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## The International Journal of Management Education

journal homepage: [www.elsevier.com/locate/ijme](http://www.elsevier.com/locate/ijme)

## Research Notes

## Using the informational interview to get an insight into the profession of a manager



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## ARTICLE INFO

## Article history:

Received 2 September 2016

Received in revised form 2 February 2017

Accepted 2 February 2017

## Keywords:

Exploratory meeting

Networking interview

Undergraduate students

Teaching method

## ABSTRACT

An informational interview, also known as the exploratory meeting or networking interview, “is a chance to pick someone’s brain about a profession, business, or industry” (Decarie, 2010, p. 306). The purpose of the study was to explore whether, when modified, this assignment could benefit second-year management education students in understanding of the profession of a manager. This assignment provides students an opportunity to interact with a professional in a business setting on a variety of topics that help students understand what it is like to work in this industry, type of company, or a position. While informational interviews have been used in communication courses in management education programs, nothing is known about the use or usefulness of this assignment in other management courses. One hundred eleven students in a human resource management course were asked to complete a modified version of the informational interview assignment. Data were collected using a survey from 89 students. The results show that overall students learned more about the profession of a manager and got an insight into careers in the chosen industries and companies. Implications for teaching are provided along with the discussion of each main result.

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## 1. Introduction

Introductory management courses are foundation stones in undergraduate business curriculum (Thompson, Purdy, & Fandt, 1997). They aim at providing basic knowledge of the field while expertise in different areas of management is further developed in advanced management courses (Swenson, 2001). These courses serve to “heighten awareness of the complexity of what occurs when humans are engaged in the accomplishment of tasks in an organization” (Krell & Dobson, 1999, p. 44). These courses also communicate to students the idea that management as a field of practice is informed by theory (Wright & Gilmore, 2012). In other words, these courses include threshold concepts, which might be hard for students to grasp at first, but which are essential for their successful completion of other courses in the program.

One of the challenges that instructors in these introductory courses face is that traditional business and management education students usually have very little exposure to how organizations work. These students have little work experience (Finan, 2004) and struggle to connect theory with their own experiences within organizations (Miller, 1991). The more experience students have, the easier it becomes to understand course material, grasp concepts and theories, make connections among them, and make decisions. Not surprisingly, non-traditional students who come to get their business degrees

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after spending years working “seem to have almost an intuitive understanding of how business organizations work, who the ‘players’ are, and how individuals interact in business organizations” (Roth, 2001, p. 22).

“Management certainly applies science: managers have to use all the knowledge they can get, from the sciences and elsewhere. But management is more art, based on ‘insight’, ‘vision’, ‘intuition’” (Mintzberg, 2004, p. 10). Not surprisingly, management positions are difficult to fill (Society for Human Resource Management [SHRM], 2016). Over 60% of HR managers experience difficulties in hiring candidates for full-time managerial positions in general (SHRM, 2016), and 74% of HR managers experience difficulties in hiring recent graduates for these positions (SHRM, 2015a). Once hired as low-level or front-line managers, recent graduates work on the frontline of the organization “where the organization interacts with its customers and suppliers, and confronts the realities and challenges of competition” (Fleming, 2008, p. 128). They become responsible for the performance of a team (Austin, Regan, Gothard, & Carnochan, 2013; Hill, 1992), enacting organizational policies, providing organizational leadership for their teams, and coaching each individual team member (Kilroy & Dundon, 2015).

To enhance student learning, instructors have to utilize different techniques “that actively engage students in learning to think and *do*” in their courses (Hallinger & Bridges, 2007, p. 6). These techniques have to help students contextualize the knowledge they learn in the classroom, deepen and expand their prior knowledge, connect their prior experiences with the course concepts and theories, and prepare students to solve real-live problems on the job in the future (Finan, 2004). A number of teaching and/or curriculum techniques have been suggested in the recent past, including commercial movies (Roth, 2001), student-generated thought-provoking questions (Chaves, 2016), magic (Krell & Dobson, 1999), the flipped classroom model (Albert & Beatty, 2014), service-learning projects (Flannery & Pragman, 2010), concrescent conversations (Akan, 2005), and collage construction (Colakoglu & Littlefield, 2011), among others.

