

Telephone Interviewing Tips

How to pass a screening interview when it's conducted over the phone.

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Perhaps you're a pro at selling yourself face-to-face. How comfortable, though, are you at interviewing over the phone?

Telephone screening interviews are becoming more commonplace as companies seek to cut hiring costs and streamline the selection process. A hiring manager can spend an hour and half screening three candidates over the phone, then invite the most impressive one to the company for a lengthier interview.

John Young, president of First American Rehab, a health care company based in Athens, Georgia, personally interviews as many as 50 candidates a week over the phone. "Telephone prescreening is extremely cost effective," he says, "because 75% to 80% of the people you talk to can be easily eliminated." Mr. Young believes that more companies will make use of phone interviewing for this reason.

Given this trend, your job search may involve more telephone interviewing. Whether you are talking to headhunters or company recruiters, the more convincingly you make your case over the phone will determine further interest in you as a job candidate.

Phone interviewing is unique. You can't count on visual stimuli such as good looks or a power suit, eye contact or body language, to aid in your presentation. Neither can you rely on visual signals to interpret the response of the interviewer. In this context, faceless conversation takes on an added dimension of importance. Both strengths and weaknesses, as conveyed by voice, are magnified through the phone. Your voice personifies everything about you.

Headhunters, in particular, listen for a relaxed style that communicates confidence, enthusiasm and intelligence. This is reflected in a smooth conversation flow devoid of cliches or verbal catchalls to stall for time as well as other negatives.

The following techniques will help you prepare for and handle any phone interview situations, especially with company officials:

Preparation Is Key

The success of a telephone interview begins with mental preparation and setting the stage with the interviewer. The first order of business is to establish a clear time frame for the conversation. By mutual agreement, this should be at least thirty minutes when both parties can be free of interruptions and distractions.

If you're currently employed, arrange for a phone interview in the evening rather than during the workday. Confidentiality and discretion may be at risk if you interview during working hours; you never know who might barge into your office unannounced or overhear something by accident. In the privacy of your home, you can be more at ease and in control of your surroundings.

Being clear on the interview format gives you an edge in preparation. Before the actual interview, it will help to know the topics to be covered, objectives to attain and the basic information regarding the position to be discussed. It also helps to rehearse. Try to think as the employer, what key information is the interviewer looking for? What questions is he likely to ask? What things do you hope he doesn't ask?

George Walther, president of TelExcel in Seattle, Washington, is a consultant and speaker on the subject of improving telephone-interviewing effectiveness. "From my experience, I would say that 98% of business executives can assess the candidate's personality after thirteen seconds, with

no visual information," he says. "Furthermore, initial voice impression tends to be reinforced by the content of continued conversation." In other words, you need to sound like a winner quickly to sustain the listener's interest in you.

It's also advisable to prepare for possible scenarios that might unfold. Hypothesize a bit...suppose the interviewer asks questions that make you feel uncomfortable. How do you handle that? Suppose he rambles, is easily sidetracked and doesn't allow you to sell yourself. How do you subtly take control of the conversation and target pertinent issues? As a worst-case scenario, suppose the interviewer doesn't call at the agreed time. If it's an evening interview, and you have other engagements, how long should you wait by the phone? If it's a daytime interview, should you assume the interviewer "forgot" and call him directly? Or do you await his call at some other, unspecified time?

Solution: Don't Panic. The employer will call to set up a new time if he had some crisis. If you are working with a recruiter, he will handle the problem and schedule an alternate time.

Finally, clear a work area near the phone and keep the following tools handy to aid your fact gathering and information sharing:

- ✓ A copy of the version of the resume sent to the interviewer.
- ✓ A note pad and pen.
- ✓ Five or six carefully worded questions you'll want to ask.
- ✓ Company literature with pertinent sections highlighted.
- ✓ A calendar.
- ✓ A watch or clock.

Preparation will increase your confidence level and ability to focus on the conversation during the interview as well as enabling you to make a favorable impression.

Phone Personality

The need to make a good impression on the phone cannot be overemphasized. The telephone screening interview is a make-or-break proposition, your one chance to convince the interviewer that you are worth serious consideration. The interviewer will be listening carefully to determine three factors: your sincere interest in the job, how you verbalize your qualifications and how aggressively you pursue the position.

Voice reflects personality. A well-modulated, controlled voice communicates authority and heightens the verbal impact you want to make. The quality, pitch and tempo of your speech convey a certain attitude, energy level and enthusiasm. "Enthusiasm and excitement are the biggest selling points of candidates talking on the phone," says Mr. Young of First American Rehab. "This translates directly over to their performance and work ethic."

Here are some practical tips to enhance your phone "personality" and overall presentation:

Talk directly into the mouthpiece. Hold the receiver approximately three inches from the mouth, not below your chin or above your nose. Speak in a relaxed, conversational style as though the other person was in the same room, not on the other side of the planet.

