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CHAPTER FOUR

PEOPLE, PAPER, AND PIXEL CHASE

Terrell had just graduated with a liberal arts degree and was having trouble getting started in his job search. He wasn't sure what he wanted to do or even what he could do with his degree. He wasn't an engineer or an accountant or a social worker, but he knew he was interested in helping people. He set up a meeting with a personnel agency, thinking that they could answer his questions. Luckily he met with someone who was sympathetic to his plight. The personnel consultant suggested that Terrell consider becoming involved in the field of industrial training.

"Training?" he wondered, "What's that? How do I find out what trainers do?" It seemed that he had stumbled into more questions than answers.

Whether you have a definite idea about what sort of career you would like to explore or you are still casting about for possibilities, you are going to need information. There are several ways to gather this intelligence on prospective fields, including information interviewing, shadowing, library, and on-line research.

Terrell persisted and eventually found a position in training. The rest of this chapter describes what he had to do to get the information he needed to learn about the field and make decisions.

INFORMATION INTERVIEWS

The best way to get answers to your career questions is to talk to people who are actually doing the work in which you are interested, through a process called information interviewing. There are several steps to follow in order to use this tool successfully:

- Identify people who can help you.
- Set up appointments.
- Prepare for the meeting.
- Conduct the interview.
- Evaluate what you have learned.

You Know Someone Who Knows Someone

Because this process is closely allied with networking, the topic of chapter 7, you can use some of the same methods. Use your career services office first, since they may have lists of people who have already agreed to meet with students to discuss their career fields. One note

of caution, though: be sure that the file in the office has not been overused. If those helpful people have been contacted too frequently by too many students, their willingness to help you might be seriously eroded. There may also be an online file of “Mentors” you can access by registering with your career services office.

You probably have neighbors and relatives who can also help in this endeavor, even if they do not work in the field directly. They may know someone who does. Did you ever play the game “Six degrees of Kevin Bacon”? Due to the proliferation of movies starring Bacon, someone decided that any actor could be connected to him in six or fewer moves. It started as a joke, but it can be applied to your career search. The game works because the field of Hollywood film acting contains a relatively fixed set of people. The same principle applies to most fields, especially if you are considering a limited geographic area in which to search.

Set Up Your Appointments

This is a critical point in your career exploration! You are about to pick up the phone and attempt to make a professional contact, perhaps for the first time in your life. This is the point at which many people either become incapacitated by fear or say something really dumb. The best way to avoid either extreme is to prepare in advance what you plan to say when you make these calls.

Try this:

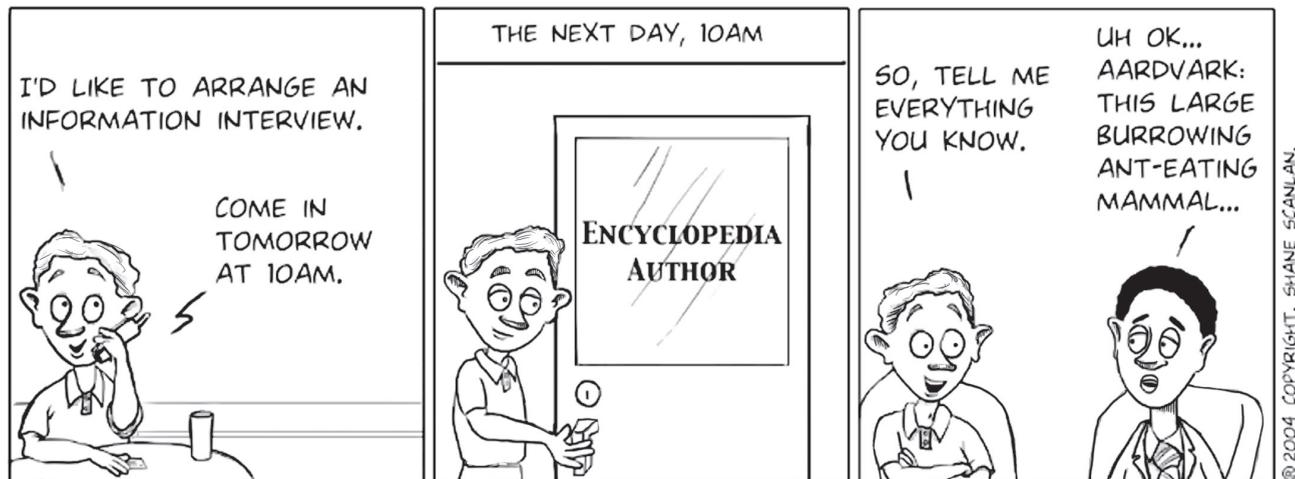
“Good morning, Ms. Shaw, my name is Terrell Jones, and I am trying to learn about the field of industrial training, and I have some questions I would like to ask you. Would it be possible for us to meet for about 30 minutes this week?”

