people actually CORRECTED my resume or sent me comments back.** The 75% didn't say anything. Does that mean they didn't look at it? No. Does that mean that they don't care? No. It means that they are busy. And just because they do or don't correct it (or provide feedback) doesn't mean that one network contact is better than the other (or you should place value of one person over the other). Everyone is of equal value, so keep this mindset and respect their time.

You have to send them a follow up email or message through LinkedIn to stay in contact with that individual at the conclusion of your informational interview. Don't get home right away and add them and send your resume. You will look too needy.

**The next day or so, just send a follow up email thanking them for their time.** Say "If you have the time (or get the chance) here is my resume if you wouldn't mind looking it over to provide feedback." Then you can say, as we discussed could you please get me in touch with person X and Y (at company 1 and 2)? (you have the names written down) Most the time these people will be from within their own company (that is why cold contact on LinkedIn is good if you want to get acquainted with multiple companies because you can branch out).

How you set up the next 2 contacts that they know is up to you (email, phone, LinkedIn). Most of the time they would just CC me on an email. Many needed to be reminded however, because they are busy. Or you can do a LinkedIn introduction if time goes by and you don't hear anything back.

## **Step 5: Follow Up, Offer Value, and Stay In Contact**

Ok so you've already sent this person your resume for feedback. They may have not said anything back and that's fine. At least you will have met 1 or 2 contacts that they know to introduce you to (some are even their hiring managers).

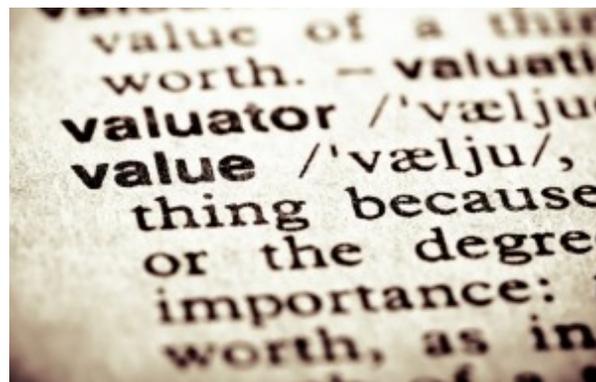
**The key here is NOT necessarily employment.** A lot of times, when you send off your resume they may just shrug their shoulders and say "OK." But if you already have a polished resume and you've sent it off to the person at the company, the chances of them thinking of you (based on a need within the company or a job opening now or in the future) greatly increase. Therefore, even for feedback purposes you have NOTHING to lose.

**The real question is HOW you can add value back to that person.**

I'll tell you what I did and how I stayed in touch with my

growing network.

The people that I really connected with (personality wise, science wise, etc.): I usually did 2 or even 3 informational interviews with. But the 2<sup>nd</sup> or 3<sup>rd</sup> time around, it's not really an informational interview anymore. **It's more of a personal "get together":**



A lot of times it can be to discuss a scientific problem. A lot of times it can be to help out a friend or coworker of theirs. Or just talk about what they are doing currently at their job (and how you can be of help). They already know your skill set from the leading question you have asked at the previous interview and from the resume you have sent them. So if they see value in what you are doing (and you have a marketable skill set that you're developing) you should have no problem offering value back to your network contact.

Specifically, I noticed a lot of biotech companies lack social media presence. Therefore, after discussing the idea of a social media analytics platform (that I would help create), I was able to spark the interest of a network contact and he saw the value in what I was doing. But a lot of this came from my own experiences.

You have to keep in mind that a lot of what I did (informational interviews, my entrepreneurial ventures) were all self-taught. That is why I am sharing them with you. But a lot of it is grounded on my personality (I've done sales since I was 16). I am aggressive, outgoing, and high-energy. You may not feel that networking is a key strength of yours. But, **ANYONE can learn to network and it is a skill that CAN be learned!**

I was fortunate enough to have my professional blog running. Even though I was initially just offering professional advice just for graduate students and post-docs (and my incentive was to try and sell a book I wrote on how to generate a second income for graduate students via online marketing-which is now free), I started to add value back to my network contacts (in biotech industry), since I started to write about ways to bridge the gap between academia-industry. Even though the solutions I was proposing wouldn't and won't necessarily be adopted, the whole point is that I was sharing the value of my thoughts and ideas. It is the exchange of information. That's what networking and adding value is all about.

One person even said that they were going to feature my article in their company's blog or twitter feed since they were trying to do more social media. Many companies don't see the value in social media and question e-commerce and online marketing and its effectiveness in driving sales and revenue. They couldn't be more wrong. Social media and technology are changing the world. Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, Google +, Pinterest, Instagram... You name it. Throw in SEO, google analytics, and google adwords. You've got yourself an entire campaign.

But, this is my **UNIQUE value proposition** that I add back to my network. **That is how I stayed in touch with my contacts.**

Some have asked me how can I possibly be an expert in all of this and provide advice to grad students and post-docs? Well for one, I have done over 75 informational interviews. It took me that many to receive ONE PHONE call and land ONE JOB in this economy. I am currently an Associate Product Manager at Promega, and I couldn't have done it without networking and adding value back to my contacts.

**There is no magic number (do whatever it takes).** The questions I asked and the things that I did really can work. It is your own drive, curiosity, and persistence that will determine how effective your strategy will be. You will get what you put into it. I cannot guarantee that you will find a job or add value back to your newly created network.

What I can guarantee is that you still develop a skill you never thought possible. You will learn about careers

you never thought possible. You will gain confidence. You will become excited about potential opportunities. You will learn from yourself as well as others. And at this stage you have nothing to lose.

**I will end by saying that the majority of people start too late.** They do their PhD defense or wait till their 4<sup>th</sup>, 5<sup>th</sup>, or 6<sup>th</sup> year post-doc then decide to do something. **WRONG** idea. **START NOW!** It is never too early to start networking. Networking is a lot of time and hard work. But you don't want to get to the end of your PhD with no idea of what you want to do and with nowhere to go. 90% of finding employment is networking!

**Your network is your net worth. Start building it now.**