

Chapter 6

Experts and Insiders

Often the best research resource is a person, rather than a web site, database, or book. This section includes basic information on finding experts and obtaining information via phone calls.



Research Skills Series

\$6.00 Offline Resources: People

Not all information is online, and much of it is not recorded anywhere but in the minds of experienced and knowledgeable people. Experts and insiders can be very helpful resources.

Your choice of phone or email may depend on how the source wishes to communicate. Email is convenient for people in other time zones, but can be limiting when you need to have an interactive conversation. Your interviews may also involve in-person meetings.

\$6.01 When to Use People as an Information Source

- ✓ For information that has not been published online or in print.
- ✓ For opinions and insight into past, present, and future developments.
- ✓ For evaluative judgments about the information you have.
- ✓ For referrals to additional or better information sources.
- ✓ For a better understanding of how information and events are viewed by others.

\$6.02 Preparing to Make an Information-Gathering Phone Call

- ✓ Make sure the answer is not readily available elsewhere.
- ✓ Do your homework. Try to get up to conversational level on a topic if you are calling an expert.
- ✓ Get background information on the person or organization you are calling to: a) confirm that this is an appropriate source and b) understand your source's role.
- ✓ Write down the questions you have or the information you need. Think about the best order in which to bring them up. While your conversation may not be a straight reading of questions, a list helps to ensure that you don't forget anything.

\$6.03 Making the Call

- ✓ Introduce yourself by name and affiliation.
- ✓ Explain, concisely, why you are calling and how the information will be used ("I am writing a report for our membership and your work in this area is particularly important to us."). Let them know



if you would like to quote them as a source, and get their permission to use their name, job title, and organization name in your research report.

- ✓ Listen to the response to be sure you have the proper person and that this is a good time to call.
- ✓ Ask your question, and then listen. Questions may be narrow (“Is this the correct title of the report?”) or open-ended (“What do you think could happen next?”).
- ✓ Don’t worry when the conversation veers slightly off-topic. You may hear about facts or issues you had overlooked. At the very least, you will get a better understanding of what matters to your source.
- ✓ Don’t hesitate to say that you are not sure you understand an issue. If necessary, restate what you think you understand and ask your contact if you have got it right.
- ✓ Wrap it up: Did you get all of the information you needed? Does the source have other sources to recommend? If necessary, can you make a follow-up call? What is the best time to call? Verify that you each have the other’s phone number.
- ✓ Thank your contact, even if he or she has not been able to be helpful. If the source is important, you may wish to send a thank-you email or that rare species, the paper thank-you letter.



§6.10 Washington Contacts: Phone and Email

§6.11 Congress

Congressional staff can be useful sources of information on current congressional activities when that information is not available online, in print, or from other sources. Staff may be able to help you with future scheduling information or with very specific information on a bill they are currently handling.

Unfortunately, congressional staff phone directories are not available for free online. The Government Printing Office sells printed House and Senate telephone directories; see <http://bookstore.gpo.gov>. The Clerk of the House web site (<http://clerk.house.gov>) has House member and committee telephone directories, with links to Senate directories. However, the directories at the Clerk’s site only provide the main office numbers; they do not list individual staff.