

Career Compass No. 78: Info Interviews - A Tool to Help You Advance

I'm a bit reluctant to get a formal coach. Is there another way to get some career advice and support that I can try out?

By Frank Benest | Nov 22, 2019 | ARTICLE



I have been in my position as a building inspector for 5 years and now want to move up in community development either in my county or in another local government organization. Given my experience and skill set, I've also been thinking of perhaps moving laterally into public utilities.

You have long advocated the benefit of coaching. I'm a bit reluctant to get a formal coach. Is there another way to get some career advice and support that I can try out?

Yes, I have long encouraged colleagues at all levels to get informal or formal coaching. Coaches can provide

- Career advice and ongoing support.
- Suggestions on how to address problematic work situations or conflicts.
- Political guidance.

You don't have to ask a senior leader or manager to serve as a formal coach. You can simply invite a senior-level colleague in your organization or another agency for coffee in order to pick his or her brain on how you can position yourself for advancement. This kind of informal coaching (usually a one-time or periodic conversation) is also very valuable. (See [Career Compass #48 "How Do I Benefit From a Coach?"](#))

Another Tool—Information Interviews

Even though coaches love to coach, some people are reluctant to ask for coaching since senior managers are perceived as already overloaded with responsibilities. Thus, you may feel that you are adding another burden by asking for coaching.

If you feel uncomfortable seeking a coach, you can ask a senior-level professional in your organization or a professional in another agency for an “information interview.” An info interview is a common practice in private, nonprofit, and public sectors. Senior professionals do not consider info interviews a major commitment or time burden.

What is an info interview?

An info interview is a meeting in which a potential job seeker seeks advice on his or her career, the industry, and the organization, as well as feedback on his or her skills, knowledge, and experience.

Info interviews typically have these characteristics:

- They are informal conversations.
- They are often one-time.
- The meetings typically last 45 minutes to an hour.
- They involve both parties sharing information and experiences.

What are the benefits to you?

Info interviews can serve different purposes. First, they can help you **ascertain what it would take to move up** in your county Community Development Department, or to move laterally into another public service discipline or function (like public utilities). These conversations can provide feedback on your hopes and dreams; your skills, experiences, and potential; and any issues or obstacles that you perceive. The person you are interviewing may even provide feedback on your resume.

Second, an info interview can help you **explore possible strategies for advancement** (i.e., education, training, stretch assignments, interim positions, team leadership opportunities, and professional association involvements).

Third, by connecting with the senior-level professional, these conversations help you **expand your professional network**. You can also ask that the person connect you with other professionals to contact for additional interviews.

Finally, if you have a good conversation, oftentimes the person you are interviewing will remember you and **provide some follow-up employment leads**.

What are the benefits to the person being interviewed?

While we tend to focus on the benefits that you get when conducting an info interview, the senior-level professional or manager also gets value from such a conversation.

- Given the talent crisis facing local government agencies, they learn about a new potential colleague to hire.
- Info interviews build the network of the person being interviewed.

- These conversations are refreshing for the senior-level colleague who is being interviewed.

Whom should you interview?

That depends. If you are focused on moving up in your Community Development Department, you might want to schedule an info interview with the chief building official or the assistant community development director (or the director if you have a positive relationship with the director). Another option is a senior manager in the Community Development Department in another county or city.

To consider a move into public utilities, you would want to make an appointment with a senior-level professional in utilities.

If you want to get involved professionally in order to create more leadership visibility, schedule an interview with an officer or “influential” in an appropriate professional association (i.e., International Association of Building Officials or a local government management association such as ICMA).

What are some provocative interview questions?

You may want to start the info interview by briefly sharing your career hopes and dreams going forward. Then you can pose some questions to the person being interviewed that spark some good conversation:

- Can you describe your career journey?
- Looking back, what have been some high points, low points, and turning points in your career journey?
- What are the “hard” technical skills and “soft” leadership competencies needed for your job?
- What was a “crucible experience” (an experience of great challenge and adversity) that tested your leadership? How did the experience transform you as a leader and person?
- Who was a coach or other person who supported your growth and development? What made that relationship so powerful?
- What are some current leadership challenges that you must address?
- What may be your career journey going forward?
- What are some trends in local government that may lead to opportunities for me to further contribute?
- In reviewing my resume, what are some skill, knowledge or experience gaps that might pose an obstacle for me in achieving my career aspirations?
- Given my hopes and dreams, which professional associations should I join? How would you suggest that I get involved in relevant committees or even share some of my knowledge or experience with other professionals in these associations?
- Who else in your professional network should I talk to? Would you be willing to make an introduction?