If you are doing this as a class project, mention that in your introduction. Or, even better, use the name of the person who referred you to Ms. Shaw.

Always be polite and professional on the phone, and ask for an amount of time expressed in “minutes” rather than “hours.” For instance, if you ask for “half an hour,” people only hear the word “hour,” which conjures up images of a long, drawn-out meeting with someone they don’t even know. “Minutes,” however, are like pennies; everyone has some minutes to spend with you.

If the person is unwilling or unable to meet with you in person and the best you can do is a phone interview, take it! Graciously accept what they are willing to give since you are imposing on their schedule, not the other way around. You may feel as though you dodged a bullet when they insist on a phone interview, since it is less intimidating, perhaps, than a face-to-face meeting. Plus, you won’t have to dress up and drive somewhere. However, keep in mind that you will miss out on some important information if you do all these interviews over the phone. For example, what is the environment like? The furnishings, equipment, the types of people who work there—these are all physical cues that you cannot read without a personal meeting. Also, it is difficult to judge people’s attitudes and true feelings over the phone.

Suggest an appointment using Skype, so you can at least see what each other looks like. You can do it from home or ask your career services center if they can facilitate the call for you. Remember, the same rules for dress apply for Skype as in the face-to-face meeting.



Do Your Homework

Yes—more homework. Before you meet with the person you have selected, learn as much as you can about the field. By doing this research, several things will happen. First, you will demonstrate to the interviewee that you are serious about this endeavor. Second, you can avoid wasting their time asking questions that you could have answered in your own research. Third, more questions will occur to you, the more you investigate the field. You will be able to get an overall picture of the career area and then use the interviews to ask more specific questions about what the person does in the field. So, if you have a general idea about what happens in mechanical engineering, you can then ask what an engineer does in a steel production plant or in a consulting firm or in an automotive manufacturing environment.

Let's Go!

If you are doing this as a requirement for a career exploration class, make the most of this opportunity. Be sure that you choose people whose advice you sincerely desire and that you are truly interested in what they have to say. This is more than just an abstract class exercise—this involves real people with real schedules and deadlines to meet, so keep in mind the following:

- Dress as if you were going to a job interview, even though you are not the one being interviewed. This shows that you are serious about your purpose and that you respect the person you are visiting.
- Have your questions typewritten on several sheets of paper with plenty of room to record your interviewee's answers.
- Arrive on time, and stick to your agreed upon schedule. If you asked for 30 minutes, be mindful of the time and plan your questions to be sure the most important ones get answered before you leave. If the interviewee indicates that it is OK for you to stay longer, then go ahead and ask a few more questions.
- Try to direct the interview as much as you can. Some professionals may try to take control of the meeting, but politely redirect them by using your preplanned questions.
- Remember to stick to your original agreement about the topic. You are asking for information and advice. You are not asking for a job. It is essential that you maintain your integrity on

this point. If you treat the meeting as a job interview in disguise, then you have defeated the purpose of this process and ruined this avenue for others who will come after you.

**An information interview is
not a job interview in disguise?**

WHAT DO I NEED TO KNOW ABOUT?

Be sure to have questions ready that will educate you about the following areas:

1. Duties and responsibilities of the person
2. Characteristics of workers in this occupation
3. Satisfactions and frustrations in this work
4. Organizational culture
5. Qualifications for the career
6. Salary and benefits
7. Your lifestyle and this occupation
8. Future outlook for the field
9. Some personal questions for the interviewee
10. Referrals to others

Here are some sample questions to use to cover these various topics. Be sure to rewrite them to suit your needs. And please—do not use all these questions in every interview!

