Cold E-mails and Hot Coffee: Get High-Yield Career Information and Build Your Network from Zero

A 10 hours in one month plan for launching your proactive career development

Written for Life Sciences PhDs

by Albert Chen (acecareers.umich@gmail.com)
Cellular and Molecular Biology Graduate Program
University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI
Cold E-mails and Hot Coffee: Get High-Yield Career Information and Build Your Network from Zero

Developed by Albert Chen (acecareers.umich@gmail.com) at the University of Michigan, with support from Paula Wishart, Head of Professional Development at Rackham Graduate School. Written for use by PhD students and post-doctoral fellows in the life sciences participating in the Active Career Exploration (ACE) Workshop.

This document may be freely copied and expanded upon, assuming Albert Chen is cited.

This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 3.0 Unported License. To view a copy of this license, visit http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/

Your assignment

Total Time: 10 hours over the course of 1 month

Goal: Meet and interview people to learn about a career of interest, decide if you want to pursue it, and formulate a plan to prepare for it.

1) Select a career (2 hours) via myIDP and research it.

2) Cold e-mails (3 hours): E-mail 10 people to learn more about the career. At least 5 should be people you do not already know.

3) Informational interview (3 hours): Meet in person with at least one person you e-mailed. If that’s not possible, conduct a phone interview.

4) Decide next steps (2 hours): Share what you’ve learned with others, then decide if you want to research a different career or start preparing for this one.

Q: Why is contacting and meeting people the most important part of learning about a career? Why can’t I just read about careers and find jobs online?

- The “practical” reason: 80% of jobs go to people that employers already know personally or through a 3rd party. This is the “hidden job market.” Employers will look to people they know first, and to an online job applicant last. Meeting people is how you discover these opportunities.

- The deeper reason: The people you will meet already have the experience to tell you what skills and expertise you need to develop and whether or not this career is a good fit for you. But they need to get to know you first, and meeting face-to-face allows you to build that relationship. You get honest answers that you can’t find online. Once you know what skills are valuable, you can start building those skills, a process that can take a lot of time. Therefore, you should start meeting people as early as possible in your graduate training.
Keep these principles in mind:

- **People are willing to help.** They are flattered to talk about themselves. Don’t be intimidated- people are really impressed when “lowly” students take the initiative. They will think highly of you because you contacted them.
- **But... people are busy!** You must minimize the amount of work they need to do. Also, make sure they feel like they are truly helping you, so it is worth their time.
- **Job opportunities may arise from these connections, but infrequently.** Do not bring a resume and do not ask for a job. You need to meet many people and develop deep relationships with a few of them, while also developing your skills.
- **Cold e-mailing and informational interviews are skills.** Being confident in reaching out is a skill. That means it will be hard at first, but if you work on things you are bad at, you will improve. Build these skills incrementally, picking just 1-2 techniques at a time to implement. **Think of this as an investment in yourself.**

Use this mindset throughout this process:

Do not think “What can I get from this person?” Instead, think “What can I offer this person? What can I offer the world?” It comes off as icky if you just want something from them. But remember: people want to help students, and you are offering them that opportunity. So help them help you, and be as clear as possible as to why you are talking to them. People love talking about themselves, so you can offer listening. If they care about an issue deeply, talk to them about that. If they give you specific advice (e.g. read a book), then follow that advice and then tell them if it was useful or not. They are much more likely to meet with you and introduce you to others if they sense that you bring value to the table, and if you are willing to develop a true relationship with them. If you don’t know what value you can offer, think carefully about your own skill set and what skills you can build to offer more to the world.

**Note on time limits:** It is critical to limit the time you spend on each step of this plan. You may not feel “ready” to move on to the next step because you are unclear on your career choices, or it may seem intimidating. But trust that leaping into the next step will solve whatever problem you were facing because it will give you new information and experiences you can work with.

If you feel really stuck, e.g. you keep sending e-mails but people ignore you, then you should ask someone else for feedback. Have a peer evaluate your efforts- you are likely making a critical mistake, e.g. your e-mail is too long or full of unnecessary details. If you have trouble fitting this plan into a busy schedule, see the Appendix.

