

Phone Interviews

Phone interviews are typically used by organizations as an initial screening technique, although they can be used in other phases of the interview process as well. In most cases, they help an organization narrow down a long list of job candidates, and do so in a way that saves time and money. Most phone interviews are brief – twenty to thirty minutes long – but some can last longer.

They can be challenging, as they do not provide the all-important “visual cues” that a face-to-face interview affords. So although you’re applying all the techniques you learned about interviewing, phone interviews require an additional set of strategies to be successful.

Below you will find some tips, advice and strategies to help you master your next phone interview.

- Whenever you’re applying for jobs, and anticipating potential phone calls for interviews, ensure that your voicemail message is clear and professional in nature. Consider a message similar to the following: “You’ve reached the number for John Smith. I’m not available at the moment, but your call is important to me. Please leave your name, number and the purpose of your call. I’ll return your call at my earliest convenience.”
- If the phone interview is “scheduled,” make sure to ask who you will be speaking with and how long you should plan for the call. This will give you a clue as to how intense the interview will be.

Confirm who will initiate the call, although in most cases it’s the interviewer. Make sure you have the phone number of your contact person, in case of an emergency.

- If the phone interview is “unscheduled,” resist the temptation of launching into an immediate interview. You’re not fully prepared and your lack of preparation may reflect negatively on you.

Let the interviewer know that you cannot give the call the attention it deserves, and then schedule another date and time to talk. Most interviewers will understand and respect this. If they don’t, it will give you some indication of the culture of the organization – how they do things.

- Confirm the interview the day before by sending an email to your contact person. It shows preparation, organization and professionalism. Let the interviewer know how much you're looking forward to the phone interview, and once again provide the number they should call.
- Treat phone interviews as you would any other interview, minus the face-to-face interaction. It is critical that you research and gather information about the position, the organization, and your unique qualifications. **See our handout on "Interviewing Techniques" for more information.**
- Get very familiar with your resume; it may serve as the "talking point" for the interview.
- Prepare and practice your answers to both traditional and behavior-based questions. **Refer to our handout on "Common and Difficult Interview Questions" for help with this.**
- Avoid telling jokes, using poor language or slang, talking about controversial topics, speaking negatively about a present or former employer, talking about personal issues or family problems, or acting desperate for a job. None of these will be well received by the interviewer.
- Practice your phone interviewing skills by doing a "mock phone interview." **Schedule an appointment for a mock interview with Clarkson University Career Services.**
- Consider the best place to conduct the phone interview. You will need a quiet environment, free of distractions and noise. You don't want barking dogs, children at play, loud music, nearby construction, or any other distraction to interfere with your interview.

If you're conducting the interview at your home, and others are present, let them know that you will be in a phone interview. Get their cooperation to help eliminate distractions and noise.

- You will also want to create a comfortable and professional environment. Sit in a chair with a firm back – and sit up straight. Good posture will help you project your voice. Make sure that the chair doesn't "creak" or make noises when you shift position. You don't want that distraction.

Sit at a table that will accommodate all of the reference materials you will have in front of you. Remove any other objects from the table.

Make sure the room is clean and neat. Removing the clutter from the room will help you remove the clutter from your thought process.

- Get a good night's sleep. The quality of your sleep can also influence the quality of your voice. In a phone interview, your voice can project volumes in terms of how you come across to the interviewer.
- Regarding the phone you use, landlines are more reliable than cell phones. If you do use a landline, make sure your cell phone is turned off.

If you don't have a landline and you need to use your cell phone, test it with a friend prior to the interview to see what part of the room gives you the clearest reception. This will be the best spot in the room for the phone interview. In addition, make sure your cell phone is fully charged and ready to go.

- Have your resume, cover letter, research notes, list of questions to ask and any other key marketing documents handy and ready to refer to if/when needed. Organize them on your table in a logical fashion for easy access.

This is one of the advantages of a phone interview. You can reference any of these documents without the interviewer seeing you. But be careful not to get distracted by all of these materials, and losing your focus on what the interviewer is asking or telling you.

- Make a list of all of the qualifications (required and desired) for the position. Next to each qualification, jot down some brief notes about how you meet or exceed that qualification. Also, make note of any stories you would want to talk about to provide "evidence" of those qualifications. Remember, employers predict future success through past performance – stories provide evidence of performance.
- Have a clean pad of paper and several pens for taking notes. Don't use your computer to take notes, as the sound of the keyboard may be distracting to the interviewer. If you have your computer nearby, make sure the sound is turned off to avoid background noise.
- Keep a glass of water at the table for those instances of dry mouth or a scratchy throat. Drink some water prior to the interview to clear your throat. Once again, the quality of your voice is critical.
- Use the restroom prior to the phone interview. Taking a "restroom break" mid-interview would not be the professional thing to do. You also want to be comfortable during the interview.
- Be ready early – at least ten minutes prior to your call. Have your room set and ready to go.
- Because there are no "visual cues" during a phone interview, you will be evaluated based on the quality of your responses and the tone of your voice. Regarding voice tone, make sure to change the inflection of your voice appropriately. Speak clearly and confidently.

- Listen carefully. Without visual cues, your listening skills will be even more important. Focus on what the interviewer is asking or telling you. Don't be afraid to pose clarifying questions.
- Take your time when answering questions. An appropriate pause is acceptable. Be thoughtful in your response, particularly during times when you're asked to tell a story in response to a behavioral-based question (tell me about a time when ...).
- Silence can be even more disconcerting during a phone interview. You can't see the interviewer, so you can't use visual cues to try to interpret it. When it becomes uncomfortable, say something such as "Did I answer the question to your satisfaction? Would you like me to expand on this topic?"
- Consider standing at different points during the interview. Posture has an impact on how we communicate. Standing and walking around the room can help you think and make you feel more engaged in the conversation.

But, if you're on a cell phone, be aware of how reception may change as you walk around the room. This is another advantage of using a landline for your phone interview.

- Make sure to smile when you're talking about things like your interest in (and qualifications for) the job, as well as your enthusiasm for the organization. Believe it or not, it does make a difference in how we communicate. You will come across as more engaging and passionate.
- Avoid the temptation of multi-tasking – checking your email, checking your phone, sending a text to a friend, or anything else that will break your concentration on the interview. Your complete and sole focus should be on the interviewer.
- Ask good questions at the end of the phone interview, if given the opportunity. **Check out our handout on "Questions to Ask at an Interview" for some sample questions.** At a minimum, always inquire about the next step in the process and when you can expect to hear from them.
- Immediately write down notes after the interview concludes so you don't forget important details.
- Remember to send a thank you note within twenty-four hours of the interview. Use this thank you note to re-emphasize your interest in (and qualifications for) the position. In addition, include any information you forgot to mention that you believe is critical to their decision-making process.
- Follow up in a professionally persistent manner, based on the next steps and timeline given to you at the end of the interview. This will show interest and keep you in their "line of sight."

Once again, phone interviews can present a new challenge in the job search process. Using these tips, advice and strategies will help you in mastering this new challenge, and in achieving your career goals.