Duties and responsibilities

1. What do you like best about your occupation?
2. What characteristics of this work cause the most frustration at times?
3. What is the most gratifying aspect of your work?
4. What aspects of this work/organization give you the most personal satisfaction?
5. Is there anything that annoys you at work?
6. What is the most challenging aspect of this job for you?



7. Can you leave your job behind you when you leave the office or do you find that it is the kind of job you take home with you?

Organizational culture

1. What are the lines of authority in your company?
2. What does the organizational chart look like?
3. To whom do you report?
4. Do you supervise other people?
5. How would you describe the culture here?
6. How would you describe the management style?
7. Please describe the decision-making process?
8. Who makes the decisions on how work will be done in your department?
9. What sets this organization apart from others in the same industry?
10. Describe the morale of the people who work here. Why is it that way?

Qualifications for the career

1. What qualifications (education, training, license, credentials) are needed for this work?
2. Can people specialize in this occupation?
3. Is there a career ladder?
4. What are the typical entry level jobs for this work?
5. What essential abilities are needed to do your job well?

Salary and benefits

(One great thing about information interviewing is that you may ask about salaries and benefits in the field, since you are not in a formal job interview. However, never ask about the person's individual salary.)

1. What is a typical entry-level salary in this field?
2. What are the beginning, middle, and top salary ranges for this field?
3. How does your organization's pay ranges compare to others in the industry?
4. What fringe benefits are typically offered?

Your lifestyle and this occupation

1. If a person does not want to or cannot work full time, are there opportunities for part-time work or job sharing?
2. What problems, if any, do you see in combining marriage and family with this sort of work?
3. How can people who take time out to raise a family remain professionally alert during their parental leave away from this field?
4. How many hours a day do you work?
5. What values are expressed by this organization? By this occupation?
6. Is travel a factor in your work?
7. How do people dress for work here?

Future outlook

1. What kind of changes are taking place in this field?
2. How can a person prepare for these changes?
3. What do you see in the future for this occupation? For this organization?
4. Is the number of people working in this field or organization growing or declining? Why?

5. How secure do you think employment will be in this occupation? In this organization?
6. What does the future of this field look like?
7. Will there be good opportunities for someone like me?
8. What are the latest developments in this field?

Personal questions

1. How did you get this job?
2. How did you get your first job in this field?
3. What steps did you take to get where you are now?
4. How old were you when you decided to enter this occupation?
5. What alternatives did you consider before choosing this field?
6. What were the most important factors that led you to this kind of work?
7. Did someone in your life significantly influence your decision? Who? How?
8. Is there any way in which your work has changed you as a person?
9. If you had to start all over again, is there anything you would do differently in your career?
10. What advice would you give someone who is thinking about entering this field?

Referrals

(Never leave an information interview without asking the following questions.)

1. Can you think of two or three other people I could talk to in order to learn more about this field? (If you phrase this question asking if there is “anyone” else you could talk to, it’s too easy for the person to simply say no, they can’t think of anyone. By asking specifically for two or three other people, you force them to think of individuals to whom they might refer you.)
2. May I use your name when I call?

