

Phone Interview Tips

by Roger Manning

Phone interviews are used extensively these days for several reasons. Your employer may use the phone interview as an initial introduction; may use it as a screening tool based upon your ability to communicate effectively; or as a screening tool based upon clarifying your resume or use the phone interview just to fill in time gaps until they can schedule a live visit to your city.

Make no mistake about it. The phone interview is an actual interview. I stress this point because many times candidates will let themselves down and do not take the same necessary steps to prepare for the interview or do not put out an extra effort. The candidate may see the phone interview as informality and not a screening step. The phone conversation maybe perceived as just another conversation. You must realize that since the employer cannot see you, they must focus all their attention through their listening skills. As a result, not only does your answer to the question matter but also the way you answer the question matters. Your employer pays special attention to your use of grammar, voice inflection, enthusiasm, personality traits, and whether or not you can relax and carry on a conversation...chemistry...if you will between you and them. As an example, let's consider this:

Case scenario:

Paul has a phone interview at 1:00pm. The employer calls promptly at 1:00pm but cannot get through to Paul. That is because Paul has given the employer his cell phone and Paul has not got out of his client's office in time for the call. Finally, Paul gets out of the client and calls back the employer 15 minutes late. We are not actually off to a good start now are we?

Next Paul is sitting in his car on a fairly mild day with the car window down. As the interview progresses, the employer hears background noise and occasional interruption of service due to losing the cell phone signal. The employer asks Paul what he knows about their organization and Paul states, "I have not really had time to research your company because of my appointment schedule." Well we have another disappointment and lost chance to impress the employer of your enthusiasm toward their company. Lastly, upon the conclusion of the interview, the employer states, "Paul, I will be in touch with you in the next couple weeks. We have other people to talk to before I can make a decision as to who we ask back for the second interview." Paul replies, "OK, thank you very much."

I hope you can see by this example that this was not a desirable interview from the lack of preparation to the environment of which Paul placed himself for the interview. Paul also was not prepared to ask a final career-focused question, summary his strengths nor ask for the next interview.

Let's review some key strategies and tactics for your next phone interview.

Preparation for the Phone Interview

- Place the interview on your calendar, Day Timer or whatever method you use to schedule your time. BE ON TIME;
- Research the company; research the industry; research the competition;
- Have your resume on the table in front of you; be sure to have your dates of employment clearly written out; know your salary history;
- If your resume does not have your accomplishments and accolades shown on your resume, then you must prepare a separate list. What are the things that you are most proud of as your accomplishments with your current and prior employers. If your resume lacks the this kind of information, see my article on [Building Your Resume](#).
- Prepare a list of company-focused and career-focused questions that you will want to ask during the interview or when allowed to ask questions.
- Give a land-line phone number to the employer. DO NOT USE A CELL PHONE. Try to be at home, hotel room or at a private office setting for your interview.
- If you are working with a recruiter/Search Consultant, be sure to call them on the prior day for last minute instructions, preparation as final confirmation that the employer will be calling you on the specified date and time.
- Practice your response to some of the typical interview questions that most employers will ask you. Be assured that you will be asked these questions as a minimum:
 - Discuss your reasons and motivations for prior job changes
 - Why these job changes prepared you for this position
 - Salary history
 - Why are you interested in this position

Review this [hotlink](#) for a good resource for some of the most frequently asked and toughest interview questions (face-to-face or telephone).

Practice Makes Perfect

- Sit in front of a large mirror and practice answering your own interview questions. Pay special attention to your facial expressions. Do you allow yourself to occasionally smile? Smiling causes your personality to come through and injects enthusiasm. Believe me that this does come through over the phone. Remember your interviewer cannot see you but they do hear you and are “reading-between-the-lines”. Are you boring and mundane. Does your voice reflect cheerfulness and enthusiasm? Do you reflect being a happy soul or do you more resemble a downtrodden and depressed unemployed worker?
- Pay special attention to your body posture and position. Slouching affects not only your attitude and ability to be enthusiastic but it also negatively affects your breathing. You must practice and learn to sit up-right with good posture and breathe fully. Breathing fully resonates sound much more clearly and with stronger voice tones than breathing more shallowly.

