Introduction

Networking is a very important tool for finding a public interest job, internship, or fellowship sponsor, yet it is something that students and alums often forget about or try to avoid. Statistics show that a tremendous number of successful job applicants learn about job openings through contacts, or “word-of-mouth”. These contacts are often gained through networking. Even if a job opening is posted, networking can give an applicant an early “foot in the door”, either by letting the applicant know that the job will be posted, or by putting the applicant in a more favorable position because he/she has already met with the employer in an informal meeting prior to the job posting.

Networking and informational interviews also give the applicant invaluable information about the organization, the legal field and issues, and the lawyers who work on those issues. It is also often fun and inspiring to meet people doing the work you want to do.

How Do You Network?

The easiest way to network is to talk to your contacts (such as other law students, professors, SJI staff, family members, former employers and so forth) about your interests and professional goals. In turn, those individuals may be able to give you job leads, offer you advice and information about a particular organization or position, and/or introduce you to individuals at that organization or in the field, so you can expand your network. Doing informational interviews is probably the most important part of networking. Although it may feel awkward, the process is quite straightforward: it simply requires making contact (via email or letter) with individuals at organizations or in fields you are interested in, and asking to meet with them informally to learn more about their work. You can suggest meeting at their office, or over coffee or lunch, or you can ask what they prefer. Some individuals may only be willing to meet via telephone. Even though this isn’t ideal (because it is harder to establish rapport and get to know each other), it can still be a helpful means of obtaining information and introducing yourself.

You can contact people who you don’t know – either people that you have heard about through your networking (and make sure to mention your mutual acquaintance) or have met in an informal setting or at a meeting; or you can contact Columbia law alums; or you can even cold-call someone with whom you have no direct ties, such as an employee of an organization you are interested in --- they may be willing to take the time to meet with you because of your interests, and if they are not, there was no harm in trying.

Remember, the purpose of an informational interview is to obtain information, not to get a job. Make sure the person you are contacting knows that you understand this.
Setting Up an Informational Interview

As mentioned above, you can send a formal letter or email to request an informational interview. Look at the samples in this Toolkit, but remember, you should frame yours so that it reflects who you are. There is not one “right” way to draft your request; however, you should follow some simple guidelines:

- Introduce yourself and clearly state the purpose of your letter/email.
- If applicable, mention any person who referred you, or mutual acquaintance. Or, if you met him/her briefly (such as at a Bar Association meeting or law school panel), include the context in which you met him/her.
- Personalize the letter so it doesn’t seem like a form letter – for example, include the name of the person’s organization or area of law they work in, so they know you wrote the letter specifically for them; or include the topics that you discussed when you met them; or mention shared interests.
- Briefly introduce yourself, and convey your background in the field and your interest in their organization (or how they can help you).
- Identify what you would like them to do (meet with you, call you, provide further information etc.).
- Make clear that you are not looking for job or job interview, but are looking for advice/guidance or information.
- Identify next steps (for example, tell them that you will call them in a few days).
- Remember to attach your resume to the letter so they have more information about your background – unless your cover letter/email provides the relevant information about your background and you want to set a more informal tone for the interview.

Make sure to follow up via telephone within a few days of sending your request for the informational interview.

Preparing For an Informational Interview

Sometimes opportunities to network unexpectedly arise in situations like cocktail parties, reunions, meetings etc. and you should take advantage of these. However, much of your networking will be done through informational interviews, and you should make sure you prepare ahead of time for these.

Informational interviews are different than regular public interest job interviews. They tend to be shorter (15-20 minutes usually), more relaxed and conversational, and are often driven by the person seeking the meeting (i.e. you!). You therefore should be very prepared, so that you have clear goals in mind for the meeting, and have a list of specific questions that you would like to ask. (It is fine to bring questions with you, as well as a pad so you can jot down any notes).

Also, you should aim to impress with your knowledge of the area of law, and/or knowledge about the work of their organization (and person you are meeting with, if possible), so make sure you do this background preparation. Be prepared to answer questions about your interest in the area of law or their organization, your background
and goals, and so forth. Don’t forget that the contact will be assessing you during this meeting, in addition to providing you with information.

Types of Questions You Can Ask

- Can you tell me about your job, your primary responsibilities and the role you play in the organization?
- How did you get this job? What is your background?
- What issues do you focus on? What legal strategies do you employ? [if you don’t know this from the website]
- Who do you work with in the office?
- Does your organization work with other organizations in the field? How? Who?
- What are the cutting edge issues in your field?
- How has this field of law changed over the past few years? What do you anticipate in the immediate future?
- What can I do to be marketable in your field? (internships, classes, membership in professional organizations, trainings, volunteer and pro bono work etc.)
- What skills does one need to work at an organization like this?
- Do you know of any organizations that will be hiring?
- Do you know anyone else I can talk to? Do you have any job search strategies for me?

Afterwards

At the close of the meeting, make sure to ask for a business card so that you can follow up and also build your networking information. (Most people expect to be asked). Make sure to send a short thank you note (email is fine) immediately after the interview (see the samples in this guide). Keep in contact, without being imposing or invasive. Try to build on the interview – for example, by contacting any names they gave you, or following any tips they provided.

Make sure to be organized in your networking, and maintain a list, or chart, of names, contact information and dates of communication. If the interview leads to a job or something else significant, be sure to let them know and thank them again.

Other

Take advantage of opportunities at law school, and turn them into networking events. For example, if you attend a panel with an interesting speaker, approach the speaker at the end, introduce yourself, and network!! Attend meetings focused on subjects you are interested in and network with other attendees (for example, professional organizations like Bar Association meetings). Stay in touch with any contacts you make through term-time internships/externships and summer jobs, and use them as a resource. Regularly check websites, or get on email lists, for organizations you are interested in, so you learn of any events they may be hosting, and try to attend these and network.
Be creative and confident – but don’t be pushy or inappropriate.

If you have a summer job in a city that you might return to after graduation, set up informational interviews at other organizations during the summer. These could turn into great leads for jobs or fellowship sponsors in the future, and will help you gather more information about the job market in that city.