As an instructor of a human resource management course taught to a second-year traditional full-time undergraduate students in a management program, I have to teach the basic concepts of and approaches to people management to students who have little to no experience with organizations, work teams, managers, strategies, and complexities of the workplace. Most students have never worked, went through a selection process, reported to a manager, got evaluated, paid, terminated, or even written a resume. They take their first two-week internship required by the program after the completion of the course. To help students get a snapshot at a profession of a manager and an insight on the art of management (Mintzberg, 2004) from a manager, I decided to include an informational interview assignment. The informational interview, also known as the exploratory meeting or networking interview, “is a chance to pick someone’s brain about a profession, business, or industry” (Decarie, 2010, p. 306). This assignment provides students with an opportunity to interact with a professional in a business setting on a variety of topics that help students understand what it is like to work in this industry, type of company, or a position. Informational interviews were coined and popularized by Richard Bolles (1972) and have become a popular career development tool in the past 40 years. As a career development tool, informational interviews are also used by human resource development professionals to assist employees with the exploration of their possible career tracks in the organization (e.g., Author, 2011). In educational settings, informational interviews have been used by career counselors (Mitchell, Levin, & Krumboltz, 1999). For example, informational interviews are used in a foster care system to help teens plan their educational and professional lives and, therefore, become ready to leave the system and successfully integrate into the society (Krebs & Pitcoff, 2004). In higher education, informational interviews are discussed primarily in the context of general communication and business communication classes, along with writing resumes and cover letters, networking, and mock interviews (e.g., Addams & Allred, 2015; Croft, 1995; Decarie, 2010; Mulvaney, 2003). While informational interviews have been used in communication courses in management education programs, nothing is known about the use or usefulness of this assignment in other management courses. If this assignment is so successful in business communication courses, should other instructors try to incorporate it in their courses? The purpose of the study was to explore whether, when modified, this assignment could benefit second-year management education students in understanding of the profession of a manager.

## 2. Informational interviews

### 2.1. The purpose and the summary

All interviews aim at gathering information. The type of information gathered depends on the type of interview chosen. Informational interview is a tool to find out more about a career in a company or an industry or in a position from somebody who has established themselves there (Scott, 2015). “Informational interviews are, very simply, opportunities for students to have conversations with people who can serve as models for the students’ futures, in this case business professionals” (Decarie, 2010, p. 306). During the 20–30-min interview, the student can ask a wide range of questions related to skills and demands of the chosen career field as well as duties and responsibilities (Croft, 1995). Being open-ended, informational interviews “provide a framework within which respondents can express *their own* understandings in their own terms” (Patton, 2002, p. 348). Therefore, students can receive first-hand information about the company, industry, or profession from experienced professionals as well as their perspectives on issues that arise in their professional practice. Bolles (2016) distinguishes three types of interviews in the context of a career exploration: practice, informational, and job interviews. During a practice interview, one learns to interview people by simply interviewing them about anything. Informational interview “involves interviewing workers who are doing work a person thinks they might be interested in doing, in order to discover if they are on the right tracks” (Bolles, 2016, p. 17). Informational interview should not be confused with a job interview. “The

purpose of a job interview is to get a job, whereas the purpose of an informational interview is to get information” (Mikelat, 2008, p. 2). A job interview is done by a potential employer to find out whether the job candidate matches expectations of the employer (Bolles, 2016).

