

Interview Techniques for Candidates

Telephone interviews often are a make-or-break situation and in many cases will be the only interview conducted prior to the employer/client making a decision. At minimum, an initial telephone contact will validate statements made on the resume, and be used to assess your personality, oral communication skills, and your level of interest in the employer and the opportunity. In most cases telephone 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 whether you may call back, and make appropriate arrangements, as outlined above. If you determine to take the unplanned call when it comes, ask the interviewer to hold a few seconds, take a deep breath, center yourself, and forge ahead.

A quick word about technology: Use a static-free phone, preferably not cordless, if you use a cell, be sure that the signal will be strong, and if it begins to fail, immediately ask to call the interviewer back on a better line. Never use speakerphone, aside from being impersonal, it can also cut out or sound hollow or tinny. Always ignore your call waiting.

The most important advice regarding telephone interviews is: **BE PREPARED!** Research the company and position for which you are applying, and have that material handy. Also have your resume by the phone, including notes regarding 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 in order to schedule the follow-up personal interview at the end of your conversation.

If the interview is scheduled, set aside at least a half 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 coworkers, 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 businesslike 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 primary disadvantage of a telephone interview is that all non-verbal communication is lacking. Everything has 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. 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 meeting you. In the meantime, what can I tell you about my qualifications?" Be prepared with a brief "commercial" summarizing your strengths and 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 so. 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. Let your interviewer know you are listening. If this is a conference call, make sure you get all parties' names with proper spelling and pronunciation, and titles (another reason to have a note pad handy). 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 of 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.

Never say anything on the telephone you would not say in person. Don't chitchat; 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, refer the interviewer to ALSC. But 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 the position. 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 project. When would you like for me to start?" And, offer some dates which would be convenient for you.

Before hanging up, confirm any agreements such as writing samples or project descriptions.

Thank the interviewer

at the end of the conversation. Also, follow up immediately 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 that they are legitimate, intelligent questions, not merely an obvious excuse for a call. After the interview communicate immediately with the recruiter. Provide any observations, new information, and what the next point of follow-up will be.

In summary, the telephone interview is just like a personal interview, but shorter and without the benefit of nonverbal communication. Since it most often is used by employers to screen candidates as quickly as possible, it can be one of the most challenging aspects of the job search process. The telephone interview can be used to your advantage, however. If you take the telephone interview seriously, prepare thoroughly, listen carefully and respond effectively, you should achieve your objective, getting the job.