

**How Kim Won Her Dream Position at a Top Bank, Against Long Odds,
Through Outstanding Information Interviewing
By Prof. Seth Freeman**

Kim Church Matthews,* a part-time NYU Stern MBA student who took my course in Fall 2009, came by to my office yesterday and told me about her success finding an excellent job against considerable odds. Her encouraging story offers valuable clues for my students who are struggling with a challenging job market.

‘How Do I Get From Here to There?’

Kim had begun her work life as an administrative assistant at a widely known Wall Street brokerage house (‘XYZ’), where she later became a Human Resources analyst. Her future prospects, though, were very unclear; she felt she would have a hard time advancing in finance in a difficult hiring market with what she considered to be a fairly weak resume. (She’d been a Spanish major and dance minor at a decent college).

Yet this week, she accepted an excellent position at a top investment bank (‘ABC’)- a position that could eventually lead to the CFOship. It’s a job for which the firm had literally flown candidates in from as far as London. How did she get from here to there?

In a phrase: she information interviewed.

‘Information Interviewing was 100% Worthwhile’

Kim quit her XYZ job in January and spent four months doing information interviewing and related tasks, all with great discipline. The process was “100% worth it,” she said; she learned a great deal that ultimately proved extremely valuable and led her to her dream job. Below are a number of particular things she did that helped her campaign succeed.

Focusing Fully on the Information Interview Process

It was hard, she found, to balance the demands of school, her job, and her job search. Acting boldly, she quit her job in January to devote herself more fully to the search. She guessed it would take two months of information interviewing to find a job; it took four. In hindsight, she felt that three months is a reasonable amount of time to make a transition like hers. In hindsight too she felt she should have quit sooner and devoted herself to the search even earlier. The search, she said, was virtually a full-time job for her.

Finding Interviewees Using Social Media

Kim haunted LinkedIn.com, seeking contacts by search for anyone who had a common bond with her (same HS, college, clubs, etc.) or by searching by the company name and sorting through her network (1st, 2nd or 3rd generation connections) to look for relevant connections. If she could, she’d ask a common friend to introduce her to people she

* Name changed to protect privacy.

found that way. If not, she invited the person to be in her LinkedIn network and, in a ~20 word message, mentioned their mutual connection and asked for a short phone call to discuss his or her experience at the company. She often got valuable conversations this way.

Finding Interviewees at Networking Events at School

She also went to networking events at her school, including ones hosted by relevant career clubs (e.g. the strategy club) and various social clubs (e.g. the outdoors club), seeking out events for full-timers and part-timers. Full-timers, though shy and not hugely helpful, could share useful information about contacts at firms they'd interned for; part-timers could share business contacts, explain the different areas of the firm and guide her in the right direction to focus on the groups that were hiring. Getting to know people's personal interests too proved to be a valuable conversation opener- something that many other students seemed to miss.

Finding Interviewees and Leads at NYU Stern Recruiting Venues

She found that the following venues were excellent places to find opportunities, which I believe she followed up on through informational interviewing:

- LRP (Langone Recruitment Program- via CCWP)
- CCWP-sponsored Career Fairs typically held in October and March
- CCWP-sponsored seminars (ex: informational interviewing, resume improvement)

65 Connections at Target Firm → Two Strong Employment Opportunities

Eventually, Kim had over sixty-five contacts at one particular top financial services firm alone- 'PQR'. She initiated each contact by informational interviews, which led her to invitations to interview for two good positions. She got to the final round for one of these positions. Each time she got a 'no', she asked for feedback about why she was not chosen, which prompted the interviewer to think further about where her skills might be a better fit within the firm...and led to more opportunity later. (See below.)

Asking for Information, Not a Job

In each information interview, she asked only for information, not a job, though she was careful to ask for advice, coaching, referrals, and suggestions about groups that were growing within the firm. At major firms, she noted, people understand you're looking without your having to ask directly for a job. So Kim was careful not to offer a resume until they asked for one.

Kim noted that information interviews are easier than people often think, because in essence you are inviting someone to talk about himself- a topic most people enjoy talking about. While it was important to have a solid list of about six or seven intelligent questions prepared, the interviewee usually understood the purpose of the call and carried the conversation.

Early in each phone conversation, Kim asked if she could pause to put an earpiece into the phone so she could type virtual verbatim notes of her conversations. She found that these transcripts were much richer and more useful than brief notes.

Disciplined Note-taking and Organization

Kim organized her notes into a template with ~20 categories- name, phone, email...and other more advanced parts such as

- account I'm using to reach the person (Linkedin, School, Gmail, etc.)
- 1st and last day we've been in touch
- Action items
- Time line- what to do by when

The template allowed her to filter her list by category, so she could instantly find, for example, things she needed to do next. (Her parents feel she should write a book about these tasks.) The spreadsheet kept her honest and focused through what was, admittedly, a tedious and often frustrating process.

Anticipating Objections

Information interviewing was especially important because she was trying to transition to a position with very different skills; the process helped her open doors that otherwise would have been closed to her. It wasn't the only thing that helped, though. To address objections about her inexperience, she emphasized

- Transferrable skills
- Relevant classes and specializations at NYU
- A Wall Street prep course she also took that helped her talk about financial modeling after just the first hour of a 24-hour program.

Applying On-Line...And Improving the Odds with Information Interviewing

Surprisingly, she also had a 21% response rate to the 76 applications she made online through mainly through Indeed.com, Linkedin and employer sites. How did she get such a high response rate? She always followed up on each application with an information interview with someone she found on Linkedin or through the NYU alumni database, asking for coaching and advice and mentioning that she'd applied on line. That seems to have helped get her application noticed.

The Information Interviewing Payoffs- Hidden Opportunities, Valuable Knowledge & Feedback, and a Personable, Polished, Effective Approach in Job Interviews

100% of her opportunities came to her through the information interviewing process. The process also helped her learn a great deal, so that when she was finally up for a final series of interviews at ABC, she was generally very well prepared. By then she had honed her presentation skills, learned how to engage with almost anyone, and could quote from many people she'd met and learned from.

She found that she was much more effective in person than on paper, so meeting with people was essential.

Success and More Success

The job she got from ABC is an excellent one- well paying, with a great future. Ironically, as she was giving the verbal acceptance to ABC over the phone, PQR called on the other line to ask her to interview for a third slot, which she politely declined.

Kim says that Information Interviewing was the key to her success.