As an assignment, the informational interview is usually divided into three steps. First, in the pre-interview step students receive instruction about the assignment (i.e., purpose, process, evaluation, and deadlines). Students need to identify an industry, profession, or organization where they would like to work in the future. Sometimes for this assignment students have to pick one out of several they are considering. Students can also consult career counselors to discuss possible career paths for them and take a career guidance test (Crosby, 2002). At this step, instructors also discuss how to find, contact, and interact with an interviewee and how to dress and behave during the interview. Students in groups, individually, or as a class create interview questions. During the interview itself, students interact with the interviewee, preferably in-person, at the interviewee's workplace and during the interviewee's work hours (Mulvaney, 2003), which would provide students more authentic experience with the person and the organization. Informational interviews become more useful when used in an area that hosts a variety of organizations to meet students' diverse interests (Croft, 1995). At the same time, interviews could be conducted using online tools, like Skype, if the management education program is located in a remote area or if the expert to be interviewed is located in a distant city or country. Students could be asked to conduct one or several interviews with the same or different people. Interviews with the same person are done over long periods of time to obtain further information and receive an explanation, a clarification, and support as the student explores a possible career by other means (Krebs & Pitcoff, 2004). Interviews with several people simply provide the student more information around the same issues (Croft, 1995). Students are asked to document their conversation in some way (e.g., taking notes or audiotaping). Students could be given additional instructions based on the purpose of the assignment. For example, students could be asked to monitor the interviewee's non-verbal communication clues if the assignment is a part of a communications class (Mulvaney, 2003). In the last, reporting, step of the assignment, students are asked to present in an oral or written, or both, forms the results of their interview. When doing short speeches in front of the class, students practice their oral communication skills. Such form of reporting also enables all students in the class to hear about many career options (Mulvaney, 2003). When doing written reports, students practice their writing and editing skills and serve as peer-reviewers. They could also report in some genre of written communication, such as an executive summary (Mulvaney, 2003). Depending on the goals of the class and of the assignment, instructors could modify reporting forms to benefit student learning.

Ultimately, the students either confirm their desire to pursue a career in a certain industry, profession, or organization or “discover their dream job isn't so dreamy after all” (Crosby, 2002, p. 32). Regardless of the outcome, students should try other tools to explore their career options.

## 2.2. *The advantages*

The primary outcome of this assignment is that students become more aware of their career options. The assignment also helps decrease certain anxiety young people have about starting a career or getting access to an organization (Crosby, 2002) and increase their self-confidence as young professionals (Booth, 1994; Sheppard, 1989). However, informational interviews have other advantages, which could benefit students in the introductory management courses. Informational interviews create opportunities for “planned happenstance” (Mitchell et al., 1999, p. 116) or other events that could impact student careers. The assignment gives students opportunities be proactive and take charge of circumstances to be able to “generate and be receptive of chance opportunities” (p. 117). For example, while waiting for the interviewee, students might have a chance to talk to other employees and read some company pamphlets or informational boards. Interviewees might be willing to answer additional questions or even show around the building. Follow-up communication could help establish relationship with the interviewee and might lead to an internship in that company or create a source for data collection for a term paper or a thesis.

Informational interviews help students develop their interpersonal, relationship-building, or soft skills, which have been identified among top three skills college graduates lack but should have to be successful in the today's workplace (Mitchell, Skinner, & White, 2010; SHRM, 2015b). These soft skills include “confidence, adaptability, the ability to set and keep deadlines, the ability to manage risk, and so on” (Decarie, 2010, p. 306). Because they require preparation and structure, informational interviews give students opportunities to interact with professionals as professionals, with adults as adults (Decarie, 2010). Informational interviews are rather short, so students have to be prepared and use the time wisely to extract as much useful information by the interview and observation as possible. This is particularly useful for young adults during their first and second year of undergraduate education because they can meet and interact with professionals who can serve as role models for the students.

Informational interviews help students be self-directed and depend less on the program and the professor in terms of the knowledge received. Dyllick (2010) argues that management education programs too often limit students' opportunities to identify “developmental areas” (p. xi) and engage in activities that help them achieve their goals. However, this assignment enables students identify knowledge, skills, and experiences they should acquire to land a job of their dream or progress in

their careers. Informational interviews have been reported to help students improve their writing, editing, and interviewing skills (Decarie, 2010) as well as research and critical thinking skills (Booth, 1994; Sheppard, 1989).

