

This Grab and Go Practice is part of a series helping students, parents, teachers, and job developers create customized employment opportunities for students with disabilities.

INTRODUCTION

One of the best ways to begin to understand an employer's staffing needs is to conduct an informational interview with that person. This involves first observing a business in action and then following up by asking the employer key questions. Informational interviewing can lead to a greater understanding of the business and its operations.

Employers are often quite willing to meet when there is a sincere desire to learn about their business. The purpose of the informational interview is not to ask if they are currently hiring, but rather to learn about the company's operations in detail to determine if it could be a good job fit for a transition-aged student. You should come to the meeting armed with a few straightforward questions and any research you have done ahead of time to learn about the business.

INFORMATIONAL INTERVIEWS

Once you have developed a list of at least 5 employers based on what may be a good fit for a student job seeker, it is time to prioritize and investigate the best option for the student, focusing on the company's workforce needs. This information can then be used to create a customized job proposal that highlights the student's strengths, skills, and interests, and how a new position could meet the needs of both the employer and the student.

Informational interviews with local employers are a great way to:

- Make a great first impression with employers
- Get your foot in the door
- Build a job development network
- Discover new kinds of jobs
- Introduce yourself and your services to businesses (Niemic, 2014)

Here are 4 steps to complete an initial employer informational interview and observational tour:

STEP 1: Select an Employer to Learn More About

Make a decision with a student on which of the 5 "good fit" employers to interview. Choose the employer based on the interest expressed by the student, as well as the likelihood of their being able to get to and from the job.



STEP 2: Set a Date

Schedule a time to meet with a key decision-maker in the company who can give you an hour to tour the business and answer your questions.

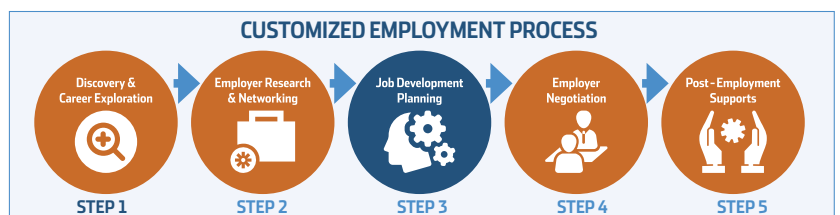


Develop a good opening pitch that will get your foot in the door to make the appointment. For example, you might say, "I'd like to find out more about your business, so I can better understand the human resource needs in your industry," or "I'm really interested in this job field. Is it possible for me to meet briefly and get more information?"

After this initial interview and observational tour, you can follow up with the employer to discuss possible student matches. This is discussed in more detail in Step 5: Follow up.

STEP 3: Prepare

Plan ahead for what you want to observe at the job site as well as general questions you want to ask. Research the company using the strategies outlined in the Grab and Go brief "Customized Employment: Employer Research." This background knowledge will help you to build a trusting relationship with the potential employer.



Step 4: Conduct the informational interview.



At the start of your time at the business, build rapport through small talk and share what you know or have learned about the employer. Share information about your transition program and the different jobs that your students have participated in. When talking about disability, focus on the abilities, skills, and interests of your students. Avoid using human service or education jargon. Remember, when you meet a business person for the first time, they want to know who you are and what you can do for them.

This first meeting is to learn specifically about the business and its operations. Your main goals for the interview and tour are to:

1. clarify operational procedures,
2. identify tasks that a student could do, and
3. pinpoint opportunities where customizing a job position would benefit the employer.

Focus on questions that will get you the following information:

- the variety of tasks performed by the business
- tasks that need doing that take employees away from their more critical job duties
- tasks that could be done more efficiently or more often
- busy times of the day/week/year when the employer could use extra help
- jobs that are not getting done because no one has the time
- jobs that have the greatest turnover
- qualities the company looks for in an employee

(National Center on Workforce and Disability, 2006)

On the tour, observe the worksite culture. For example, is it friendly, formal, informal, busy, loud, or quiet? This is important so you can match a student's personality with the right work environment. For instance, if a student is sociable and chatty, it would not be a good job match to have the student be in a work environment where that behavior is frowned upon.

After the interview, ask yourself the following questions:

- Is this business a good match for a specific student?
- What skills does that student have that could fit this employer's needs?
- What specific tasks can that student do or learn to do that will benefit the business?

Keep in mind that the only reason a business hires anyone is to improve their bottom line. Convey to the employer that you're here to help them make a smart business decision that will improve their bottom line.

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Step 5: Follow up



Option 1: If you have a student who would be a good fit, send a thank you note for the opportunity to visit the company. Review the needs of the company that you observed and/or discussed in the interview. Then ask for an additional meeting to explain your ideas on how you could partner with the business to meet those needs. Include a short introduction to the student you have in mind with some initial tasks that you think could help fill the needs of the company.

Option 2: If the business is not a good fit for the students you support, still send a thank you note. Review their employment needs and make it clear that you will be on the lookout for a great employee in the future. Discuss other ways to partner (e.g., mock interviews, job try-outs, student informational interviews, résumé reviews, speaking at a job club, etc.). Invite your contact at the business to join a business council/transition team for increasing work opportunities for young people. Explain that you will maintain regular contact.

If the business was not a good fit, you and your student should decide which employer to focus on for your next informational interview.

CONCLUSION

Employer informational interviews and observational tours are an excellent way to get the information you need to develop a successful job proposal that will meet the needs of both the employer and a student. The next step is to put together a job proposal. Check out *Grab and Go Practices: Job Development Planning* for more on that!

REFERENCES

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TRANSITION PROJECT



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