

# THE TELEPHONE INTERVIEW

Telephone interviews are used by companies to screen candidates and narrow the pool of applicants who will be invited for in-person interviews. They minimize expenses associated with interviewing out-of-town candidates and help employers quickly and efficiently target candidates who fit their needs. Companies also use telephone interviews to differentiate between candidates who appear similar on paper and to determine organizational fit.

You should take a telephone interview as seriously as you would a face-to-face interview. If you do poorly on the telephone interview, you will almost certainly not be invited to the onsite interview. Without good preparation, you can just as easily fail at a telephone interview as at an in-person interview. Issues such as background noise, dropped calls, lack of knowledge about the company, and being unprepared to respond to questions could negatively impact the interview and your chances of working for a company that has shown interest in you.

## Advantages of the Phone Interview

One advantage of a telephone interview is that it allows you to have your research and preparation materials in front of you during the interview. However, you should not read directly from these documents, as interviewers can likely tell if you are reading. Many interviewers may even try to test you to see how quickly you can think on your feet. To ensure that you do not read straight from your notes, write down important points and facts only, not entire paragraphs or sentences.

## What to Expect

Telephone interviews can be as brief as 15 minutes or as long as an hour. They may involve a standardized set of questions that are asked of all candidates. Be prepared for interviewers to ask a lot of questions about a specific skill or experience that is important for the job.

While telephone interviews mainly involve employers asking you questions, you should be prepared to ask a few questions as well. By asking for information regarding the position and its responsibilities, you show

an employer that you are interested in a position and enthusiastic about earning a face-to-face interview.

## Types of Telephone Interviews

- **Information Gathering Interviews:** An employer may ask to speak with you to determine your interest in their company. This is common if you were referred to the employer through a personal contact or someone you met at a career fair. You should treat this phone call seriously. Companies often use information gathering interviews to see if candidates are a potential fit before scheduling a lengthier phone interview.
- **Screening Calls:** Companies may use telephone interviews to narrow down a pool of applicants for in-person interviews. This type of interview can last anywhere from 15 to 45 minutes and may be conducted by either a hiring manager or someone from Human Resources. In either case, you should assume that the interviewer has in-depth knowledge of the position and job qualifications. Be prepared and demonstrate as much interest



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and enthusiasm when speaking with an HR representative as a hiring manager.

- **In-Depth Telephone Interview:** Companies use in-depth interviews to minimize travel expenses associated with interviewing out-of-town candidates. In some cases you may be put on speakerphone to talk with an entire hiring committee.
- **Unexpected:** A company representative or recruiter may call you unexpectedly and ask if you have a few minutes to talk. For this reason, you should always be prepared. Try to determine if the representative is making a quick informational call or if they want to discuss job-related skills in-depth. If it turns out to be a longer interview, decide quickly if it is a good time for you to talk. If it is not (which is okay), ask if you can arrange to talk at another time that is convenient for both of you. Keep in mind that when you talk on the phone with a prospective employer, you should always use your best interviewing skills, and convey enthusiasm and professionalism even if it is 9 am.

## Who Calls Who?

Usually, employers prefer to call candidates to arrange interview times that meet both schedules. Sometimes, employers may ask candidates to call them, which can test how serious the candidate is about the job as well as how effectively they follow through. If you receive a telephone call from employers at a bad time, it is okay to ask if you can call them back in ten minutes or so to better position yourself in a quiet location. It is always better to ask to reschedule than to appear unprepared.

## Scheduling

When you schedule a phone interview, you should arrange a time that is comfortable for both you and the employer. If you have a class or other commitment,

let the employer know and they will be happy to try to accommodate your needs. You may prefer not to arrange interviews too early in the morning or too late in the afternoon. However, if the employer has no other time available, your willingness to compromise and be flexible can make a good impression.

Always confirm the time zone, length of the interview, and the name and position of the person (or people) conducting the interview.

## Voice Mail

Make sure you have a clear and professional voicemail message in case you miss a telephone call from a company. Get rid of a ringback tune from your favorite band, as employers will likely not wait through it but will hang up and not call back. Remember, your voicemail message is your chance to make a truly excellent first impression.

## Preparing for a Telephone Interview

During your job search, you should be prepared to take, and succeed on, a phone interview on a moment's notice. However, if you know about the interview in advance, take time to prepare and do your research just like you would for a face-to-face interview:

- Make a list of your strengths and weaknesses.
- Review and think about answers to common phone interview questions (see list on pages 4-5 for examples).
- Be prepared to talk about your background and skills, especially as they relate to job specifics.
- Review the job posting and make a list of how your qualifications match the hiring criteria.
- Make a list of examples you could use to demonstrate your skills and abilities. Practice

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talking about those examples using STAR (Situation, Task, Action taken, Result). Refer to the **Interview Process** tipsheet for more details on how to use the STAR approach.