The informational interview assignment is also an activity that helps address the needs of the emergent adult management student (Dachner & Polin, 2016) because the assignment incorporates six principles of adult learning (Knowles, 1970). Table 1 shows connections between the principles of adult learning and the informational interview assignment.

The assignment is focused on students' possible careers in the future and, hence, motivates students to learn. The assignment could shed some light on what knowledge, skills, and experiences students need to learn to get the desired jobs, showing the gap they need to close. For example, Orr, Sherony, and Steinhaus (2011) surveyed employers who were interviewees in the informational interview assignment. These employers pointed to several skills that students needed to improve to increase their chances of employment in the future, including "proper eye contact, using good posture, and using appropriate facial expressions and gestures ... developing skilled, well thought-out questions and asking the right number of questions ... [and] being well groomed and appropriately dressed" (p. 30). Students actively participate in all three steps of the assignment, so students learn by doing. Students incorporate their prior knowledge and experiences when constructing the interview guide, conducting the interview, and presenting the results in a written or oral format. By participating in all three steps of the assignment, students are engaged in the four components of experiential learning, such as "experiencing, reflecting, thinking, and acting" (Kolb & Kolb, 2005, p. 194). In other words, they gain experience in constructing an interview guide and interviewing a professional, reflecting on these two processes, thinking about the desired possible career paths and the profession of a manager after the interviews, and making decisions about whether to pursue a possible career and about knowledge, skills, and experiences they should gain to increase their chances of getting a desired job. Although interviews should take place at the interviewees' workplace, which could be considered a formal situation, they take place outside of the classroom and without the instructor and could be regarded as informal learning (Marsick & Watkins, 2001). Informal learning may be structured or unstructured, unintended and incidental, or part of a planned activity, and is generally considered to be in the control of the learner (Marsick, Watkins, Callahan, & Volpe, 2009). Although the informational interview is an assignment that is guided by an interview guide, the execution of this assignment has a great degree of informal learning where students learn outside the formal classroom and control many aspects of the assignment (e.g., who to interview, how to approach the interviewee, what additional questions to ask, or how to carry themselves during the interview).

Next, the activity is also based on the ideas that knowledge comes from a variety of sources and exposure to many sources during a course benefits student understanding of the course material. Learning that is limited to listening to a lecture or reading a course textbook is insufficient in preparing students to the demands of today's workforce (e.g., Madsen & Turnbull, 2006). College courses have to incorporate activities that enable students "to connect the readings, class discussions, and other assignments with the real world, full of real people, with real problems that students try to help solve" (Bush-Bacelis, 1998, p. 27). Informational interviews are also based on the assumption that the most current information about a job or an organization comes from people who do that job or work for that organization, and not from books or the Internet (Bolles, 2016). Therefore, informational interviews expose students to another source of information, an employee, in a managerial or non-managerial position, in addition to the textbook, lectures, seminars, other readings, and the instructor.

Importantly, informational interviews are also a career development technique used by training and development professionals in organizations to assist employees in their exploration of possible career paths within the organization (e.g., Author 2011). Therefore, students have an opportunity to experience a training and development technique, which most likely is discussed in their human resource management course usually included in the core undergraduate curriculum. The instructor can modify the assignment to make it more useful for the class. For example, the interview guide could have additional questions about how the interviewee communicates with his or her subordinates or superiors, motivates his or her team, makes decisions, or solves problems. Due to these advantages, the informational interview assignment is one of the most exciting and eye-opening assignments that students who only begin to entertain ideas about their careers enjoy. The informational interview almost always "becomes the most popular assignment of the semester" (Mulvaney, 2003, p. 70).

**Table 1**

Connections between the principles of adult learning and the informational interview assignment.

	Principles of adult learning	Aspects of the assignment
1	Adults must want to learn.	The assignment focuses on students' future careers.
2	Adults will learn only what they feel they need to learn.	The obtained information shows the student what they need to do to get the desired job.
3	Adults learn by doing.	Students actively participate in all three steps of the assignment.
4	Adult learning focuses on problems and the problems must be realistic.	The assignment focuses on students' future careers and helps identify developmental areas.
5	Experience affects adult learning.	Student experiences, class discussions, and course readings are incorporated in all three steps of the assignment.
6	Adults learn best in an informal situation.	Interview takes place outside the classroom and without the instructor.