Finally, expect this to be hard. Worthwhile skills are often difficult to build. If networking is outside of your comfort zone, that’s perfect. If you already network regularly, push yourself harder (e.g. learn to read body language, or challenge yourself to connect with someone famous).
1. Initial Preparation: Select a Career

Select a career that resonates with you and read up on it.

Time Limit: 2 hours

Important warning: do not get stuck on this. When you start out, you usually don’t have enough information to rule in or rule out any careers. Just pick what tentatively seems best and move on. Investigate another career later if your first choice isn’t for you.

Goal: Reflect on career traits most important to you and select a career to investigate. Personalized career exploration starts from your own interests, skills, and values. What do you want to get out of a career, and what can you offer the world?

| A) 2 minutes: Really quick self-assessment on dougsguides. Just a warm-up. | 
| http://www.dougsguides.com/node/345/ |
| B) 20 minutes: Complete the in-depth Assessment section on myIDP, look at the Consider Career Fit section, and choose 1-2 careers for further investigation. | 
| http://myidp.sciencecareers.org/ |
| C) 45 minutes: Read about your chosen career(s) in the section Read About Careers -> Resources. Search the web for other resources. | 
| Tip: SKIM many sources. You don’t have the real-world experience yet to know what is useful information, so don’t read too much. Instead, select a few topics that keep coming up over and over again. Then, save those as questions for the people you contact for cold e-mails and informational interviews. |
| D) 30 minutes: Compile a list of people in that career to contact. Leverage every possible avenue: LinkedIn, ask people you know to connect you, Google “X City Y Career”, professional societies, people visiting your university, alumni lists, companies nearby, etc. Hint: the most effective method is to e-mail people just to ask who else you can e-mail. Be proactive in finding contact information. |

Highly recommended: Cal Newport’s 18-minute talk on how people find jobs they love (hint: it’s not about following their passion). https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-V'Uv1ZCkYw. Full version: https://vimeo.com/48041227

This first exercise is about introspection, but then you must validate that introspection by engaging with the real world. For example, on the dougsguides quiz, you might answer, “I like work schedules that... are totally up to me.” It sure sounds good, but have you actually tried a job like that? Or at least talked to someone with a job like that?

In other words, hypothesize what you want in a career and how to get it. The next step is to test that hypothesis.
2. Outreach: Send Cold E-mails

Time Limit: 3 hours

Goal: Develop the skill of reaching out via cold e-mails. This exercise will start you on building your network in a field from zero. Be proactive and build your own connections.

Requirement: Send at least 10 cold e-mails to practice.

How to do this

Step 1: Pick a person and commit to e-mailing them within 15 minutes. Don’t worry about having a perfect reason for e-mailing them.

Step 2: Perform quick research on the person. Google, LinkedIn, personal websites, ask a friend, etc. Note things the person likely cares about, and potential connections you can leverage. Decide what productive exchange might occur and make that the goal of your e-mail. It can range from “I just wanted to say I admire your work” to “I’d like to meet with you for 30 minutes to learn about your career.”

Step 3: Just write and send the e-mail already. DO NOT WAIT.

Critical Elements of Cold E-mails

Important warning: Do not worry about crafting a “perfect” e-mail and do not get bogged down in all the details below. If you worry, you will simply talk yourself out of sending the e-mail. Instead, just pick 1-3 elements to incorporate into your e-mail, and just send it. You will be pleasantly surprised by your success rate. Writing good e-mails is a skill that needs to be built up systematically.

• 1 minute-rule: It should take them less than 1 minute to read, think about, and respond to your initial e-mail. Your initial e-mail should less than 8 sentences long. You need to leave out some details, even ones they will eventually need. Do not delve into your background. You can expand in future e-mails.

• First paragraph: Why you are contacting them should be apparent from the first two sentences. If necessary, the first sentence can be a basic introduction to who you are.

• Additional details: Remember you should have already stated or strongly implied the reason for the e-mail in first two sentences!! Never assume the person will read these additional details. Keep it to less than 8 sentences total.

• Clear finisher: Explicitly state what the person should respond with, if anything. If no response is needed, say that.

• Personalize it: Think carefully about what you know about the person. What do they care deeply about? Who do you know in common? Why contact this person rather than anyone else with this career? Put these personalized hints front and center- in the subject line, in the first or last sentence of the e-mail, etc. Note that personalization is particularly important if the person already receives numerous e-mails from students.

