MAKING AN IMPRESSION WITH
THE PHONE INTERVIEW

The phone interview is increasingly used by companies and other organizations as an economical and efficient means to begin the process of hiring new employees.

Although similar to an in-person interview, the phone interview has several differences, but presents you as a job-seeker with the opportunity to make a strong and positive first impression on potential employers.

Consider these differences when preparing for a phone interview:
• The time of the interview
• Your surroundings
• Knowing your strengths and weaknesses
• How to project both your ideas and enthusiasm
• Researching the employer and gathering questions to ask
• Practicing answering to the various types of questions that you might be asked

The phone interview is your first step to securing a personal interview. Don’t make the mistake of not being prepared!

WHY CONDUCT A PHONE INTERVIEW?

Organizations use phone interviews for a variety of reasons. The most common reasons to conduct a phone interview with a prospective employee are:
• To save time
• To save money (specifically, travel expenses)
• To pre-screen employees
• To narrow down the search for potential face-to-face interviews

HOW DOES AN INTERVIEW ON THE PHONE DIFFER FROM ONE IN-PERSON?

Phone interviews are similar to face-to-face interviews despite the method of communication. Face-to-face communication consists of words, tone of voice, and body language. Phone communication consists only of the first two, so what you say and how you say it are critical. Use positive words like “challenge, solution, success, we, I, our, your, opportunity, can, good, between assignments.” Avoid words like “can’t, won’t, don’t, haven’t, unsuccessful, failure, problem, bad, unemployed, retired, fired.” Your tone of voice should be enthusiastic and positive.

One disadvantage of the phone interview is the loss of personal contact between you and the interviewer—a vital part of selling yourself. Due to this loss of contact, you sacrifice all control over the interview because you are an ambiguous person on the phone. You are deprived of visual cues regarding the office environment, culture, and the interviewer’s attitude toward others. The opportunity to gather a visual sense of the company, potential co-workers, and the interviewer is lost.

A face-to-face interview does a great deal more than allow two people to have a conversation about themselves and a career. Within this process you have the opportunity to bond with the interviewer and to portray the best way in which your talents can mesh with the needs of the organization.

Keep in mind that there are some advantages to the phone interview. Since the interviewer can only focus on what is being said (and how it’s being said), then he or she will listen to your verbal expressions more intently than in a face-to-face interview. Also, you have the advantage of using any resources available while on the phone (copies of resume, job description, etc.).
WHEN SHOULD A PHONE INTERVIEW OCCUR?

Hopefully, you will get the chance to correspond with an organization and set up a time to conduct a phone interview at your convenience. However, they may call you out of the blue based on a resume you sent out months ago. The call could start out with, “I just had a few questions about your resume…” and extend into an hour. Keep in mind that you have the option to say, “Right now is not a good time, but can I call you back in an hour?” so that you can collect yourself in order to give your best impression. However, also keep in mind that it is important to be prepared for a phone interview on a moment’s notice. You never know when a recruiter might call.

WHERE SHOULD A PHONE INTERVIEW TAKE PLACE?

Place yourself in a private location, free from intrusions and distractions. Have your phone in a quiet room away from radios, televisions, family and friends, or anything else that may make a noise or take your attention away from the task at hand. Select a comfortable place, preferably with a nice view to help you concentrate.

HOW WILL A PHONE INTERVIEW BE EVALUATED?

How you will be assessed in a phone interview differs from how you might be assessed during an in-person interview. Rather than making your first impression with body language and a firm handshake, your first impression will be your initial greeting on the phone. The interviewer may ask him or herself the following questions after the interview:

- Did you have an enthusiastic voice?
- Did you answer questions vaguely or directly?
- Did you research the organization well, or did you ask simple questions?
- Did you express interest in a second interview?
- Did you follow up with a thank you letter?
- Did you pursue this opportunity with a phone call or e-mail?
- Did you send supporting material (resume, portfolio, etc.)?

PREPARING FOR THE PHONE INTERVIEW

Prepare for the phone interview just like you would for an in-person interview. Even shower and dress up so that you will be in a professional and confident frame of mind. You will not do as well in your phone interview if you are lying in bed or draped over a couch in your pajamas.

Research the Organization and the Position

Before you conduct the interview, learn as much about the organization and position to which you are applying. Visit the organization’s website. Analyze the job description and try to match your experiences, interests, and abilities to what they are seeking.