### 3. The modified informational interview assignment

#### 3.1. *The setting and the participants*

The informational interview assignment was included in the course Human Resource Management taught to 2nd year undergraduate students in a management program. The course followed a three-quarter long Introduction to Management course, which students took during their first year, and an Organizational Theory course, which students took during the first semester of their second year. The management program is provided by a large independent research university in the Russian Federation. Due to the university internalization efforts, the course is taught fully in English. For all students taking the class, English was a second language. Out of 111 students listed in the class roster, 89 were present during the data collection. About 60% of these students were female and 40% male. All students were studying full-time and came to the program right after graduating from high school.

#### 3.2. *Description of the assignment*

Because students had a rather vague understanding of the role of a manager, the informational interview activity was modified. The purpose of this activity became to provide students an opportunity to get a snapshot of everyday tasks and main functions of a manager who works in the industry or type of company or company where the student would like to work in the future. Therefore, the objective of the activity was two-fold: (1) to learn about the managerial role and functions from a manager and (2) to learn insights potentially useful for students' career choices. Implementation of the activity consisted of three steps.

##### 3.2.1. *Step 1: the introduction of the assignment*

I introduced the assignment to the students during a seminar by placing information about the activity on a handout and projecting it on the screen so that everybody could see what was being discussed. The activity was introduced after the students discussed readings for the course unit "Management and Leadership." Students were introduced to the assignment five weeks before the deadline to allow sufficient time for students to identify the person and conduct the interview. The students were asked to identify a person who meets two conditions: (a) was working in the industry or type of company or company where the student would like to work in the future and (b) had supervised a team of at least five people for at least one year or had been a leader (top management, owner) who had had a leadership position for at least three years. They were also asked to set a 15–30 min (phone, skype, or face-to-face) conversation with him/her. The students were instructed that their interviewees might be reluctant to reveal their names and the name of the organization to others. The students were advised on how to deal with confidentiality; other instructors using this approach need to abide by protocols and professional ethical standards of their teaching institutions.

##### 3.2.2. *Step 2: the creation of the interview template*

During a seminar, two weeks after the assignment was introduced, the students with my guidance created an interview template. First, the students worked in small groups and generated a list of questions they wished to ask. When students are asked to create their own questions, they usually get more engaged in their learning, which enhances their ability to ask smart, relevant questions (Broggy, 2011). They also become more interested in the material (Nardone & Lee, 2011) and learn the material better (Berry & Chew, 2008). In this process, students also use their higher-order thinking skills by analyzing information, making connections between concepts, and synthesizing all information into their own questions (Ciardiello, 1998). Then, each group was asked to choose top two questions from the list. Then, each small group stated their questions, and I typed them up on a computer, projecting the list on the screen. The students were asked not to repeat questions that had been suggested by previous small groups. Because the class (111 students) was divided into four groups of 26–28 students, I repeated this process with each of the four groups. After the process was completed with all four groups, I examined the list of questions and created a template. The template was divided into required questions for everyone to ask and additional optional questions to be asked if time allowed and if the student and the interviewee wanted to continue their conversation. The students were encouraged to add other questions. The template was emailed to the students. The students were given four weeks to complete the assignment.

##### 3.2.3. *Step 3: the discussion*

The discussion took place during two seminars. First, the students were divided into groups depending on the industry or company type where the interviews took place and where they would like to work in the future (e.g., education and social services, entertainment, IT, hospitality, sales, and logistics and production). Then, in groups, they are asked to create two composite profiles: (a) a composite profile of what it is like to be a manager in the industry or company type where the students would like to work in the future and (b) a composite profile of what it is like to have a career in this industry or company. The creation of these profiles included further learning about the topics from their peers and an analysis and synthesis of the material, which fit the exploratory nature of the assignment. The creation of these profiles also allowed the students to be creative and made the learning process interesting and fun. The students presented the profiles using the board.

