# Networking for Career Success: Guidelines for Contacting Alumni

## Table of Contents

- What is the UCSF Graduate Division Career Alumni Network (GD CAN)? 3
- What is the purpose of GD CAN?
- What information is included in the GD CAN database?
- Who can use the GD CAN database?
- How do I access the GD CAN database?
- How do I prepare to contact alumni?
- How do I initiate contact with alumni? 4
- What is job shadowing? 5
- What is an informational interview?
- Job shadowing vs informational interviewing: How do I decide?
- How do informational interviews differ from employment interviews?
- What is the format for an informational interview?
- What are sample questions for informational interviewing? 6
- How do I arrange a meeting with the alum? 7
- What if I don’t receive a response from an alum I have contacted?
- What do I do after my job shadowing experience or informational interview? 
- Next steps 8
Welcome to the UCSF Graduate Student and Postdoc Career Alumni Network!

What is the Career Alumni Network?
The Career Alumni Network is a database containing information on UCSF graduate student and postdoc alumni who have volunteered to serve as informal career advisors.

What is the purpose of the Career Alumni Network?
The purpose of the database is for you to gain career information and/or job search advice that will help you make wise and meaningful career decisions. Through your conversations with alumni, you may learn about new career fields, tasks associated with a job that may or may not interest you, or job opportunities available in your field of interest. However, it is not appropriate to contact alumni to ask for a job or internship, as this is not the purpose of the Career Alumni Network.

What information is included in the database?
The database has a series of alumni profiles with the following information:

1. Contact information
2. Educational background/degree(s)
3. Employment history
4. A list of the ways in which the alum is willing/able to participate in the Career Alumni Network (Are they willing to talk with you for an informational interview? Host you for a job shadow? Provide information about job market opportunities?)

Who can use the Career Alumni Network database?
The Career Alumni Network is available to all UCSF graduate students, postdocs, and alumni-in-transition who are seeking career information and/or job search advice.

How do I access the database?
1. The database is available to search on a computer in the Graduate Division office at Mission Bay and the Office of Career and Professional Development (OCPD) at Parnassus. You can access the database Monday-Friday, 8 a.m. – 5 p.m. You may need an appointment to search for alumni contacts. To learn more about how to access the database, call the Office of Career & Professional Development (OCPD) at 415-476-4986.
2. The profiles in the database contain the educational and career backgrounds of alumni as well as an alumni ID. However, alumni volunteers’ names and contact information are hidden. If you wish to contact a particular person you will need to meet with a career counselor. To arrange a 30-minute appointment with a counselor, please call (415) 476-4986.
3. During this appointment, the counselor will provide you with the alum’s specific contact information and coach you regarding strategies for contacting and engaging with alumni so that everyone has a successful interaction.

How do I prepare to contact alumni?
To get the most out of an informational interview or job shadowing experience we suggest the following four steps:

1. **Engage in self-reflection.** It’s easier to find a great job – and a great “job fit” – if you know what you are looking for. A great job fit happens when your skills, values and interests are well
Networking for Career Success: Guidelines for Contacting Alumni

suited for the role, the responsibilities of the job, and the work environment. For example if you know that teamwork is an important value to you, you might look for examples of collegiality with collaborations. If support and training are meaningful to you, you could ask alumni what training they received during their first year and what training they wish they had received. You can only ask these targeted questions and know what evidence to look for if you have first engaged in self-reflection. Completing the questionnaires available in the assessment section of Science Careers’ myIDP online tool may help.

2. **Gather as much information as possible before meeting with alumni.** Look online, in journal articles, and other publications for information about the organizations, job responsibilities or professional backgrounds of alumni.

3. **Be clear on your purpose for contacting alumni.** Consider your reasons for contacting them and the type of assistance you are seeking. What specific information do you want to know as a result of your meeting with them?

**Examples:**
- Information and insight into how the field or a particular role might match your interests, values and skills
- Advice on particular skills, experiences, and/or training needed to be successful
- Career options available to someone in your field and/or specialty, including options that may open up in the future as the field evolves
- Recommendations and/or feedback on your job/internship search strategies
- Feedback on your resume, CV or cover letter
- Advice on additional training to help prepare you for the role you wish to pursue
- Specific job titles for those entering into the field
- Information on what could be negotiated in an employment contract with a particular employer at different stages in your career
- Information on what challenges new professionals may face in their first job and suggestions or advice on how to address these challenges
- Industry and/or employer information and suggestions for further research
- Referrals to others in your field of interest

4. **Be prepared with specific questions.** For ideas, read the sample questions for informational interviewing on page 6.

