

Telephone Interview Tips

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Today's Toughest Interview Environment

"It was a humiliating experience. One of the biggest mistakes of my life," she said. As I listened to her tale, it sounded much more like a buildup for an episode of "Murder She Wrote" than a real-life encounter with a hiring manager in a telephone interview.

"They gave it to me with both barrels. I was on one end of the phone, fumbling for facts and any degree of comfort that I could find, while two people who I didn't know were firing away from a speakerphone. I was completely unprepared. The timing was terrible, and the call came out of nowhere. I just know that I blew it ... Do you believe that I'll get a second chance at this one?" Logic seemed to say that if she really thought she had done that poorly, the company wouldn't be taking the conversation any further. Sure enough, she got a "thanks but no thanks" letter for her effort.

Why Companies Subject Themselves and You to the Telephone Interview Process?

- Telephone interviews can be one of the most uncomfortable pieces of the job-seeking puzzle. Still, most employers use them as a regular part of the hiring process. They resort to them because they are a necessary step, primarily for cost reasons. Without them, companies would overburden themselves interviewing candidates face-to-face who could have been disqualified for the process much earlier on.
- It is this opportunity to become "disqualified" that is the major reason for the discomfort that you most likely experience during the process. It would be great if every hiring manager or human resources person on the other end of the phone were looking for reasons to hire you, instead of reasons to drop you from the process. Sadly, however, that isn't the case. Depending upon the nature of the person conducting the interview, these telephone conferences can become extremely uncomfortable.
- It is that difference in human nature, which can also make a telephone interview a valuable part of the process for you as well. Should you encounter a person with enough courtesy and respect to allow you to also learn from the process, you can become one of the lucky ones who gain something from the encounter. In order to help turn some of these potentially negative scenarios into opportunities, first understand the reasons behind these calls.

Different Reasons for Telephone Interviews

- The "screening call" from Human Resources: quite often, the H/R department needs to learn more about you for the purposes of sending your credentials (with their notes) down to the right manager who has the open position. Although they most frequently make these initial contacts quite unassuming, in all likelihood this H/R person is trying to "short list" a big stack of prospects.
- The "Ad Response" from a hiring manager: when a manager with an open position runs an ad, which might receive as many as a couple of hundred responses, they often have to run brief telephone interviews on the top ten or more resumes. Quite frequently, they'll

just pick up the phone and conduct these sessions - most lasting 10-15 minutes - at their convenience.

- The "In-depth" telephone interview: generally, once a prospect has been proven to be of potential interest to a company, either already screened by the H/R department or by a recruiter, the hiring manager will want to conduct a more intensive session dealing with the past experience and skills of the applicant in comparison to the job requirements.
- The "recruiter interview": After being recruited for a position, or after presenting your credentials to a recruiting firm, you will have a telephone conversation in detail with this outside consultant. It can be specific to a given project or allow you an opportunity to go into your aspirations and goals for your career in general. Most recruiting companies, due to the sheer number of resumes they review each week, will wait until a project looms before conducting an in-depth interview.
- The "committee telephone interview": sometimes several hiring managers will decide to get together on the interviewing process, so that they can share their conclusions afterwards. This rarely happens when the company is still early in the process, and most often when there are just too many qualified applicants for the face-to-face round. Once again, the goal is to disqualify.

Eight Tips To Help You Improve Your Odds

Is there anything that can be done to make the process, if not more pleasant, at least more productive? Something that you can do to achieve a higher percentage of success during the process? Remember that this process is the same as a normal interview, except in hyper speed and without the element of "in person" communication. Here are some ideas to review prior to the interview, which will help you sharpen your telephone interview skills:

- Remember that the person on the other end of the phone may be just as uncomfortable as you are. Concentrate less on your feelings of inadequacy and more on how to make the other person feel at ease. Most people do not like the telephone interview process - remember that it works both ways.
- Smile over the phone. Believe it or not, smiling while you are talking will actually help you sound more "friendly" and open. Many telephone-marketing offices have a mirror on each desk so that their people can always keep this in mind!
- During the telephone interview, you are judged by the same criteria used in an in-person interview, i.e.: self-confidence. Self-confidence is judged differently by phone than in-person (where eye contact, for example, can be an excellent barometer). Instead, you'll be judged by a much more subtle set of factors - the sound of your voice, your level of friendliness and enthusiasm, etc.
- The ability to speak succinctly about your past experiences and accomplishments will be critical. Many technical professionals launch into long, drawn-out answers to telephone interview questions. Because they do not have the sense of sight working for them, they are quite unable to tell if the person on the other line has gone to sleep!
- Many people find that the most uncomfortable scenario in a telephone interview is the occasional "dead air" of silence during the conversation. Do you have a list of questions prepared about the company and the opportunity that you can refer to when caught in one

of those dead spots? Although good communication seems to be up to both of you, typically that dead air will be your responsibility to fill.

- Although you are always judged on your ability to listen well, nowhere in the recruiting process do listening skills become more important than in the telephone interview. You'll find that your nerves will sometimes make this very difficult. I suggest that you close off all thoughts about whatever is going on around you and concentrate on the words and voice of the interviewer.
- It should be remembered that since so much of your success in this situation is determined by your comfort in the surroundings you are in during the call, make certain that you get yourself situated properly. Perhaps it is by suggesting a time for the call that is after the kids have gone to bed. Or, if the caller takes you by surprise, ask for five minutes to get organized and get a phone number to call them back.
- Don't ever talk about issues related to potential compensation, company benefits, problems at your current employer, etc., when in the throes of an initial phone interview. This is solid advice for any first-interview situation. It always amazes me when an experienced veteran launches into a diatribe about bad management at their company, or asks the infamous line "What's the job pay?"

Prepare yourself for a telephone interview

Put these items near the telephone: copies of materials you have sent out (i.e. resume, cover letter, writing samples), information you have received from the company, a "cheat sheet" of research information on companies you have contacted, a list of your specific experiences and skills that you wish to communicate, a list of your questions about the company and the position, and pen and paper for notes.

For a pre-set interview, request the names and titles of the people with whom you will be speaking and wear appropriate interview clothing such as a suit. It will assist you in assuming "interview mode".

Other advices:

- Have a clock to keep track of the time. Most screening interviews last 30 minutes.
- Control background noise such as stereo, TV, roommates, family, etc.
- Disable call waiting temporarily.
- Smile as you speak. It makes your voice more pleasant and upbeat. Put a mirror in front of you so you can monitor your facial expressions.
- Record a professional message on your voice mail/answering machine!
- Make sure your line is open when the call is expected

It Will Matter to You

Conducting a successful telephone interview is something that matters throughout your career. At all levels of the organization, the telephone interview provides a valuable service to the recruitment process. By its very nature, it is a tool used to help define the job and the potential that the field of applicants has to fit within those parameters. Human resources and hiring

managers alike all find that despite how much they may dislike the process, it is an invaluable tool.

Don't make the mistake of not taking a telephone interview seriously. It is the first important step in the process and remember, your goal on the telephone interview always should be to get to the next step, even if you are not sure how interested you are in the opportunity. You can always decide to back out after evaluating your telephone conversation, but you cannot resurrect a bad interview.

So give it your all and have a great interview!