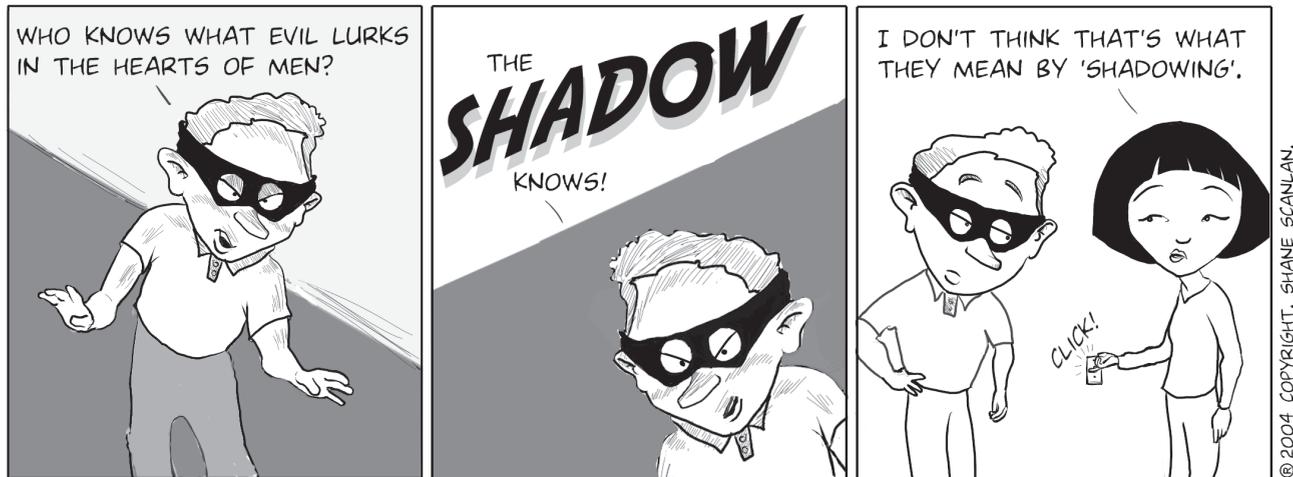
Evaluation

Remember: not all these questions are necessary or applicable to your situation. Pick the ones that will be most helpful to you. Once you have your answers, be sure to evaluate what you have learned from each interview. Use the worksheet at the end of the chapter.

SHADOWING

There is an ancient bit of job search advice that says if you really want to learn about an industry or specific occupational field, talk to a salesperson who serves that field. That is exactly what a student named Anita did when she was exploring careers. She shadowed a friend who sold printing services. That is, she traveled with a printing salesman for a day to see exactly what he did in the course of his work.

Anita saw the salesman visit many different businesses, sometimes making presentations, or picking up art work or just stopping by to see how things were going. She realized that her friend had the chance to move in and out of many different work environments during his day, so he knew a lot of people and learned a lot about what was happening in the various businesses he visited. Anita made a note to use this information throughout her job search. Talk to someone in sales!



Shadowing is another low risk technique to use in exploring career options. Because of the time commitment—seven or eight hours—you may want to ask someone you know personally rather than a stranger. Also, since you are imposing on the person’s time, why not buy lunch that day?

Why Shadow?

Here are some reasons why shadowing a worker is a good idea:

- See a career in action. You can observe what really happens in the course of a typical day.
- Discern the skills being used. It is one thing to ask someone to describe the skills they use and quite another to see them in action. As you move through the day, see if you can identify the specific skills being employed by the person you are following.
- Learn about the people involved in the field. Here is your chance to see what a person’s coworkers, supervisors, or customers are really like. Do you want to work with the types of people you see in this field? What are their values, mannerisms, attitudes, and communication styles?
- Observe the environment. Where is the work done? Do people work in a muddy construction pit, a blazing hot roof top, a cubby hole in a “cube farm”? If they work inside, are the furnishings new and up to date or torn and shabby? If you *like* working in a muddy construction pit or blazing hot roof top, then maybe you have found your niche.
- Listen to your heart. What is your gut reaction to what you see? Check your values against those you observe in the workers. Does anything scare you about the people, environment, skills, or expectations? Pay attention to your feelings.
- Use a worksheet to keep track of what you learned during your shadowing experience. There is a shadowing evaluation worksheet at the end of this chapter.

Finally, whether you meet face-to-face with an employer, use Skype to communicate, or shadow someone, be sure to send a thank you letter. Express your gratitude for all the time and help the person provided. Who knows, you may need to come back to that person later on.

Careers for Women

Does that headline inflame your sensibilities? Is there still a career apartheid between men and women? In a 1939 book called *Vocations for Girls*,¹ the following choices were listed in a section called “Ladies First”:

Nursing	Cosmetology
Home Economics	Household Employment
Teaching	Office Work
Social Service and Religious Work	Secretarial Work
Library Work	Dental Hygiene

In a section called “For Men Only—Unless,” the list looked like this:

Medicine	Science
Dentistry	Foreign and Armed Services
Law and Politics	Engineering
Ministry	High Finance

The “Unless” statement said that such career fields were for “men only” unless women had the proper qualifications and could afford the necessary education and training.

The idea of career stereotyping, placing men and women in different careers based on gender and race, is supposed to have dropped out of the picture like other bad ideas that have outlived their usefulness. Turkey deep fryers and kerosene home heaters also come to mind, but like these dangerous contraptions, stereotyping still hangs on in some areas.

