

Dialing for Jobs: How to Make the Most of a Phone Interview

Andrea Hall



Telephone interviews are becoming an increasingly common way for managers to screen candidates and for job applicants to learn more about a position. It saves time and travel costs for both parties. At the same time, however, phone interviews are part of a larger process that can be fraught with frustration for both the manager and the applicant. “Hiring someone is like dating them a couple of times and then marrying them,” says Daryl Forsythe, CBET, director of biomedical electronics at Delnor-Community Hospital in Geneva, IL. “It’s challenging, to say the least.”

As with any approach to hiring, there are pros and cons to telephone interviews. On the plus side, managers can “get a really good idea of candidates’ communication skills,” says Cindy Stephens of Stephens International Recruiting, which specializes in biomed recruitment. “If you can’t communicate on the phone, you won’t be able to communicate with people in the hospital.”

However, not being able to interact in person can be a drawback to managers. Getting a sense of someone’s personality, without being able to see his or her body

language, can be difficult. “There are non-verbal clues that you don’t get over the phone,” says Forsythe. “As humans, we generally judge people based on how they speak and how they look.” Job applicants also may find phone calls somewhat restrictive. “You can just do so much over the phone” to impress someone, says Chris Jones, CBET. Jones went through a number of phone interviews before landing his current job in the imaging services division at Johns Hopkins Bayview Medical Center in Baltimore.

Despite these obstacles, telephone interviews can be a satisfying and cost-efficient experience for both candidates and supervisors. By keeping in mind tips from experts and those who have been through the process, both parties can increase the likelihood of having a successful experience.

Do Your Homework

Applicants need to “prepare, prepare, prepare,” says Forsythe. “If you’re in the job market and you’ve applied for the job, you should have prepared for a phone interview,” he explains. Research the organizations to which you have applied. Tape your resume to a wall near the phone, and make sure the phone is in a quiet area, away from the TV, stereo, or young children.

“We tell candidates that they are competing for the job on the phone as well as in the face-to-face interview. You have to outshine the competition on the phone just as you would in person,” Stephens says. Smile while speaking on the phone, she adds, “because the smile comes through.” Avoid discussing anything negative. “I urge people to be very positive and self confident,” says Dick Berg (aka Richard Lechtenburg), a biomed recruiter with his own firm.

Be able to speak about yourself. You will project confidence if you can list your accomplishments and are able to back each one of them up with an example or

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statistic, such as how you increased preventive maintenance or your role in a significant cost savings, according to Stephens. Be prepared to explain how your strengths relate to the position to which you are applying.

With all this preparation, don't forget the basics. "It's amazing how many people don't realize the normal everyday things they do that can impact a call," says Stephens, who along with her staff remind applicants to:

- Make sure the outgoing message on your answering machine is professional.
- Remind your family about the importance of writing down all phone messages.
- Speak clearly and adjust the phone volume appropriately.
- Remember that a landline is better than a cell phone or even a portable.

A Wake-up Call

Most managers do not like to schedule telephone interviews with candidates in advance. "Hit 'em cold," says Forsythe, who explains that this is a good way to see if the candidate has prepared for the interview. Although he will ask if it is a good time to talk, Forsythe says a cold call can reveal much about the job applicant.

Remember that although you can't see the candidate, there are ways to gauge his or her personality before an in-person meeting. Draw him or her out. A candidate who is comfortable is more likely to reveal more about his or her own character. "Try not to be their best friend right away, but have a good rapport to make them feel at ease," says Jones. Look for the following qualities when interviewing job candidates by telephone:

- Can they talk about their strengths and weaknesses, and how they compensate for those weaknesses?
- Are they confident?
- Can they tell you why they like this type of work?

Forsythe suggests asking the candidate what type of manager he or she likes to work with, as well as what he or she did or did not like about former managers. Stephens' advice is to ask the applicant, "What was your worst experience on the job? How did you handle the staff who was angry at you?" Some of these questions will get out the worst side of people, she explains. For some applicants, just thinking about such a situation can trigger an outburst.

Just as applicants commonly make mistakes that can cost them a job, managers make their own errors. Usually, these are sins of omission, such as failing to ask

the right questions, which can result in time-consuming in-person interviews with poorly matched candidates.

Prepare your questions in advance, ask all applicants the same questions and rate their answers for later reference, suggests Jim Kenyon, CBET, field service engineer with Sacred Heart Engineering Services in Spokane, WA. Inquire about their experience, especially on equipment you have at your facility, he adds. Most importantly, don't let a good applicant slip through your fingers. "Employers who don't react quickly enough risk losing good candidates," Stephens says.

While it may be difficult to make a lasting face-to-face impression with a potential employer, candidates should focus on how to make their verbal cues sell their skills. As for employers, zero in on how prospective employees handle themselves when answering pointed questions. By keeping some of these tips in mind, applicants and employers can take advantage of the time and money they save when conducting phone interviews. After all, time is money. ■

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