- I have even advised some of my candidates that were phone-interviewing on a day-off from work (or in between jobs) to go through the motions of grooming and dressing-up as if to be going to the interview “live”. This dressing-up puts you in a more serious frame of mind and makes you feel like you are going to an actual interview. Again, attitude and enthusiasm towards the job opportunity is everything and is detected by your interviewer/listener. [Are you conducting your phone interviews in an environment where the listener would wonder if you are still in your underwear, lounging on the couch with the TV going in the background? I would hope not!]
- Practice interviewing into a tape recorder to make an assessment as to your proper use of grammar, voice inflection and idiosyncrasies like using the term “uhm, uhm”. How many times do you say uhm in between phrases or sentences?

What Are Good Questions To Ask During the First Phone Interview?

Let’s start discussing the questions that you do NOT ask during your phone interview.

DON’T ASK ABOUT:

- Salary or compensation plan
- Benefits
- Vacation time or other time off
- Questions that appear judgmental of the company or the manager
- Questions that sound sarcastic

I know that your spouse or significant other wants to know about the money and benefits after the interview, but you will have to tell them to be patient for later interviews. You should be more concerned about questions that give you clear answers as to your long term job satisfaction relating to:

- Appropriate challenge for your level of experience and knowledge;
- Career growth and upward mobility;
- What your work environment will be like;
- What kind of supervisor will you report to and what is their management style and philosophy;
- Stability of the company in the areas of finances, growth, research & development, employee turnover, etc.
- Longevity with the Company;

So what are some good questions to ask during your phone interview?

- What drew you to XYZ Company and made you decide to come to work for them?
- What can I expect from you in terms of your management style and philosophy?
- What do you feel that separates apart your #1 person in this similar position from the mediocre performers?
- How do you conduct your performance process of people within your department? How frequently do you conduct this performance appraisal?

- I have done a little research on XYZ's financial status for the last year. Can you explain why the company is showing negative growth?
- What kind of training can I expect from you and/or your company?
- What do you see as the future for XYZ Company and especially for your department?
- Who do you see as your main competitor and why would I want to work for XYZ instead of them?
- What can I learn from the predecessor's performance in this position whereby I could do a better job?

These are only a few of thousands of questions that you could present to your interviewer that reflect your interest and concern about your career and the decision-making process that you will make in selecting your next employer. Make some quiet time for yourself where you can concentrate on making a good list of questions that yield answers that will make you know whether or not you want to pursue this opportunity.

The SUMMARY

When the interviewer has obviously indicated that they are done with their questions, sometimes you are allowed to ask questions. It is usually appropriate to ask one or two questions. Again, be sure to ask career-focused questions. After you have been satisfied with their answers, you must now summarize and close. The summary consists of:

- Making a positive statement about your interest in this position and your confidence that you will excel in this position if given the opportunity.
- Give a brief summary or bullet points of your strengths, accomplishments or character traits that you feel confidently match what is needed in this position leading to your success. Then you must close.

The CLOSE

No matter how the interview appears to have gone, you must realize that you will either be invited to go to the next step or you have been eliminated. Assuming that you are interested in going to the next step based upon your initial impression of this interviewer and the Company, you must CLOSE the interview. Closing the interview is much like a salesperson or negotiator closing their deal. Ask for the next interview. Ask for the job. However, you ask it, you must show that you are interested and want this position. Enthusiasm and drive go along way in convincing most employers to oblige you the next step.

Keep in mind that your interviewer may actually have many more people scheduled to interview. The person(s) that make the most memorable impression upon the interviewer's mind at the end of the day are the ones that get asked back. If you can actually get the interviewer to make that commitment up-front by (a) making the next appointment date, (b) commit to the next interview, (c) state that you will see his/her boss, or any other form of commitment, will actually stand a better chance of fulfillment.