What did you observe during your information interviewing and shadowing experiences? Did you notice certain gender roles in the places you visited? Who made the coffee? Who led the meetings? If you saw certain stereotyped modes of operation during your exploration activities, you will have to decide if you can live with them or if they are unacceptable to you.

PAPER CHASE

In addition to all the work you have done in meeting with people, there are still many other resources available to gather the information you need. These can be found in good, old-fashioned libraries as well as on the Internet.

There are several classic works that you will want to use, including books published by the government such as the *Occupational Outlook Handbook* as well as books by individuals (for example, *The Guide to Internet Job Searching* by Dikel and Roehm).

Perhaps the most useful of the government publications that you should review is the *Occupational Outlook Handbook*, a resource we mentioned in chapter 2. It gives a brief description and the current outlook for many positions sought by college graduates. If you



cannot find the current edition in your college or community library, you can find it on-line at <http://www.bls.gov/oco/>.

The descriptions are all divided into specific sections to guide you in understanding each occupation. The “Summary” tab introduces you to the career field. It provides a brief description of the duties, assignments, and day-to-day work activities of people in that field. You can get an idea of the scope of the field and even see related occupations and job titles.

The “What They Do” and “Work Environment” tabs tell you about the settings in which people work, how many hours per week they work, and whether travel is part of the job. The “State and Area Data” tab explains how many people are working in that field across the country, how many are self-employed, and whether they are likely to work in urban or rural areas.

The “How to Become One” tab describes the level of education required for the job, any licenses or certifications that are necessary, and a little about the aptitudes essential for success. It traces a typical career path for someone in that field, beginning with entry-level positions and moving through the possible levels of that career.

In the “Job Outlook” section, you can learn about the growth potential for the career area. The *Handbook* tries to gauge how many people will be needed for that field over the coming years, but this is difficult to determine precisely. The authors warn that susceptibility to layoffs due to imports, slowdowns in economic activity, technological advancements, or budget cuts can affect the number of jobs that will be open in a particular field.

Curious about how much people are paid in certain jobs? The *Handbook* has a “Pay” tab to help you. This section discusses typical earnings and how workers are compensated—annual salaries, hourly wages, commissions, piece rates, tips, or bonuses. Within every occupation, earnings vary by experience, level of responsibility, performance, length of time in the job, and geographic area. Benefits are also an important part of the compensation package, but they vary widely and so are not included here.

In chapter 2 we also talked about the *Occupational Information Network* (O*NET), and it is important in this chapter as well. Use O*NET to learn some basic information about careers in which you are interested before you do any information interviews. O*NET will give you ideas about good questions to ask, and more importantly, you will make a good impression on the people you interview. They will be pleased that you took the time to do some research before coming to them.

PIXELS, ANYONE?

Who can resist the lure of those glowing bits of light that make up your computer screen? Not us, that’s for sure. The book, *The Guide to Internet Job Searching* by Margaret Riley Dikel and Frances Boehm is now a website called rileyguide.com. Dikel began life as a librarian and was one of the first people to recognize the potential of the Internet for the dissemination of information. Who knew librarians could be so cool? She has written several books about job searches, and this is one of the best on how to use the Internet. We will say more about it in chapter 7.

On-line research can be time consuming and time wasting, especially if you search too broadly or are easily sidetracked. Always use your college career services office website as a starting point in this research. They have already compiled lists of helpful websites for you.

LinkedIn.com is an invaluable resource for identifying potential information interview-ees. For example, you can search a particular company for alumni from your college and use that connection to approach them for a meeting. You can even search for certain job titles that appeal to you that are located in your zip code to find people who can help. We will say much more about how to use LinkedIn in chapter 7.

One More Book

Check out the *Great Jobs* series of books, in which the authors have tried to put together a list of career options for various majors, showing how the degree fits into many different fields. *Great Jobs for English Majors*, for example, suggests several possible career paths for literature lovers.

SUMMARY

Once you have completed your self-assessment work, it is time to gather information about the careers that interest you. The best way to do that is by setting up information interviews to talk to people who are actually doing the work.