### 3.3. Data collection

To collect data about the usefulness of the assignment and make changes to improve the assignment in the future, survey research was used. A survey “provides a quantitative or numeric description of trends, attitudes, or opinions” of a population sample (Creswell, 2009, p. 234). The students were asked to complete an Informational Interview Evaluation Questionnaire that consisted of three parts. Part One asked about five “points of learning” that this assignment targeted the most. The last, point number 6, was left open to the students as “Other”. The students were asked to evaluate the usefulness of this activity to them on the scale of 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Part Two asked whether after completing the assignment, they would continue their pursuit of the career in the chosen industry or company and why. Part Three used Brookfield’s (1995) Critical Incident Questionnaire to understand what aspect(s) of the assignment from the moment it was introduced to the presentations got the students engaged and distanced and was the most helpful, puzzling, and surprising. The Questionnaire is a qualitative tool that could assist instructors in exploring “how students are experiencing their learning and your [instructors’] teaching” (Brookfield, 2006, p. 41). The data collected by the Questionnaire helps instructors see the classroom through the students’ eyes, reflect on their teaching, and improve their instruction (Brookfield, 1995). Since its introduction, the instrument has been used in adult and higher education classroom in face-to-face and on-line formats (e.g., Gilstrap & Dupree, 2008; Glowacki-Dudka & Barnett, 2007; Phelan, 2012).

## 4. Results

The results of Part One of the Questionnaire show that overall students found this assignment useful (see Table 2). The average score was the highest (4.1) for the first point of learning. Four other points of learning had the average score of 4.0.

Only four students provided answers to the last open-ended point. These students indicated that this assignment helped them improve their communication skills, understand main difficulties, “talk to experienced managers and become encouraged by them”, and “understand what I should do to become a manager in my field”.

Part Two of the Questionnaire asked the students whether after completing the assignment, they would continue their pursuit of a career in the chosen industry or company and why. Out of 89 students, 60 (74%) decided to continue pursuing a career in the chosen company or industry (see Table 3).

These students responded that what they learned either confirmed what they had expected or made them even more interested in the company/industry:

“It really helped me better understand this field; I am not disappointed and ready to continue.”

“I got more information about this industry, which is interesting for me, and now I know what I need to do to be more competitive to get a job in this industry.”

“I have been interested in working in this industry for a long time and doing this assignment helped me understand that it is the right one for me.”

“It is mostly like I expected it to be.”

“This assignment helped me discover new sides of the industry. Now I am interested in this industry even more.”

Out of 89 students, 29 (26%) responded they would not continue their pursuit of a career in the chosen industry or company. Twenty-one students provided reasons for changing their minds about the pursuit of the job/industry. For example, five students realized that they wanted to have a job that would allow them to be more creative:

“I prefer creating a new product and not work at a production factory.”

“I would prefer to become a journalist rather than a manager at a publishing house.”

“I would like to have a job that gives me more freedom, something more creative.”

“I would like to have my own company, rather than work for somebody.”

Another eight students did not like the overall impression of the job itself, finding it “stressful,” “boring,” with “too much routine and repetitive tasks.” As one student stated, “I have understood that work in the office is not for me: You have to face the same routine every day, and it’s kind of boring.” Another student explained, “You have to spend decades working as a rat

**Table 2**  
Results of part 1 of the informational interview evaluation questionnaire.

	Points of learning	Average score
1	Have a better idea of what it is like to work in this company/industry	4.1
2	Understand the role of the manager	4.0
3	Understand the daily routine of a manager	4.0
4	Have a snapshot of a career in this industry/company	4.0
5	Think about my career in general	4.0

**Table 3**  
Results of part 2 of the informational interview evaluation questionnaire.

Decision on the pursuit of the career	n
Continue the pursuit of the career	60
Not continue the pursuit of the career	29
Provided reasons:	21
Want to have a more creative job	5
Did not like the overall impression of the job	8
Prefer a more people-oriented job	2
Prefer a less people-oriented job	3
Do not have technical knowledge	3
Provided no reason	8

in the office. I am not ready for this.” Two more students realized that the job was not as people-oriented as they wished, while three other students preferred not to deal with people a lot on their job. Three other students changed their minds about the company because they found out that they had to have technical knowledge (e.g., chemistry, physics) to succeed in the company.