• Subject line: Clear and concise
Optional: Include attention-grabbers. For example, if you were referred by someone else, mention that person’s name in the subject

- Make it easily searchable: Include some idea or name that is memorable and easily recognizable.

- **Convenience**: Be super-specific and give them up-front choices. If setting up a coffee date, list 2-3 concrete dates, times, and places. Exception: if someone is coming to campus to visit, they already have a set itinerary, so ask them when they have time. **Always make it as easy as possible for them to respond to you.**

### 3. The Informational Interview

**Time Limit: 3 hours**

**Goal:** Get actionable information to move your career forward, but precisely what this entails is entirely up to you. You could aim to learn about this person’s career path, identify a skill to build, get clarification on something you read about the job, discover internship opportunities, find a mentor or role model, etc. Many possibilities.

**Requirement:** Commit to an informational interview. These take more time than a cold e-mail, so make sure you do all the necessary preparation to get the most out of it. There’s no single “right way” to conduct an informational interview. **Don’t worry about doing everything that’s listed below- just pick some and try them out properly.**

**Before the interview**

- **Write down your goal for the interview.** See above- be as specific as possible.
- **Do your homework.** Research the person and career.
- **Write down questions** for the interviewee. Think back to your 2 hours of career research. This is your career, so you really should think up your own questions relevant to yourself and your interests. As a last resort, Google “informational interview questions” or ask your peers.
- **Be ready to introduce yourself.** Prepare a 30-60 second description of the most important elements of your background and what you are working on right now. Be prepared to elaborate if they ask. Practice this introduction with strangers whenever you can.

**Beginning of the interview**

- **Introduce yourself:** Don’t force this in or make it overly formal- just give the introduction whenever it feels natural.
- **Purpose:** Briefly communicate to them what you hope to get out of the interview. Be as specific as possible with career goals. If your exploration is very open-ended, admit that. Do not ask for a job and do not bring your resume.
- **Time:** Be clear on how long you’d like to talk for, and ask how much time they can spare. Note: their time limits may have changed since you e-mailed them.
Getting actionable information from the interview

- **Focus on stories, not advice.** Stories are information-rich - you can extract your own lessons from their stories. The most important advice may be so obvious to them that they don’t bother stating it - this is “implicit wisdom.” Many people have not thoroughly analyzed their own careers, so explicit advice may not be helpful. Also, people often use advice-giving as an opportunity to stand on a political soapbox.

- **Identify the “accomplishment ladder.”** Start with where they are now, and figure out what enabled them to get there. Work backwards until you get to where you are now in your own career or training.

- **Pay attention to vocabulary.** Understand how they talk about their work. What types of issues or accomplishments do they focus on? If they talk about something a lot, it’s probably important. You can use that same vocabulary when talking to someone else in that career. Also, if you understand career-specific vocabulary, you will be better qualified for the job.

- **Ask questions that are relevant to you and your interests.** Don’t just ask every question you can think of. Think back to myIDP and doughsguides.

- **Pay attention to the two types of actionable information**
  - 1. **Career capital:** what is necessary to succeed in this career? What is valued?
    - **Skills:** what skills are valuable in this field that I can build?
    - **Knowledge:** What should I read on a regular basis? Courses I should take? Books I should read? Topics I should learn about?
    - **Relationships:** Who else can I talk to? Is this person willing to be a mentor? What professional societies should I join? What networking events should I attend? Who are the best connected people in this field? Who has input on whether or not I get hired?
    - **Experience:** What opportunities are there to build experience? Fellowships/internships? Self-driven projects? How can I demonstrate that I can do the job?
  - 2. **Career traits:** What makes this career rewarding? Why might someone dislike it?

- **Details matter:** Every company or organization is different. Do colleagues hang out with each other at this company? Do I have to move to another city to pursue this career? What skills does this particular company want?
Throughout the interview

• **Don’t be afraid to show your ignorance.** People use career-specific jargon and look at things from the perspective of many years of career experience. It’s difficult for them to step into your graduate student shoes—so help them do it. It may be embarrassing, but it’s part of the process.

• **Be conversational.** Don’t be too formal. Summarize what they say to indicate you understand what they are saying, and give them a chance to correct you. Don’t worry about transitions! Forcing transitions just makes conversation stiff.