**How do I Initiate contact with alumni?**
Each alumni volunteer within the CAN database has provided contact information. The strategy that works well in most cases, is sending an introductory email clearly stating **who** you are, **how** you obtained the person’s contact information, and **why** you are contacting them (e.g., asking for a scheduled telephone or in-person appointment).

**Tips for contacting alumni:**
- In your email, introduce yourself as a UCSF graduate student, postdoc, or alum who is contacting him/her in the hope that s/he can be a career resource to you.
- Let the alum know that you obtained his/her name from the UCSF Graduate Student & Postdoc Career Alumni Network.
Networking for Career Success:  
Guidelines for Contacting Alumni

- Your introduction should include your career interests and/or specialty and the assistance you are seeking.  
- The purpose of your first contact should be to request a time to talk with the alum and to begin the process of setting up an appointment to talk later.  
- Reflect flexibility: In your email, write: “If you are willing to talk with me, I’m free any time during the week of (date 1-3 weeks in the future). If you suggest a time during that week, I will confirm the time and call you then.”

What is job shadowing?
Typically, job shadowing would involve meeting with the alum and/or others at the place of employment for a more in-depth career discussion and observation of the work environment. Each alum has indicated in his/her profile whether he/she is able to provide job shadowing. Shadowing, if agreeable to the alum, would be arranged at a mutually convenient time.

What is an informational interview?
The term “informational interview” is just another name for a conversation you have with someone else to learn more about their professional experience in an effort to explore your own career options. You have already conducted informal informational interviews if you’ve ever asked friends or colleagues about their job responsibilities, their professional or academic background, or their thoughts about working in a particular organization. The length of an informational interview is usually about 30 minutes.

Read a brief tutorial on how to set up a informational interview at:  
http://myidp.sciencecareers.org/TalkToPeople/InfoInterviews

And review sample correspondence for setting up informational interviews at:  

Job shadowing versus informational interviewing: How do I decide?
Both job shadowing and informational interviewing are helpful methods of gathering information about your career options. Although job shadowing is always in person, informational interviewing can happen by phone, Skype, or in person. Informational interviews conducted by email tend to be less productive.

How do informational interviews differ from employment interviews?
Even if you are searching for a job, the purpose of an informational interview is to ask for information, not a job. In informational interviews, alumni are more likely to share information and advice if there isn’t a job opening being discussed during the time you meet. People have greater freedom to be candid about their work and their organization and to make certain suggestions, when the conversation is framed in the context of exploring and discussing their career path, as opposed to applying for a job. You want to focus on understanding the alum’s career path to clarify if it’s the right career for you.

What is the format for an informational interview?
Informational interviews tend to cover four areas:

- A Person’s Present (i.e. information about an alum’s current responsibilities and the organization s/he works for.)
Networking for Career Success: Guidelines for Contacting Alumni

- **A Person’s Past** (i.e. information about an alum’s academic and professional background, how s/he found his/her current and past jobs, what the interview process was like, etc.)
- **A Person’s Future** (i.e. what type of opportunities could open up 5-10 years in the future)
- **A Person’s Advice** (i.e. what individuals and organizations does s/he suggest you seek out, a critique of your resume/CV, or suggestions on resources/activities to pursue.)
Networking for Career Success: Guidelines for Contacting Alumni

What are Some Sample Questions for Informational Interviewing?

Questions about the person’s PRESENT professional experience:
1. What can you tell me about your current responsibilities?
2. Could you describe a typical day? What is a typical week like?
3. With whom do you primarily interact?
4. What types of skills and experiences are key to succeeding in your position?
5. What are common qualities of individuals who are successful in your position?
6. What makes this organization a particularly good place to work? How long have you been in this position?
7. What is the most challenging/unexpected thing about working in this position?
8. What do you like about your work environment? What keeps you here?
9. How would you describe the culture, management style and organization here?
10. What is your understanding of the average starting salary range for this type of position in the Bay Area?

