

How to (and How Not to) Ask for Advice

Posted by [Lindsey Pollak](#) on Nov 11, 2010 12:02:30 PM

One of the most common recommendations I give to young professionals is to ask more experienced people for advice. After all, there's no better way to know how to do something than to ask someone who's "been there, done that." This is also known as informational interviewing and it's a great strategy.

However, what I've been observing lately is that a lot of students and recent grads don't know how best to ask for advice and guidance. The better your ask, the better the answers you'll receive, so here are some tips:

- 1. Make it easy for someone to say yes to your request for help.** When you ask someone for advice, be specific about the kind of help you need (job hunting advice, career change advice, etc.), request a specific amount of time (15-30 minutes is usually appropriate) and offer to call the person or meet at his or her office at his or her convenience. Then, be sure to confirm 24 hours in advance so the person knows you'll show up.
- 2. Do not ask to "pick someone's brain."** Okay this one is more about how not to ask me in particular for advice. Some people don't mind this phrase, but I definitely do. Why? First of all, I think it sounds kind of gross (think about it). Second of all, it is very one-sided: if you are picking my brain, what's in this conversation for me? It feels as if I'll be left brainless afterwards. My advice is to always request advice in a way that makes the ask-ee feel respected and like he or she will leave the conversation with something, too.
- 3. Be specific.** Instead of saying, "I'd like to hear some general advice" or "I'm happy to know anything," show that you've done your homework and you are looking for particular advice or tips. For instance, "I know that you started your career in accounting, but you switched over to consulting. I'm thinking of doing the same and would be interested to hear how you made the decision." Or, "I am not sure what I want to do after graduation, but I know I want to use my writing skills. Can you share some advice on how you've built a career with your writing?" It's perfectly fine to prepare a specific list of a few questions to guide the conversation. Don't bring a laundry list, though -- five questions is about right.
- 4. Request "assignments."** One of the ways to turn an informational interview into a real relationship is to ask for the person to give you a few assignments, such as recommending that you subscribe to a particular industry e-newsletter, join the discussions in a particular LinkedIn group or read a specific business book. The reason I like this strategy is that it gives you a reason to follow up with this person in the future when you've accomplished the assignment that he or she has recommended. It's a way to show that you are a person who listens and takes action, and it sparks another conversation about the action you've taken.
- 5. Ask, "Is there anything I can do to help you?"** Even though you're a student or just starting out in your career, you never know how you might be able to help another person. By asking this question, you are showing that you understand that the best networking relationships are mutually beneficial. Even if the person doesn't need anything right now, he or she may want to reach out to you in the future and this question sets up that opportunity.
- 6. Say thank you.** I've written about this before, but it bears repeating. I am constantly shocked at how many students email me for advice, I respond to their request and then I never hear from that student again. I once asked a student why she never thanked me, and she said, "I know you are really busy so I didn't want to bother you with another email." Trust me -- receiving a thank you is *never* a bother. Thanking someone after he or she has helped you is an absolute must and will make it more likely that this person will want to help you again in the future.