

A NEW APPROACH TO THANKSGIVING



What are you expecting your Thanksgiving break to be like? For many people home for the holiday, it will probably look like this: eating and drinking too much, sleeping too late, shopping until your head aches and, at some point over the weekend, grousing at family members. Isn't there a better way to use the time?

Even if this grim picture doesn't fit with your usual experience, let me propose something to those folks on a break from school -- or those just out of school or considering going back: The Thanksgiving break is the perfect time to be "harvesting" information about eventual graduate school and career choices.

Remember there are only two choices in today's wild career world: networking or not working. So, make a list of everyone with whom you could possibly come into contact this break, at a family gathering, at friends' houses, or out and about in the community. Then, write down the kinds of work they know about (by virtue of their doing it now or having done it in the past) and, if you know, the professional training they've had. If you're serious about this, you should be able to come up with a full page (shoot for 20 names to prime the pump) of interesting people.

The next step, then, is to ask yourself which ones might have some relevant knowledge about one or more of the directions you're considering for yourself. After that, rank them in order of which jobs or fields appeal to you most at the moment. Then call the top three and set up a schedule for having 15- to 30-minute conversations with each of them. If you can't get all of your top three, move on down your list. If you can complete four or five, that's even better. And the rest of the top 10 you can leave till winter break.

So then what? What could you possibly say to these people? The following six questions should be etched in your brain, so that you can go into "information interview" mode at any time of night or day, whenever you find yourself in close physical or electronic proximity to anyone doing interesting work. Here are the questions:

- (1) How did you get where you are? What made you choose this field? How has it worked out for you? What parts have you liked and disliked? (Note: It's essential to let your quarry talk about him/herself first. That puts them in a receptive mood. It also gives you a chance to listen carefully to ascertain the person's style and biases, which may or may not be similar to yours.)
- (2) What education and training are required to enter the field? And to advance in the field? Are there any schools or programs you'd particularly recommend?
- (3) What skills and interests are essential to enjoy this field/job and do well in it? What "style" of person seems to you to do best, and why?
- (4) What are the typical hours and salary for this kind of work? What is the "culture" of your workplace like?
- (5) What are the drawbacks to this field currently? How does the future look to you?
- (6) If you were starting out today, do you feel that this field would be a good choice? Why or why not?

That's all there is to it. Take along a notebook or portfolio for taking notes (you can have these questions taped inside) and keep a folder to collect all your priceless "harvested" information. And don't forget the thank-you note, even if your talk happened between the main course and the pumpkin pie at Thanksgiving dinner. You may also want to slide a crisp new resume into the envelope in selected cases as well. Keep the connection warm any way you can -- you never know when you're going to want to contact that person again.

So have a great holiday, and perhaps you can bring back some career-inspiring information -- instead of the traditional few extra pounds!