Questions about the person’s PAST professional experience:
1. How did you get into this field? What path led you to this position?
2. How did you organize your job search?
3. What was your interview process/job talk like?
4. What has been particularly rewarding about the path you have taken? What would you do differently?
5. When you think about your first year in this position, what actions/activities were key to your success (e.g. setting expectations, work/life balance, etc.)?
6. What type of orientation and/or training did you receive when you first began working here? Is there anything you wish had been included in that training?
7. What, if anything, did you negotiate in your job offer? What do you wish you had negotiated?
8. Can you talk about the norms involved in working at a research-focused institution and how they differ from a teaching-focused institution in terms of things like hours, responsibilities, and expectations; typical compensation packages, including vacation, and salary range; work-life balance, etc.?

Questions about the person’s professional FUTURE:
1. What are some career paths that may open up for someone in your position 5 or 10 years down the road?
2. What would be an interesting next step in your career?
3. Can you think of former colleagues who have moved on from positions like yours? Where did they end up?

To seek general advice, you might ask:
1. What advice would you give someone in my position who wants to be successful in the field?
2. What would you advise new grads/students/postdocs to look for in terms of orientation, support, and workload?
3. Looking back on your own interview, what questions do you suggest candidates ask before taking a position?
4. I have a copy of my resume/CV. Would you be willing to review it and let me know your thoughts?
Networking for Career Success: Guidelines for Contacting Alumni

5. From the research and the informational interviews I’ve done so far, I’ve developed a list of organizations in the field that I am interested in. Can you tell me anything about these organizations? Are there organizations I’ve left off that I should look at more closely?

6. Can you recommend anyone else for me to talk to, either with a background or interest similar to mine (in terms of research interest, work sector, etc.), or who works at one of the organizations I mentioned?

Now that I have decided the best format, how do I arrange a meeting with the alumni?

Tips on arranging and conducting a telephone or in-person meeting:
- Ask the alum if they prefer to meet in person, talk on the phone, or Skype and when would be a convenient time to meet. If meeting in person or Skyping, dress professionally
- Send an email confirming your meeting 2-3 days in advance
- Arrive on time and keep the meeting within the time originally agreed upon (i.e. 30 minutes) unless the alum offers to extend the meeting time
- If appropriate ask the alum if s/he would be willing to look at your document and provide feedback
- Prepare a list of questions to ask the alum during the interview. The questions should be based on your research, your career interests and the alum’s background
- If you wish to take notes, be sure to ask permission to do so first
- Express your gratitude and appreciation for both the information and the time given
- Determine any follow-up actions and be sure to follow-up on any advice that was given (i.e. send a resume for his/her review, follow-up on suggested reading material, initiate contacts, etc.)
- Ask for a business card and if it is possible for you to contact them again in the future should you have a question
- Send a thank you note within 24-48 hours
- Periodically stay in touch with your contact(s) to let him/her know how you are progressing. Let the alum know that you followed his/her suggestions and the results

What if I don't receive a response from alumni I have contacted?
Although alumni listed in the CAN database have volunteered to be a career resource, you may have to ascertain their current willingness and availability to assist you. Their job status may have changed or the demands of their position may prevent a timely response. If you do not connect with the alum after a reasonable period of time (a week), try again via the same or an alternate contact method. After attempting to contact the alum twice, we suggest you pursue other contacts to gather the information or advice you are seeking. If you encounter alumni who no longer wish to serve as a resource or who may need to be reminded about the parameters of the program, please let your counselor know.

What do I do after my job shadowing experience or informational interview?

Send a thank you note.
Always send an email thank you note after receiving assistance from an alum.

Tips on what to include in your note:
- Thank the alum for the time s/he spent with you and for specific advice or information provided
- Let the alum know how the discussion has been helpful to you (e.g., by increasing your understanding of a particular role/employer, reinforcing your interest in the field, etc.)
Networking for Career Success: Guidelines for Contacting Alumni

- Let the alum know that you plan to follow-up on his/her suggestions
- For a sample thank you note sent after an informational interview, visit (page 2): http://images.sciencecareers.org/img/myIDP/myidp-infointerview-correspondence.pdf

Next Steps
If you would like to connect with alumni in the network, please schedule a 30-minute appointment with a counselor by contacting OCPD between the hours of 9 a.m. and 5 p.m., Monday through Friday, at 415-476-4986. We would love to hear from you!