- Research the company and the job. You should be able to clearly articulate why you are interested in the job and why you would like to work for that company.
- Prepare a few questions to ask at the end of the telephone interview similar to those you would ask at the end of an in-person interview.

## Before the Interview

Make sure you have a quiet space with no distractions reserved for your interview. This includes pets, children, and roommates. Do not have the television or radio on in the background.

While it may seem silly, you should also dress in professional attire for your phone interview. When you dress for business, you put yourself in a professional frame of mind.

Make sure you have the following items on hand before you start your interview:

- Your resume
- Any notes you have prepared in advance

- A photo of the person who will be interviewing you so you have a face to put with a name. This will help relax you.
- A mirror to check your facial expressions and body language which can be conveyed through your voice. Smile and try to relax!
- A calendar in case you are asked to schedule a follow-up interview
- A clock to monitor how much time you have left in the interview—always respect the time parameters set by the interviewer
- A glass of water in case your mouth gets dry
- A pen and paper handy for note-taking

Also, remember to turn off call-waiting on your phone so that your interview does not get interrupted.

## During the Interview

Your phone interview should be as professional as your in-person interview. Make sure to smile, sit up straight, be alert, and focus on the interviewer. Your attitude and interest level will come across through your voice, so make sure to convey a positive and enthusiastic tone—studies indicate that smiling can help achieve this.

Listen to each question the interviewer asks and answer it as fully as possible. You should not be engaged in substantial reading and note-taking on the side, as you might miss important questions and comments.

While on the phone, remember:

- Do not smoke, chew gum, eat, or drink.
- Pay attention to your body language. Smile, think positively, and focus on the interviewer.
- Speak slowly and clearly, and use proper grammar.

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- Do not assume pronouns, avoid using Mr. or Ms. instead use their full name or preferred name.
- Never interrupt the interviewer. Wait until they have fully asked a question before you ask any clarifying questions.
- Take your time answering questions. You can take a moment or two to collect your thoughts before you give your answer.
- Avoid the overuse of “ah,” “err,” “uhh,” and “like.”
- Avoid saying a simple “yes” or “no” by backing up your answers with specific examples from past work, project, or educational experiences.
- Express your enthusiasm by talking about what excites you about the job, the company, the field, and your major.
- Do not mention compensation. This conversation typically comes at the end of the interview cycle, not during a telephone interview.
- Request contact information for follow-up questions and thank you letters.
- Reiterate your interest in the job and desire to move on to the next step.
- Remember that the goal of the telephone interview is to gain an invitation to a face-to-face interview. At the end of the telephone interview, thank the interviewer and inquire if it would be possible to meet in person.
- Send a thank you note to express your thanks and reiterate your interest in the job and company. Include a reminder of something specific you discussed that demonstrates how well you matched one or two of their key requirements. Refer to our **Thank You Note Writing** tipsheet for more guidance.
- Send any requested materials to the employer as soon as possible.

## Common Telephone Interview Questions

- Can you tell me a little about yourself?
- What interests you about this job?
- Why do you want this job? Why do you want to work at this company?
- What do you know about this company/position?
- What is the most important thing you’re looking for in a company/job?
- Are you willing to travel?
- What applicable experiences or skills do you have?
- What is your greatest weakness?
- What are some of your greatest strengths?
- What is the most significant accomplishment you have made thus far?
- How do you handle stress and pressure?
- How would you rate your communication skills?
- How do you prefer to communicate—in person, by phone, email, instant messaging?
- What is your favorite book? Movie?

## After the Interview

- Write notes summarizing the interview. Note what questions you were asked and how you answered.
- Evaluate how well you did on the interview and highlight areas that you could improve for next time.

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- What motivates you?
- What type of work environment do you prefer?
- Give an example of a situation where you used logic to solve a problem.
- Have you ever gone above and beyond the call of duty? When and how?
- How have you handled a difficult situation with a customer or co-worker?
- How do you evaluate success?
- Questions about your career goals—where do you see yourself in five years? ten years?
- Questions about your abilities and qualifications.
- Is there anything I haven't told you about the job or company that you would like to know?
- Do you have any questions?

Remember, the CDC is here to help—stop by to meet with a CDC staff member about any questions you have. You can discuss telephone interviews in an appointment or at drop ins.

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