How Matt Saved and Built His Career Through Information Interviewing, Winning Two Job Offers and Strengthening His Success on the Job

By Prof. Seth Freeman
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Matt, a recent student of mine, called me today to share the story of his remarkable success using information interviewing to win two separate, attractive offers. That alone is worth sharing, but Matt's experience also dramatizes the broader value of making information interviewing a basic daily part of your professional life.

In January 2012, Matt was beginning to feel that it would be wise to start looking for a new, more financially rewarding position. He worked for one of the top named investment banks. Over the course of that year, he conducted roughly 80 information interviews. As he explained, it was an iterative process that helped him identify a new career path within financial services.

By 2013, Matt's personal life had reached a turning point. He was close to finishing his MBA, he and his wife were expecting in July, and they had plans to close on their first house. He also got word in late January that his current position might be in jeopardy. As he put it, the news prompted him to push his information interviewing work up to the next level, spending more of his time reaching out to more people inside and outside the firm.

By July, Matt closed on his home, had a baby and conducted 113 additional informational interviews – bringing his running total to 193. Within a week of physically moving to his new home, Matt had received two separate, attractive offers (one from his firm) for two separate and distinct roles. Had it not been for information interviewing, Matt said, he would not have known about either opportunity and he would not have received either offer. Indeed, one offer came about through information interviewing back in January 2012; the other through an information interview he had in March of 2013.

I asked Matt if it was difficult reaching out to so many people. He said it was surprisingly easy because people really enjoy talking about themselves and sharing their insights. Simply contacting them and saying he wanted to get their perspective and learn from them almost always prompted a positive reply. "It's a benign request," he said. As information interviewers know, the chief goal really is learning. Matt said that in each interview he also had two other goals: he wanted to tell his story, and get at least one referral. This too is excellent information interviewing practice.

Matt was struck by the surprising value and versatility of the information interviewing process. While information interviewing certainly is useful for someone who does not have a job or who imminently needs to find one, Matt came to feel that it was an essential task for anyone in professional life with a job and it really should be a regular part of one's day. The process strengthened his relationships, gave him ongoing insight about the firm, the industry, and his place in it, and gave him a better vision for the direction he eventually hoped to move with his career. And it doesn't end there. He finds that informative interviews enhance his new work and his new working relationships as he meets with new colleagues and seeks out their advice. Work itself, it turns out, calls for further application of the same skills he developed as an information interviewer.

When I asked him how he found the time in a high-pressure environment to have so many information interviews, he replied that he simply made the task of basic part of his day. “It really takes very little time to e-mail someone and ask him/her to talk for 20 minutes. I interviewed people every possible way; by phone, in face-to-face conversations, and by e-mail.”

Matt also said he got very good at listening without having to take notes of the meetings themselves; he would simply take notes right after the meeting. This ability frees him up to listen more attentively in information interviews, build rapport, and let the discussion flow.

Surprisingly, Matt also found that he became better at formal interviewing through his experience doing information interviewing, in part because it made him more comfortable meeting people, in part because along the way he acquired broad and deep insight about the work he was interested in, and in part because it put him in the habit of briefly talking about his own story. “When the time came to have a formal interview, I didn't really need to prepare at all, because in effect I'd been preparing for year and a half.”

He also found that information interviewing gave him an additional case for his own candidacy working with clients. When asked, “how do we know you can handle that kind of work?” Matt could reply confidently, “because the very skills it takes to connect with clients are the skills that enabled me to be here with you right now; it was through my conversations and contacts that I created the chance to speak with you about the position and that ability will serve me well as a reach out to clients.”

When I asked Matt what changes he would make to his approach, he said that in general he was so pleased with the outcomes that he wouldn’t make many adjustments. But he did note that early in the process he made the mistake of leapfrogging too far up the hierarchy of his firm by speaking to a very senior person without having a referral from somebody close to him. Later, Matt learned to get the referrals he needed to speak with more senior people.

When I asked Matt what he would say to someone with social anxiety disorder for whom the idea of information interviewing sounds dreadful, he observed that he felt the process can be a valuable exercise that may actually help one reduce his or her social anxiety through regular practice- presumably, beginning with people who are most easy to speak with. “It provides a framework to follow.”

Matt’s experience reminds me very much of that of a close friend who survived five separate layoffs at a Fortune 500 multinational corporation over the course of several years. Let's call him, ‘Will.’ In fact, Will eventually became the president of one of the most famous research labs in the world. When I asked Will how he managed to pull off this remarkable feat, his story was surprisingly similar to Matt's. Like Matt, Will made information interviewing a regular part of his day, seeking out colleagues within and without his department, learning from them, finding out their needs, winning referrals and allies who could give him early tips about when layoffs or other major events were coming. It also helped him discover paths and contacts who could help him make the transition.

Matt says he's now a strong believer in information interviewing as an ongoing part of business and professional life, and warmly recommends that students and colleagues integrate it into their day, whatever their professional situation at the moment happens to be. He adds that he so believes in the process that he welcomes others to ask him for an information interview.

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