• **Eye contact**, slight head tilt, slight body angle = accommodating body language.

• **Notes or no notes?** Taking notes is often disruptive. If you want, take very select notes. Regardless, write down information immediately afterwards.

After the interview

• **Immediately write down key points**, e.g. opportunities you may want to take advantage of, things you didn’t previously know about the career, things you should read, skills that important to build, more people you can contact, etc.

• **Write down any difficulties** you had during the conversation. Always aim to become a better conversationalist.

• **Note your emotional reaction to the conversation.** Did you and the interviewee get along? Find out if the interviewee is representative of that career. If so, that can help you figure out how to prepare for this career, and whether the career is right for you. Getting along with colleagues is critical for career satisfaction.

• **Think about why this person achieved success** and how you personally might emulate elements of their career path.

• **Follow-up:** A quick thank-you e-mail is the bare minimum. Often times the person can point you to other people who can help you or opportunities you can pursue. If the person seems open to mentoring you, start building up the relationship!
  o Highly recommended: ask for 2 or 3 more people to contact. Be clear about what types of people you’d like to be put in contact with and why.
  o If appropriate: send them a CV and ask them to let you know if they hear about an internship or job that’s a good fit.
4. Decide Your Next Steps

Time Limit: 2 hours

1. **Tell others about what you learned.** Explaining it to someone else is the best way to consolidate the information in your mind.

2. **Decide** whether to start preparing for the career, or pick another career to investigate. If you aren’t sure, read the Principles of a Career Plan below.

3. **Develop an achievable 6-9 month plan to implement what you've learned.** Your next steps should include building **career capital** (e.g. skills, expertise, experience and/or connections), perhaps involving a small project, doing daily reading, networking on LinkedIn, or joining a group that will facilitate your career development. If you are more advanced and already have many skills relevant to your career, your plan might involve an internship or job application.

4. **Principles of a Career Plan**
   a. **Do not wait for certainty.** Don’t wait until you are certain this career is for you. Don’t wait until you are certain a skill is useful to start building the skill. Don’t wait until you think you have more time- you will never have more time.
   b. **The less sure you are, the more you should focus on Translatable Skills.** Many skills are useful for many different careers. For example, communication and writing skills are universal. Furthermore, many skills will be useful for your current job- select these if possible.
   c. **Take action with Little Bets.** You can’t be sure if a skill or project will be useful until you have first-hand experience with it. Little Bets are projects that can be completed in less than a month to “try it out,” but still require you to master a new skill or produce something concrete. Then assess its usefulness and decide if it’s worth seriously developing.
   d. **Pick a skill or project, spend 6-9 months working your butt off, and then have something to show for it.**

5. **After you implement your plan** and have made concrete progress, you can repeat the entire process to update your plans for a more experienced you.
Appendix 1: Productivity techniques: stick with goals, manage your time and to-do list, stay motivated, and fit career development into a busy schedule.

- If you have trouble with procrastination or focus, use the Pomodoro technique: [http://lifehacker.com/productivity-101-a-primer-to-the-pomodoro-technique-1598992730](http://lifehacker.com/productivity-101-a-primer-to-the-pomodoro-technique-1598992730)
- If you work a lot but feel like not much gets done, apply the Pareto Principle: [http://markmanson.net/80-20-your-life?fb_ref=Default](http://markmanson.net/80-20-your-life?fb_ref=Default)
- If you have trouble creating lasting changes to your habits: [http://tinybuddha.com/blog/simple-mini-habits-can-change-life/](http://tinybuddha.com/blog/simple-mini-habits-can-change-life/)
- If you feel constantly overwhelmed by what you have to do, use Weekly/Daily goals and a time log: [http://www.scotthyoungham.blog/2012/08/26/work-less-to-get-more-done/](http://www.scotthyoungham.blog/2012/08/26/work-less-to-get-more-done/)
- For numerous techniques to prioritize important tasks and get things done, read Manage Your Day-to-Day by 99U: [http://www.amazon.com/dp/1477800670](http://www.amazon.com/dp/1477800670)

Appendix 2: Recommended career books for scientists and other knowledge workers. Background reading is most helpful when you are already engaging in career exploration. Insights from these books inspired much of the Cold E-mails and Hot Coffee plan.