Know Yourself

Be prepared to discuss your strengths, weaknesses, educational and work experience, personal goals, and values. Read the job description thoroughly and anticipate questions that may be asked of you.
Make a List of Questions to Ask
The questions you ask will reveal much about your level of interest in the organization and your level of preparation for the interview. Ask questions that demonstrate a genuine interest in and knowledge of the organization and position. Although each situation will warrant specific inquiries, some suggested questions include:

- What are the characteristics of a successful employee at your organization?
- What factors make someone an ideal candidate at your organization?
- What are the problems I will be expected to solve?
- What is a traditional career path for this position?
- Can you tell me something about how your career has developed working at your organization?
- How are employees evaluated?
- Could you describe a typical week within your organization?
- What are some of the reasons you believe people enjoy working at your organization?
- Do you have any unanswered questions about my qualifications?
- What are the next steps in the hiring process?

Utilize Your Resources
Gather these tools near the phone for use during the interview:

- Resume and cover letter for the position
- Pen and paper to take notes during the interview
- Research you have conducted on the organization
- Questions to ask about the organization and position
- A loosely written outline of points to make or items to cover as you talk about the position
- Comfort items: tissues, water, etc.
- Job description

TYPES OF ANSWERS TO PRACTICE

Behavioral Answers
The most common type of questions are behavioral. These questions aim to determine how you would operate on the job. One strategy for answering behavior-based questions is to use the STAR formula (Situation, Task, Action, Response). The formula ensures that you deliver a complete and concise answer. For example:

Question
Describe a time when you were a team member and someone fell behind.

Answer
Situation I had been assigned to a team to build a canoe out of concrete. One of our team members was not showing up for our lab sessions or doing his assignments.
Task To maintain a good relationship with him and to help him do the job, I met with him in private.
Action I explained to him the team’s frustration and asked if there was anything I could do to help. He told me he was failing another class, so I found someone to help him with that coursework.
Result He was able to spend more time on our project and was also grateful to me for helping him out. We finished our project on time and received high scores.

Traditional Questions
Traditional questions include questions that clarify points on your resume, evaluate your accomplishments and goals, and assess your expectations of the organization. “Themes” also work into these questions, as well as many opportunities for you to showcase your strengths. Some traditional questions and themes include:

- Question Why do you want to work here?
- Theme Measure of knowledge of organization and interest in it.
- Question I have researched the leading organizations in this industry, and yours seems to be the one that does the best job in terms of customer relations, encouraging risk-taking, and setting challenging goals. These qualities really appeal to me.

Difficult Questions
Difficult questions are those that you are hoping they won’t ask. For instance, if your resume does not show continuous employment, you can expect to be asked to explain any gaps. In order to answer these questions, you will need to come to terms with the issue at hand, see the positive side of it, and demonstrate that you are eager to move on with your career.
DURING THE PHONE INTERVIEW

- Have a self-confident and enthusiastic voice
- Smile as much as possible—this will create an enthusiastic tone of voice
- Speak succinctly so that you are not rambling
- Keep the conversation going with prepared questions
- Do not eat, smoke, or chew gum while on the phone
- Speak directly into the phone so that you can be heard clearly
- Do not take other calls while on the phone—try to turn off call waiting
- Sit in an upright position or stand while talking—your voice will sound stronger
- Avoid nervous habits that will create noise
- Do not interrupt the interviewer
- Listen to what is said and asked and ask for clarification if needed

ENDING THE CONVERSATION

- Let the employer end the interview
- Thank the employer for his/her time and reiterate your interest in the position
- Find the next steps so that you can follow up appropriately
- State that you would like to meet personally

FOLLOW UP WITH THE INTERVIEWER

Send a thank you letter to the interviewer as soon as possible to show your appreciation and enthusiasm for the position. Make sure that the timetable of the hiring process and future steps have been discussed so that you are aware of where you stand in the interview process.

PREPARE FOR THE FACE-TO-FACE INTERVIEW

A phone interview may be all that is needed to convince your interviewer that you are the right person for the job. However, many organizations prefer to meet job seekers in person before making any decisions. Consult with Career Services for help with face-to-face interviews. We have many resources and can work with you during a taped practice interview to assess your interviewing strengths and weaknesses.

Hints to Help You Transition to the in-Person Interview:

- Focus on what you can offer the organization
- Offer new information if possible
- Give new examples of what you have accomplished
- Ask more specific questions
- Let your research show

During the in-Person Interview:

- Arrive 5 to 10 minutes early
- Express a positive and enthusiastic attitude
- Pay attention to your body language
- Show confidence without being arrogant
- Open up to the interviewer so that he/she gets a glimpse of who you are
- Be neatly groomed and display good hygiene
- Dress accordingly and demonstrate good posture
- Maintain good eye contact throughout the interview
- Give a firm handshake before and after the interview
- Maintain interviewer’s pace and style of speech
- End the interview with gratitude and enthusiasm for the job in a closing statement