To be successful in this endeavor, you must identify people who can help you, set up appointments with them, do some research before the meeting, conduct the interview, and evaluate what you learned. These interviews are more valuable if done face-to-face, since you can see the physical environment in which the work is done and observe the sort of people who work there. Remember: an information interview is not a job interview in disguise.

You can learn about the duties and responsibilities of the person, the type of people drawn to that occupation, the satisfactions and frustrations of the job, necessary qualifications, typical salaries and benefits offered, how the job may impact your lifestyle, the future of the field, and something about the personal history of the person you are interviewing. Always ask for referrals to other people when you close the interview. Use the list of sample questions in your interview and rewrite them as needed.

Shadowing a person for an entire day is an excellent way to get an in-depth picture of a typical day in a worker's life. You can see the career in action, observe how people interact with each other, and see how well you might fit into the environment.

Career stereotyping, allowing people access to certain careers based on gender or race, is less prevalent now but is still an issue in some career areas or in some organizations.

Your career exploration should include the use of such helpful publications as the *Occupational Outlook Handbook*, O*NET, and other tools describing possible careers for different academic majors. The Internet is also a useful tool in career exploration. Use your college's career services office website as a starting point to direct you to more helpful sites.

Name: _____ Date: _____

CHAPTER FOUR

Questions and Exercises

(Available on Careers in Action CD)

1. Make up a list of potential interviewees or people who may be able to refer you to others who can help you in your career exploration.

2. Write out what you plan to say when you call to arrange an information interview. Be sure to introduce yourself, explain your purpose, and ask for a meeting.

3. What research do you need to do before the meeting? What resources will you use?

4. Go over the list of suggested questions and put a star by the ones you think you'll want to use. Make sure you get at least one from every category. Write them out on the worksheet labeled "My Questions."

5. After each information interview you conduct, use the evaluation worksheet to review what you learned from each person.

6. Use the shadowing evaluation worksheet to record your impressions and summarize what you learned from the experience.

7. Have you ever seen examples of career stereotypes? In what fields does it still persist?

8. Look up your first choice for a career in the *Occupational Outlook Handbook*. Briefly summarize the nature of the work, qualifications, outlook, and salary information.

Name: _____ Date: _____

9. Go to page 69 in the text and copy your answers to question 3 here.

10. Look up your answers to #9 in O*NET. Write the career name and code below. How closely do the codes resemble each other?

11. Go to your college's career services office web page and list three of the most helpful sites for exploring your prospective career. Check out each one and see what other links you discover.

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Name: _____ Date: _____

Information Interview Evaluation Worksheet

1. What are the most important things I learned from this conversation?

2. Did I hear anything that will significantly change my opinion of this field?

3. Are there things I should not ask next time or things I forgot to ask?

4. What are my impressions of the facilities?

5. What kinds of people did I see working there? How were they dressed? How did they interact with one another?

6. Does it seem like the kind of place I would like to work? Why or why not?

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Name: _____ Date: _____

Shadowing Evaluation Worksheet

1. What skills seemed to be most important in this work?

2. How would I rate my proficiency in those skills?

<i>Skill</i>	<i>Rating</i>				
_____	Poor	Fair	Good	Very Good	Excellent
_____	Poor	Fair	Good	Very Good	Excellent
_____	Poor	Fair	Good	Very Good	Excellent
_____	Poor	Fair	Good	Very Good	Excellent

3. What were my impressions of the people I met during the day?

a. Their values: did they closely resemble my own?

b. Their mannerisms: professional or annoying?

c. Their communication styles: pleasant, direct, businesslike, annoying?

d. Did they seem happy in their work? Why or why not?

4. How would I rate the physical environment?

- a. Work inside—outside—combination—doesn't matter—didn't notice
- b. Furnishings: comfortable—up to date—shabby—doesn't matter—didn't notice
- c. Equipment: modern—efficient—outmoded—doesn't matter—didn't notice
- d. Noise level: quiet—moderate—loud—doesn't matter—didn't notice
- e. Lighting: bright—too dark—no windows—doesn't matter—didn't notice

Name: _____ Date: _____

5. What was my gut reaction to what I observed?

a. The people were _____

b. I am afraid _____

c. I loved _____

d. I disliked _____

e. Overall, I felt _____

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