Eight students did not provide specific reasons for changing their minds:

“In my mind, this job looked a bit different and it is not as positive as I had thought.”

“The activity helped me understand the industry that I was interested in, but I changed my mind after that.”

“I absolutely understand that it is not my job, not my industry. But I would like to add that now I know more about the role of a manager in this industry.” One student changed his/her mind because he/she “liked more what other students told about their companies.”

Part Three of the Questionnaire used Brookfield's (1995) Critical Incident Questionnaire to understand what aspect(s) of the assignment from the moment it was introduced to the presentations got students engaged and distanced and was the most helpful, puzzling, and surprising (see Table 4).

Not surprisingly, the students reported being engaged the most during the interview (81%). As one student explained, “because he [the interviewee] explained me the situation in this company and the industry in general and simple terms.” Others (13%) were engaged the most during the class discussion. As another student explained, “when we were discussing the top skills which are very necessary in this sphere, I really liked the process of sharing and structuring the ideas.” Others (6%) mentioned the first time they heard of the assignment and the entire assignment. About a third of the students (35%) reported not feeling distant from the assignment at all. Most (46%) reported feeling distant when they heard about the assignment for the first time. As one of these students explained, “I did not understand the purpose of the assignment.” Others mentioned feeling distant when developing the Informational Interview Guide, choosing the respondent, and class discussions. Not surprisingly, the interview was the most affirming or helpful experience for more than half of the students (54%). As one student explained, “I think that the interview was that thing that gave a lot of information and was very fun.” Others (16%) mentioned that the interviewees themselves were the most helpful: “[my] interviewee's answers were very helpful,” “the advice of that person was very helpful,” and “the manager was very eager to answer my questions.” Another third of the students found classroom discussion and presentations of the two profiles the most helpful and affirming. One student wrote, “Presentations of other groups helped me broaden my knowledge about other spheres.” Another student explained, “It was really interesting to know about managers' work in different fields.” Most students (65%) did not report anything puzzling about the assignment. Many were puzzled by different aspects of the interview, such as little time to ask all questions, “talking to a complete stranger,” “first minutes of the interview”, or “meeting a real manager for the first time.” Several people commented on being frustrated when the interview had to be postponed or when the interviewee was late for the interview or joked during the interview. The last question in the Questionnaire asked the students to identify what surprised them the most. The students gave a wide range of answers. Some (45%) found the assignment itself surprising: “The assignment was surprising and not the same as in other classes.” Students (35%) also commented on how difficult it was to take an interview: “I was surprised that I was brave enough to conduct the interview” and “I am glad I survived the interview!” Others (20%) mentioned to be surprised, for example, by the number of skills and tasks managers have, the differences in managerial skills in different industries, and that managers do not necessarily have degrees in management.

## 5. Reflections on the results

The purpose of the study was to explore whether this assignment, when modified, could help second-year management education students in understanding the profession of a manager. The results showed that overall the students learned more about the profession of a manager and got an insight into careers in the chosen industries and companies. The average score of 4 out of 5 on the first part of the Questionnaire could be considered high. However, this average score could have been negatively affected by the students' misunderstanding of the assignment. Those students who decided not to pursue the