Avoid sitting in a hunched position, grasping the phone in a vise-like grip. This will add a note of stress, and your voice will communicate that uneasiness. Try standing, it opens your diaphragm to a smoother airflow and imparts a feeling of liveliness. Getting up and moving around introduces an element of action, which instills a relaxed, conversational manner and reduces fatigue. A longer cord or cordless phone will allow maximum mobility,

Pay attention to the interviewer's voice patterns. Does he speak slowly or rapidly? Try to match the cadence so that the conversation flows smoothly. According to Mr. Walther at TelExcel,

the average person speaks at a rate of 160 words per minute. Adjust your speaking rate, voice volume and phrasing to be more in rhythm with the interviewer.

Sound upbeat. If you had a lousy day and came home to find your spouse and kids arguing, put it out of your mind. Genuine enthusiasm is contagious. Smile to show a sense of humor. After all, the interviewer may have had a bad day too.

Be a conversationalist. Listen carefully to get the big picture and to avoid saying something that indicates any momentary mental distraction. Allow the interviewer to complete questions without you finishing his train of thought or blurting out answers prematurely. No matter how comfortable you get in the interview, do not cuss for any reason.

Handle any trick questions in stride. The interviewer may throw in several "trick questions" to test your alertness or mental keenness. Showing verbal adeptness is a sign of how quickly you can "think on your feet." Be cautious: the interviewer may say something that puzzles you or that you firmly disagree with. Show enough respect to voice your thoughts in a professional manner. A defensive posture or argumentative tone is the surest way to alienate the interviewer and eliminate your candidacy.

The Telephone Interview

Establishing rapport at the beginning of the phone conversation sets a favorable tone. During the first few minutes, mention something that shows commonality of interest or similarity in background. This helps both parties feel more comfortable as the conversation progresses.

Get to know the person behind the voice. Does he/she show a sense of humor? Is he/she direct and forthright in supplying information? Does his/her speech sound "canned", or does it exhibit freshness of thought and expression? Just as importantly, does he/she actively listen to you, or merely wait for the chance to ask his/her next question? The interviewer may be a personnel official or a hiring manager. If the individual is someone with whom you will be working, pay all the more attention to his/her explanation of the job and what potential it offers.

Your prepared list of questions will indicate that you have given careful thought to the prospect of joining the firm. Even though you don't know everything about the position at this point, convey the impression that it's something you are interested in and competent at handling.

Only in a face-to-face interview can you totally sell yourself. The purpose of the phone interview is to identify areas of mutual interest that warrant further investigation. In other words, give them good reasons for wanting to invite you to the company location.

Basically, what the interviewer needs to hear and conclude is that you can get the job done. Mentally, he is making the connection between the company's problems and you as a problem solver. Don't overwhelm him/her with facts and figures (he's only going to remember so much).

You can best make your point by reciting memorable stories that document your ability to analyze a dilemma, weigh alternative responses and choose the appropriate action. By selectively highlighting turnaround situations you spearheaded, you are communicating a willingness to tackle similar problems for his company.

As you glance over your notes and keep an eye on the clock, there may be additional important points to cover in the pre-allotted time frame. Tactfully take control and introduce the subject matter that needs to be discussed or further elaborated. Example: "That's a good point. Can we come back to it a little later? I have some additional thoughts on the subject we were discussing a moment ago."

As the conversation winds down, become less talkative and give more thought to what you say. Your final words will generally have greater impact and be remembered longer. Careful word choice and voice inflection will under-score the significance of your remarks. By contrast, a machine-gun volley of words will likely put the listener on the defensive or turn him/her off altogether.

The Home Stretch

After 30 minutes, both parties should know how much of a "fit" there is. Provided the job interests you, express your desire to proceed to the next step: a company visit.

The interviewer may extend an invitation at that point. With calendar nearby, suggest several available days and times that agree with your agenda. Should the phone interview go well but end without a specific invitation to visit the company, state your desire to investigate the opportunity further.

Example: "I'd be very interested in such a challenging position. I would be available to come in for a personal interview and discuss my abilities in greater detail on (day)."

He may then mention the likelihood of an onsite interview once he confers with other officials. Your assertiveness will be remembered. If you hear nothing within 48 hours, follow up with a call.

A final concern: The interviewer may ask a salary range that you're expecting (*don't introduce the issue yourself*). It's best to mention that at this point you are not altogether certain what the job is really worth. Example: "I would feel more comfortable discussing a salary figure after meeting "the key people I would be working with and knowing more about the position." If the interviewer continues to pressure you for a figure, specifically ask, "What salary range are you working within?" Chances are 50/50 that he will tell you.

Respond by indicating that your desired salary is in that range (if that is correct). If the dollars are a little low, don't despair or defend what you feel you are worth. For an absolutely sterling candidate, most companies can flex the purse strings and make a very attractive offer.

On the phone, your job is to entice a buyer, not to close a sale. Salary negotiation will fall into place at the right time.

End the conversation on a positive note. Thank the interviewer for the information shared and again let him/her know that you look forward to visiting his/her company. After all, if the position discussed is not the ideal job for you, something else might be.

Improved telephone interviewing techniques can really give you a competitive edge.