

TELEPHONE INTERVIEW TECHNIQUES

Phone interviews are often make-or-break situations and must be taken as seriously as an in-person interview.

Prospective employers screen candidates to determine whether or not to spend the time and money for a face-to-face interview. Telephone interviews can be especially useful here when the candidate lives in a different city or to determine if the candidate possesses specific, possibly esoteric, expertise. At minimum, an initial telephone contact will validate statements made on the resume, and be used to assess the candidate's personality, oral communication skills, and level of interest in the employer and the opportunity.



As a candidate, your objective is to assure the prospective employer that an in-person interview is warranted.

In most cases, phone interviews are scheduled in advance. You must determine whether it is best to have the interview at home or in your office, whether you will be making or receiving the call, the exact time (taking into consideration time-zones), and the name(s) and phone number(s) of all parties who will be involved. When scheduling the interview, take advantage of any time-zone differences to allow you to have the interview at home, before or after work, but still within the interviewer's regular business hours. On the other hand, a prospective employer might just pick up the phone and surprise you with a call, so it is best to be prepared. In that case, if it is not a good time or place for you to talk, ask if you may call back, and make appropriate arrangements, as outlined above. If you decide to take an unplanned call when it comes, ask the interviewer to hold a few seconds, take a deep breath, center yourself, then forge ahead.

A quick word about technology: During your job search, make sure you have a message machine or voice mail available, with a professional sounding outgoing message (i.e., no music, sound effects, jokes, funny voices, or children). And, check your messages frequently. Use a static-free phone, preferably not cordless, nor a cell or speakerphone, which can cut out or sound hollow or tinny. Ask your secretary to hold calls or, if at home, ignore your call waiting.

The most important advice for telephone interviews is: BE PREPARED! Research the companies and positions for which you are applying, and have that material handy. Also, have your resume by the phone, including a listing of representative transactions or cases, notes of the points you would like to make and questions to ask, along with your references' names and telephone numbers. Keep a pad and pen handy to take notes during your phone interview. Have your calendar within reach, to schedule the follow-up personal interview at the end of your conversation.

If an interview is scheduled, set aside at least an hour. Have a glass of water by the phone and be ready five minutes early. Be in a quiet place, turn off the television or music, banish any barking dogs, and ask your co-workers, family, or roommates to be quiet and not disturb you during this important phone call. Stand up

and get your energy going, warm up your voice, and smile (it can almost be heard over the telephone). Dress in a business-like manner to put yourself in the proper frame of mind, and sit or stand with good posture. Although your interviewer cannot see you, these things affect the quality of the image you project through your voice. You want your interviewer to imagine you perfectly groomed and sitting in an office, rather than lounging around in your pajamas. If, for some reason, the interviewer does not call or is unavailable at the appointed hour, be sure to call the interviewer and leave a message expressing your interest and request to reschedule the interview.

The main disadvantage of the phone interview is its lack of all non-verbal communication. Everything needs to be communicated through your voice. Therefore, speak slowly and clearly, with moderate volume and plenty of enthusiasm, positive energy and inflection, keeping your mouth about an inch away from the mouthpiece. Do not eat, chew gum, or smoke (yes--we can hear you puffing away through the phone!). Always answer your phone in a professional manner, whether at home or at work, because you never know who may be calling. After the initial introductions and pleasantries, open with a positive expression of your interest based on what you have learned about the opportunity and the firm. Then say "I am looking forward to a personal meeting with you. In the meantime, what can I tell you about my qualifications?" Be prepared with a brief "commercial" summarizing all of your strengths and your accomplishments, tailored to the position you are seeking.

Throughout the interview, use interesting, descriptive language and proper grammar—not slang ("yes" rather than "yeah"). Do not use profanity under ANY circumstances, even if your interviewer does. Avoid fillers such as "ums" and "errs." Try to avoid "yes" or "no" answers; answer in short, complete sentences. Conversely, do not run on at the mouth. Let your interviewer speak the majority of the time. You might want to ask a trusted friend for feedback on your phone technique, and/or practice with a tape recorder.

Let your interviewer know you are listening. Make sure you get all parties' names with proper spelling and pronunciation, titles, addresses, and telephone numbers (sometimes there are several interviewers on speakerphone). Periodically use their name (their surname until invited to do otherwise). Say "yes" or "I see," repeat their words, ask follow-up questions. Do not rush, interrupt, or contradict the interviewer. Listen carefully and make sure you understand the question before you answer. Answer directly, and ask if the interviewer needs additional information. Take notes of the major points of the conversation and, if the interviewer is interrupted, say, "we were discussing..." Compliment the firm and its achievements (this shows you've done your homework, and often is taken as a compliment to the interviewer personally), and agree with the interviewer as much as possible. An excellent technique for establishing rapport is to match the interviewer's rate of speech, volume, and pitch, within your own personality range, of course.

During the interview, most of the same rules of in-person interviewing apply. Never say anything on the telephone you would not say in person. Don't chit chat; stick to business, and don't let your guard down. Never bad-mouth your current or past employers, or ask about compensation. If you are asked directly about your compensation requirements, try to sidestep by saying "While salary is important, I am more interested in the opportunity at this time." If asked again, state the amount you are currently earning (breaking out base, bonuses, and benefits) plus when and how much of an increase is expected. If your current geographical region or type of organization has markedly different salary scales than the potential employer's situation, let the interviewer know you are aware of the differential. Tell the interviewer, "If this is a good match, I am confident that we can come to an agreement."

Go for the close: summarize your qualifications and ask for a face-to-face interview. Say something like, "This seems to be an interesting and challenging opportunity. With my background and expertise, I believe I

could make a valuable contribution to your firm. When can we meet to discuss the position in further detail?" And, offer some dates which would be convenient for you. Remember, the best way to get a real feel for a firm is through a face-to-face interview. Therefore, even if you are not excited about an opportunity at the end of the telephone interview, do not jump to conclusions. The caller may not be a good phone interviewer, and you do not have all the information you need in order to make a decision. Hence, if you are lukewarm, ask for that personal interview anyway.

Before hanging up, confirm any agreements, for example: arrangements for an in-person interview or requests for you to send follow-up materials, such as writing samples or transcripts. Thank the interviewer at the end of the conversation. Also, follow up with a thank you note mentioning some of the points discussed, and reiterating your interest in the opportunity. Send any requested material immediately. If, after reviewing your notes, you have some questions, a follow-up call is appropriate. Just make sure they are legitimate, intelligent questions, not merely an obvious excuse to call.

In summary, the telephone interview is just like a personal interview, but shorter and without the benefit of non-verbal communication. Since employers use it to narrow the field of candidates, it can be one of the most challenging aspects of the job search process. However, the telephone interview can be used to your advantage. If you take the telephone interview seriously, prepare thoroughly, listen carefully and respond effectively, you should achieve your objective—landing that face-to-face interview.

If you have further questions, ask us!

"I won't send you anyone I wouldn't hire myself."

Dick Williams - Founded in 1988 by Dick Williams - semiconductor executive bringing firsthand experience to the search process - is well versed in areas of capital equipment, instrumentation, materials and chemicals. As a president, sales and marketing vice-president and an operations director and one-time job seeker, Dick understands recruitment from the candidate's point of view.



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