

Ten tips for handling job interviews by phone

By Kathleen Pagana, PhD, RN

YOU WERE EXPECTING a face-to-face job interview, but instead you're scheduled for a phone interview. Discouraged? Don't be. Phone interviews are a way to narrow down the applicant pool and minimize expenses for out-of-town applicants. These days, they're a standard first step for many jobs.

The purpose of a phone interview is to screen job candidates and determine which ones to invite for an in-person interview. Remember—interviewing is a two-way street. As an interviewee, one of your goals should be to determine if you're a good fit for the organization. If your answer is yes, your challenge is getting to the next step—the face-to-face interview. Here are 10 tips for acing the phone interview.

1. Be prepared

Find out as much as you can about the organization and the position. Start by checking the organization's website. The more you can find out, the more confident and prepared you'll feel when the phone rings. Role-play and practice your answers to typical questions. The trend in interview questions is to make them behavioral-based, on the premise that past performance is a good indicator of future performance. Don't give one-word answers to questions, and limit your response to less than 2 minutes. If the interviewer wants more detail, he or she will ask. (See *Sample interview questions*.)

2. Control your surroundings

You need to be able to talk freely. Eliminate distracting background noise; don't move around to avoid noisy areas, because you may sound out of breath and lacking in confidence. If you didn't schedule the interview and can't control your surroundings when the interviewer calls, ask if you can call back at a scheduled time.

3. Get into business mode

Many job applicants find it helpful to dress up for the phone interview. Even though the interviewer can't see you, you may feel and act more professional if you're dressed ap-

ropriately. If you're in your pajamas, you may sound too casual and tired.

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4. Stand up and smile

When you stand, your voice sounds more confident and dynamic. Move around a bit and use hand gestures. And be sure to smile. The smile on your face can be heard in your voice. Smiling changes the tone of your voice and projects a positive image to the listener.



Sample interview questions

You have a lot to gain by anticipating the questions you're likely to be asked during the phone interview, and preparing appropriate answers. Here are some common interview questions:

- What experiences do you have that will help you in this position?
- What are your major strengths? Weaknesses?
- What distinguishes you from other job candidates?
- Can you tell me about a time when you learned to get along with a difficult person?
- What makes you qualified for this position?
- When faced with a difficult problem, what do you do?

5. Have a pen and paper handy

Take notes during the interview. You don't want to be shuffling papers and looking for something to write with. Also, keep your résumé in sight in case you're asked questions about something listed on it.

6. Be a good listener

Don't interrupt the interviewer. The more information you can gather by listening, the better you can respond. If you have call-waiting, don't interrupt the call to take another call. Better yet, turn off the call-waiting function so you don't get interrupted.

7. Have questions prepared

Having questions on hand shows careful preparation; if you don't have questions, the interviewer might assume you're lazy or apathetic. Here's one suggestion for a question: What skills are considered most important for this position?

8. Watch your manners

Use the caller's title—for instance, Mr., Ms., or Dr., plus the person's last name. Address the interviewer by first name only if he or she asks you to. Don't interrupt the interviewer and don't smoke, chew gum, eat, or drink during the call. It's OK, though, to have

a glass of water handy in case your mouth feels dry.

9. Tweak your outgoing voicemail message

Make sure your voicemail message reflects a professional attitude. Although your friends may enjoy hearing a snippet of music from your favorite band, the interviewer may find it annoying or off-putting.

10. End the interview efficiently

Make every effort to reach your goal—an in-person interview. Ask about the next step in the interview process. If you don't get a positive response, ask the interviewer if he or she has any areas of concern, and try to clarify misunderstandings. Then ask again about the next step and the hiring timetable. Don't forget to send a thank-you note after the interview.

Job interviewing can be stressful no matter how and where it takes place. Remembering these 10 tips can help you “pass” the phone interview and move on to the in-person interview, where your chance of being hired increases greatly. ★

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