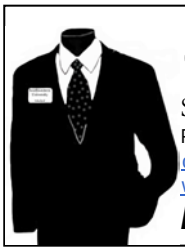
Telephone Interviews



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Why employers conduct telephone interviews

Employers use telephone interviews to identify and recruit candidates for employment. There are three basic types of telephone calls that you get from employers at this stage. One of the keys to success is to be able to identify quickly what type you are going to be participating in.

1. *Information Gathering Interviews* – An employer may ask to speak to you over the phone in order to assess your interest in the company. This often occurs if you are referred through a personal contact, referral, or someone you met at a career fair. This kind of call should be treated as seriously as an in-depth interview. It is a good way for you, as the potential employee, to see if you are a good fit for the company and their objectives.

2. *Screening Call* – Many companies use telephone calls as an initial screening mechanism in order to narrow the pool of applicants who will be invited for in-person interviews. Screening interviews are quick – usually 30 minutes – and usually conducted by someone from Human Resources

3. *In-Depth Telephone Interview* – In this case, the telephone is being used as a way to minimize the expenses involved in traveling for the interviewer and/or the interviewee. Depending on the type of organization with which you are interviewing, you may be interviewed by a hiring committee, where you will be broadcast over a speakerphone.

Since you are unlikely to win the job from a telephone interview, your goal is to secure an in-person interview with the person who has the authority to hire. Approach the call with that attitude.

Pros and cons of telephone interviews for candidates

Telephone Interviews have one advantage over the other types of interviews – you can have your preparation materials in front of you as the interview is taking place. These include not only your resume, but also a "cheat sheet" of compelling story topics that you would like to introduce. It can also include a "cheat sheet" about the employer, including specific critical points describing the employer and their products.

Have your materials open and available when you are preparing for a phone interview.

It is important that your phone interview sound well-organized and thoughtful, but not rehearsed. Only write down important points on paper, but do not write down entire paragraphs or sentences and read them when you are conversing with an employer. It is very easy for someone to tell if you are reading, and they may test how quickly you can think on your feet.

Telephone interviews can be challenging because it is more difficult to gain rapport with the interviewer because you cannot see the interviewer's non-verbal reactions and cues. Conversely, the interviewer cannot see your enthusiastic expressions or professional appearance. This places all the weight on your phone manners, clarity of speech, voice tone and the content of your answers.

Be prepared

Prepare for a phone interview just as you would for a regular interview. Do your homework on the company. Compile a list of your strengths and weaknesses, as well as a list of answers to typical interview questions. Also, practice! Talking on the telephone isn't as easy as it seems. Have a friend or Career Services' staff member conduct a mock interview and tape record it so you can see how you sound over the phone. You'll be able to hear your "likes" and "ums" and "uhs" and "okays," and you can practice reducing them from your conversational speech. Also rehearse answers to those typical questions you'll be asked.

Make the following physical preparations for the scheduled phone interview:

- Select a quiet, private room with a phone in good working condition.
- Clear the room of distractions. Evict the roommates and the pets. Close the door and hang a do-not-disturb sign. Turn off the stereo, TV and any additional land or mobile phones. Turn off call-waiting on the phone you will be using.
- Prepare comfort items, such as tissues and a glass of water.
- Keep your resume in clear view, on the top of your desk, or tape it to the wall near the phone, so it's at your fingertips when you need to answer questions.

- Have a short list of questions about the job and the organization, as well as the job posting and an outline of the research you did on the organization.
- Have a pen and paper handy for note taking, as well as your calendar and a calculator.
- Dress professionally, as it can help you feel professional and therefore more formal and confident.

During the phone interview

- Do not smoke, chew gum, eat or drink. If you have to take a quick sip of water, cover the speaker.
- Breathe deeply and relax.
- Smile. Smiling will project a positive image to the listener and will change the tone of your voice.
- Speak slowly, directly into the phone, and enunciate clearly. Consider standing up to help project your voice.
- Use the person's title (Dr., Mr. or Ms.) and their last name. Only use a first name if they ask you to. Write down the full names and titles of each call participant.
- Let the caller do most of the talking. Be courteous and try not to speak over the interviewer. If you do, apologize and let the interviewer continue. Since you lack the visual cues of body language to assess whether you've said enough, mark the end of your response with a question, such as "Would you like more details of my experience as an intern with XYZ Company?"
- Take your time – it's perfectly acceptable to take a moment or two to collect your thoughts. Use the technique of repeating or re-phrasing questions. It tells the caller that you listened carefully, and gives you time to think about your answer. If you need a moment to think, say so. Silence during a telephone conversation is dead air time.
- Support your statements with detailed examples of accomplishments when possible. It is easy for someone to get distracted on a phone call, so paint a vivid picture to keep the interviewer interested.
- Avoid fillers like ah, er, hum. This habit is especially noticeable on the telephone. This takes practice. So practice.
- Take notes when appropriate. Don't type on a computer, as it can be heard and sounds like you're not paying attention.
- If you think of a question or comment while the interviewer is speaking, jot a note on your talking points list, so you remember it later.
- During the interview, if the interviewer inadvertently answers a question from your prepared list, cross it off. If you forget and ask it, it will seem as if you were not listening.
- Use your talking points list of specific skills and accomplishments; cross them off as you work them into the conversation. At the end, if you have some uncrossed items, you might say something like, "I thought you might be interested to know I led a major conversion project, quite similar to what you are planning. I managed a $2.5 million budget and completed it 45 days early, saving over $48,000."

Compensation issues come at the end of the interviewing cycle, never at the telephone stage. If you are asked about salary expectations, you can truthfully say you don't know enough about the job to state a salary figure. Re-affirm your qualifications; express your interest in the job and the company. Say you would appreciate the opportunity to talk about the job further in person.

Before you hang up

- Let the employer end the interview.
- Thank the interviewer for the opportunity.
- Get the correct spelling of your interview's name and contact information for follow-up.
- Before ending the call, be sure you know the next step in the process, and offer to provide any additional information needed.
- Remember you need a strong and confident closing. Reiterate how you can make a contribution.
- Don't hang up until the interviewer has hung up.

If you perform well on the telephone, you'll probably be invited to interview with a hiring manager on site.

The unexpected call

While you're actively job searching, it's important to be prepared for a phone interview on a moment's notice. You never know when a recruiter or a networking contact might call and ask if you have a few minutes to talk. More than one student has mistaken an initial call from an employer for a telemarketer and lived to regret it later.

It is 9:15 am; you're in bed and the telephone rings. The best strategy for handling the unexpected call is to determine whether it is a call or an interview. Calls are primarily informational, while interviews include job-related questions.

If it is an interview, decide quickly if this is a good time to talk. If it isn't, simply ask if you can arrange a mutually convenient time to conduct the interview.

Apply your best interviewing skills (even if you are dressed in your pajamas).

After the interview

- Take notes about what you were asked and how you answered.
- Follow up promptly (within 24 hours) with a thank you note, which reiterates your interest in the job. If you don't do so, you have just invalidated all your other efforts!