**Table 4**  
Results of part 3 of the informational interview evaluation questionnaire.

Reactions	Instance(s)	%
Engaged	During the interview	81
	During the class discussion	13
	The first time they heard of the assignment and the entire assignment	6
Distanced	The first time they heard of the assignment	46
	Not feeling distant at all	35
	Developing the Informational Interview Guide, choosing the respondent, and class discussions	19
Most helpful	The interview or the interviewee	70
	Classroom discussion and presentations of the two profiles	30
Puzzling	Nothing puzzling	65
	Different aspects of the interview	35
Surprising	The assignment itself	45
	Difficulties with interviews	35
	Managerial skills, experiences, responsibilities	20

chosen industry or company as a result of the assignment considered their results and the assignment itself unsuccessful. During the discussion of the assignment, I had to explain the students that changing their minds after the completion of the assignment was not a negative result. In fact, it is one of the two possible outcomes of the assignment: a confirmation or a change of the possible career path (e.g., [Bolles, 2016](#); [Crosby, 2002](#)). This finding implies that instructors using the Informational Interview as a class assignment have to state clearly upfront, when introducing the assignment, that the assignment is exploratory in nature and has two possible outcomes. Even if students get disappointed or disillusioned about a career in the chosen industries and companies, students do receive an insight about the industries and companies, make an informed decision not to pursue a career in this industry or company, and can explore other possible career paths. A negative outcome of the assignment is interviewing a random person, a person who cannot provide any insight into a possible desired career path for the students. Interviewing a random person would be simply useless.

It was not a surprise that the interview was the most engaging, helpful, and affirming part of the assignment. However, it was exciting to see that many students saw the value in the small group discussions and presentations of the two profiles. The presentations were a success; students were creative, engaged, and excited. They listened to other groups' presentations and made comments about the differences and similarities among the profiles of managers and careers in different industries. The discussions were done in class; however, to provide more time for students to analyze and discuss the results of their interviews and create the two profiles it might be useful to leave the discussion as their homework assignment. When given more time, students might conduct a more in-depth analysis of the data collected individually. Other instructors ask students to synthesize the results of their informational interviews as individual assignments, for example written reports ([Addams & Allred, 2015](#)), a critical analysis paper of communication at work ([Croft, 1995](#)), or an oral presentation ([Mulvaney, 2003](#)). Therefore, this research shows that small group discussions and the creation of profiles could be used to synthesize the results of individual interviews. In the future, it would be interesting to read what other types of collaborative work could be used at the discussion step of this assignment.

Another surprise at first was that so many students reported being distant when they first heard of the assignment. Perhaps, this reaction is due to the fact that students often feel intimidated by the assignment, unsure about possible career paths, and frustrated about where to search for an interviewee ([Decarie, 2010](#)). It is also possible that a short explanation that was provided when introducing the assignment was not enough for the students to begin to get interested in the assignment. Therefore, instructors might consider asking students to read short articles on the use of the informational interview (e.g., [Crosby, 2002](#)) after the introduction of the assignment. Reading relevant articles at home could also help students generate meaningful questions for the interview template. Many students reported being puzzled or frustrated by many aspects of the interview. For most of them, this assignment was the first time they did a little piece of research and interviewing. Instructors should spend more time explaining the challenges students might face when interviewing a professional person.

## 6. Conclusion

The informational interview is a well-known training and development technique and an assignment usually taught in communication courses at the undergraduate level. However, this assignment could be a great addition to other courses in undergraduate management programs when students have little experience with organizations and management and could benefit from a purposeful conversation with a successful professional. Colleges of business and management have been criticized for inadequate preparation of students for their future careers in the field ([Thomas, Lorange, & Sheth, 2013](#)). The assignment could also help them explore a possible career path and identify areas for their own professional development. The assignment should follow the general basic guideline (e.g., [Croft, 1995](#); [Crosby, 2002](#); [Decarie, 2010](#)); however, the instructor could make changes in many aspects of the assignment depending on the course and the goal of the assignment. Finally, as reported by others (e.g., [Mulvaney, 2003](#)), the students in this research found the assignment enjoyable and useful. The assignment often "turns into one of the most important activities, if not the most important activity, they do throughout

the course” (Decarie, 2010, p. 308). In the future, it would be interesting to know how other instructors teaching in undergraduate management or business programs modify the informational interview to help students better understand the course and what aspects of the modified assignment receive positive feedback from students.

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