

Steps to a Successful Phone Interview

Overview

Telephone interviews are often your first contact with a future employer and are their screening tool to determine who will be invited for personal interviews. Usually a specific time will be mutually scheduled for the call. Less frequently the interviewer will work in the call during a busy schedule and other times you will be asked to call them. Remember your goal is to move on to the next step in the process by selling yourself, your skills, and your accomplishments. Preparing for this conversation will greatly enhance your odds of being asked in for a personal interview.

Before Interview

- Any time you're in the job market, make sure your voice mail message is detailed and professional. Don't take the risk of an unclear, flippant, or otherwise inappropriate recording being an interviewer's first introduction to you.
- When scheduling the interview, confirm the time zones and adjust as needed. If an emergency arises and you will not be available for a scheduled interview, let your recruiter and the interviewer know as soon as possible. A timely notice will indicate a true interest and professional demeanor on your part. Conversely, no notice or late notice could end your career with this company before it's even begun.
- Just as you would before any interview, research the company, products, revenues and other pertinent industry information. Also, if relocation would be involved, research the area where you would be living. Corporate cultures are often proud of their companies and their communities and are looking for candidates who care enough to find out about both.
- Assemble a list of questions that you would like to ask. These can be checked off as they are answered and many times the answers will come before the question is asked. However, realize limited time will not allow having them all answered during this first interview. You don't want to monopolize the conversation with your questions.
- Prepare a list of accomplishments for each of your past positions. Make a list of your skill sets and know what you are going to highlight.
- Practice and record your answers to those questions you anticipate. You'll be able to hear your "ums" and "uhs" and "you knows" and "okays" and practice reducing them from your conversational speech.
- Place a bottle or glass of water close by in case you need to moisten your mouth. Do refrain from smoking, chewing gum, or eating.
- Always have two pens and plenty of blank paper handy for note taking.
- Have a calendar or planner for scheduling the next telephone or personal interview.
- Keep your resume at your fingertips for easy reference.
- Know your resume and make it "come alive". Don't assume that the interviewer knows your background or is familiar with your past employers. Practice describing what they did and your accomplishments.
- If at all possible, use a land-line. However, when using a cell phone, make sure you have a well-charged battery and are in a place with good reception. If you're in an automobile find a safe and non-busy place to park during the conversation.
- If at home, clear the room - evict the kids and the pets and close the door. Turn off call waiting, stereos and TVs. The less distraction and disruption, the better the call.

During Interview

- Speak directly into the receiver clearly and slowly. Talk loudly enough to be heard-- but not too loudly-- and with some variance in inflection and tone.
- Be enthusiastic. Even smiling will be heard in the tone of your voice and will project a positive image to the interviewer.
- Note taking will be invaluable both now and when preparing for the face-to-face meeting. If for any reason there is an interruption, jot down the topic under discussion. When the conversation resumes you can recap: "We were just discussing. . ." It will be appreciated and set you apart from the others.
- As a general rule, use the person's title (Mr., Ms., Dr., etc.) and their last name. Only use a first name if they ask you to.
- Establish a connection. Ask about the caller's experience with the company or mention something you have read about the company or their location. This will also serve to let them know that you were interested enough to do your homework.
- When the interviewer asks a question, don't just answer "yes" or "no". Take your time to formulate your responses – it's perfectly acceptable to take a moment or two to collect your thoughts. Giving examples of related experiences is a great way to "sell" your skills and abilities. Demonstrate your accomplishments by reviewing a recent problem that you turned into a positive situation. Help the interviewer understand the problem, your specific role, what path you took to resolve it, and the final result. However, beware of dominating the interview with too much information because often it will "turn off" and/or bore the interviewer. Being a great talker but a poor listener leaves most interviewers with a bad impression.
- Use your best listening skills and let the interviewer do most of the talking. Try not to interrupt, but use questions to stimulate the conversation as needed. Asking good questions illustrates that you are already thinking seriously about the position and joining the company. Most potential employers expect to be asked questions and welcome opportunities to talk about their companies and/or their own backgrounds. Ask questions from the list you prepared—for example, "What exactly will be the three major responsibilities in this job?" or, "What will be the first job I get my teeth into?" Remember, the more you can find out about the job responsibilities and expectations, the better you'll be able to tailor your responses to show why you are a good match for their needs.
- Be prepared and clear about your reasons for leaving your current and past employers. Almost every interviewer will ask that question. If you were laid off or downsized be sure to mention how many others were affected so it is apparent that it was not just you. If you left a job because there was a conflict in the department or with your manager, be brief about the conflict. Don't duck the skeletons in your closet. However, under no circumstances, at this or any other time, should you be negative about any past employer or manager.
- Compensation and benefits will usually be discussed at a later time during a personal interview. The phone interview is about how you can help them.
- **If you are asked**, be open to compensation questions. Be specific and precise about the base, bonus, stock options, car allowance, etc. If asked, "What are your salary expectations?" a good answer is, "My current package is a base of \$XX and bonus of XY%, and I am hoping you will make me a fair offer based on my experience and the value I can bring to your company." Answering in this manner is usually sufficient.
- At the end of the interview, thank the caller for their time and let it be known that you are interested in the opportunity. If the interviewer has not asked you about your schedule or availability for the next interview, you should ask, "What would the next step be in the process and when would it occur?" Allow the interviewer to answer your question and conclude the interview.

After Interview

- As soon as the interview is over, call your recruiter to discuss any thoughts or concerns you have about the interview, the company, the position, or the location. This is an extremely important step in the process because the company will soon be contacting the recruiter about your feedback and also providing their thoughts and impressions. If the recruiter has not heard from you when the company calls, it could be interpreted by the recruiter and/or the company as a lack of interest on your part.
- If your next interview has already been scheduled, this will be the time to begin discussing strategies with your recruiter to enhance your chances of getting an offer. If there has been no interview scheduled, your input will be valuable in helping your recruiter work towards that goal.
- Occasionally, a telephone interview results in you losing interest in a particular opportunity. Immediately make your recruiter aware of this. Then on your behalf, your recruiter can gracefully withdraw your candidacy. This will also give the recruiter the go ahead signal to submit other qualified applicants. Also let your recruiter know if you desire for them to continue searching for better suited opportunities. Professional communications only makes good sense, plus, it keeps you from burning any bridges to future opportunities.