You can identify many more questions by doing an Internet search “information interview questions.”

What’s the secret sauce?

If you want the info interview to lead to great things, you need to structure the interview so that you create relationship and connection. To do so

- Make the meeting a conversation.
- Share yourself in the hope that the senior professional shares himself or herself.
- Show some vulnerability (for example, share a wrong turn or a mistake in your unfolding career journey). Showing vulnerability helps create relationship and connection.
- Follow up (see more on follow-up later in this column).

By creating rapport and connection with the other person, it is more likely that the senior-level professional will provide referrals and introductions, employment leads, and opportunities to get involved in professional associations.

Frank’s info interview that super-charged my advancement

When I was the human services director (overseeing all the city’s social services) for a city in Southern California, I wanted to become a city manager but had several skill and experience gaps. I asked for an info interview with the city manager in a neighboring community. When we met, he indicated that I needed some land use planning experience. Given his limited staffing, I suggested that I lead on my own time a team in his city shaping an upcoming development project. He agreed and I seized the opportunity.

After several other meetings, the city manager also gave me a useful title and made a number of introductions to other city managers who gave me career advice and otherwise supported my efforts to secure a manager position.

In particular, the time-limited pro bono project in another city allowed me to enhance my resume and respond to questions about my land use background and I eventually got selected as a city manager.

What are some tips to have a great experience?

To set up the info interview, I suggest that you

- Send a blind email (many colleagues like me almost always accept these invitations for an info interview); identify your career aspirations; and attach your resume to the email. Follow up if you don’t get a response.
- Better yet, ask a colleague to make an introduction via email to the person that you want to interview and then you follow up with an email requesting a time to meet.
- Identify in your email dates/times when you can meet and ask the interviewee to select an appropriate date/time for a 45-minute conversation.

- Identify your specific interests (e.g., feedback on skills and knowledge and experiences required for advancement to a particular position, strategies to position yourself for advancement, opportunities to get actively involved in a professional association).
- Suggest a cup of coffee to “pick his or her brain” about your career opportunities.

During the interview, I encourage you to

- Thank the person for taking the time to meet with you and give you feedback on your career journey.
- Keep it conversational.
- Share at the beginning of the meeting a summary of who you are professionally and your career hopes and dreams going forward.
- Ask who else in the other person’s network you can speak with.
- If you have had a good conversation, request that the other person make an email introduction to a professional colleague or at least allow you to use his or her name in trying to schedule another info interview.
- Thank the person for his or her time and guidance.

As a follow-up to the interview, I suggest that you:

- Send a hand-written thank you note (not an email).
- Keep the interviewee advised of any other interviews (and thank him or her for any introductions that he or she made).
- Ask him or her if he or she can notify you of any appropriate job openings or other professional opportunities that become available.
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Bonus tip

If you have a good conversation with someone and connect with him or her, schedule a second conversation in 6-9 months in order to provide an update on your progress and how you have used the advice. Turn the one-time interview into an informal coaching relationship.

How do I leverage the info interview?

Here are some strategies to leverage to get the most out of the interview experience:

- Ask the person being interviewed to share an experience (in response to one of your questions); sharing experiences and stories helps create relationship.
- Request that the senior-level professional or manager make an introduction or two so you can have a few more info interviews and multiply the benefits of the info interviews.
- Ask if you can contact the person for any guidance as you actively make efforts to move forward in your public service career.
- Suggest a half-day job shadow with an appropriate professional on the interviewee’s staff
- Ask if the senior manager has a challenge and lacks insufficient staffing resources in an area where you would like to gain skills or experience; then suggest that you conduct pro bono a time-limited special project for the manager.

“Hooking” the interviewee

The info interview is aimed at generating information from the professional being interviewed. You certainly want information about the position you seek, the skills required for the position, and suggestions on how you can further develop yourself.

However, the other even more important goal is to form a relationship and “hook” the other person on your development and advancement going forward.

Try it out. An information interview is worth the time and effort. The experience can be engaging and energizing and accelerate your advancement.



Sponsored by the ICMA Coaching Program, *Career Compass* is a monthly column from ICMA focused on career issues for local government professional staff. Dr. Frank Benest is ICMA's liaison for Next Generation Initiatives and resides in Palo Alto, California. If you have a career question you would like addressed in a future Career Compass, e-mail careers@icma.org or contact Frank directly at frank@frankbenest.com. Read past columns at icma.org/careercompass.