

Telephone Interview

Telephone interviews are becoming an important part of the recruitment process. They are now used frequently by many organizations, as the first stage in selecting a candidate.

Telephone interviews save time and cost relatively less. Employers conduct telephone interviews for a variety of reasons. They may have received hundreds of responses to a vacancy advertisement and do not want to go through a face-to-face interview with each applicant. A number of applicants may be residing in other cities, and the organization wants to save on the time and cost involved in arranging in-depth interviews across the table for these applicants. Just conducting a short telephone interview and then short-listing the suitable applicants can significantly reduce the pile of resumes received.

Employers, therefore, use the telephone interview as an initial screening interview. It is a short, cost-effective way of finding out the answers to the following questions about the applicant:

- Q. Is the applicant serious about the job and the organization?
- Q. Has he/she made any effort to research the company/position or has just sent in his/her resume?
- Q. How good are his/her communication skills?
- Q. Why does he/she want to quit from his/her existing job?

Telephone interviews could be scheduled or unscheduled

There is no fixed system for when a telephone interview is held, unlike a face-to-face interview where the time, date and venue are scheduled well in advance. Some employers could inform you beforehand when they are likely to call. Others may just decide to pick up the phone and call you also cannot be sure who is making the first call, whether the HR person or the recruiting agency.

In this scenario, it makes sense to be prepared because you never know when you will receive the telephone call. In case you receive the call, without prior notice, at a bad time, when you are in the middle of some domestic chore, you could take down the person's name and telephone number and say you would call back after 5 minutes. Or, you could request the caller to hold on for a few seconds till you get your act together in terms of getting a paper/pencil and your documents ready. Otherwise, you

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may not be psychologically prepared and could be caught on the wrong foot from the word go.

If you are lucky, you may be informed of a date and time when the telephone interview will be held. This will make things easier for you in terms of being mentally prepared, having the relevant papers by your side, speaking suitably for the occasion etc.

Through this article, we will provide guidelines on how to prepare for a telephone interview-to improve your performance and increase your chances of being short-listed.

Try to get short-listed to the next stage of the face-to-face interview

What is your objective in a telephone interview?

As the telephone interview is usually the initial screening interview that works as an elimination round, your objective is to get short-listed! Getting short-listed implies that you move on to the next round of the face-to-face interview.

You need to, therefore, prepare for this telephone interview and not treat it as lightly as a casual call. However, do not let the significance unnerve you. It is important that you remain cool and confident throughout the duration of the telephone interview, as this will do wonders to your performance!

The interviewer wants to evaluate your communication skills

The primary concern of the interviewer, during a telephone interview, is to judge you by your communication skills. How well do you communicate on the telephone, where you cannot see your interviewer? Do you seem uncomfortable since you cannot see the interviewer's reactions? Do you sound confident, qualified, interested and enthusiastic despite the absence of non-verbal cues from the person at the other end? Or are you left stuttering and groping for words, distraught by occasional awkward silences during the telephone call?

These are issues that you need to keep in mind during the telephone interview.

How can you improve the way you communicate on the telephone? Can you change the way you speak overnight just for an interview?

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Think through your answers to improve the way you communicate on the telephone. Improving the way you communicate on the telephone is not just how you speak and your accent. What is crucial is what you say i.e. the content of your answers. You can definitely make a difference to your answers by a certain degree of smart preparation.

Your preparation should involve thinking through certain questions that you could be asked with regard to your resume, and how you could possibly answer them. This does not mean that you should memorize canned and standard answers, but just that you draw up a list of anticipated questions, and think through how you would answer them. You could jot down points for each answer or just write a few key words to clarify your thought flow.

This will eventually help you in the actual telephone interview by reducing the time taken to answer questions, will ensure that the answers are brief and to the point, will reduce unnecessary gaps and long silences at your end. In addition, it will also indicate to the interviewer that you are a thinking person with clear career plans and are seriously interested in the position at the employer organization.

If you get caught off guard because you had not thought through a list of anticipated questions, your answers would tend to be long, lacking focus and you would come across as a confused individual, which is definitely not what you want the interviewer to perceive.

Some of the questions that you can anticipate are:

Summary of your career/previous work experience

Short and long term career goals

Where do you see yourself 5/10/15 years from now?

Why do you want to quit your current job?

Why have you applied to this organization?

Why do you want to work for this organization?

How are your skills, qualifications, and experience suitable for this job?

What do you know about the job that you have applied for?

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Tell us something about yourself

Find solution to a problems situation at work

For any questions relating to how you would handle a problem or crisis situation at work, remember to use an analytical and structured format for your answer i.e. problems definition-solution-implications.

Keep your answers short and to the point

Avoid verbosity and lengthy detailed explanations in your answers. Stick to what you have been asked. Do not get into a long preamble before you get to the actual answer. This will show clarity of thought and can be achieved by your preparation.

For example, to answer the question-“Tell us about yourself”- you may have a lot of information to give but you will need to prioritise. You could either describe yourself in a few adjectives to cover your strengths and weaknesses, or you could give a brief outline of your current employment and your career objectives etc. What you say should be prepared before hand so that it ensures that your answer is short and to the point.

Your telephone interview could vary from a duration of 5-10 minutes to half an hour or longer. Prepare answers to as many questions that you can think of because there is no fixed duration for the telephone call. The longer the interview takes does not necessarily mean a good interview, similarly a short interview does not necessarily mean a bad interview over the phone. It depends on what your answers were and how you delivered them over the phone. Just remember to keep your answers crisp, concise and focused.

Speak clearly and slowly

Regarding your style of delivering your answers, try and speak clearly and slowly. Be articulate. You have to rely on the interviewer’s listening skills to evaluate what you say, so do not take any chances in messing up at your end. You have to be sure that the interviewer has heard and understood what you say, so initially you may need to be careful about the pace at which you speak. However, do not concentrate on it so much that you forget what you were talking about!

Your voice should sound pleasant, friendly and enthusiastic

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Since the interviewer cannot see you, your tone of voice is important in making an impression on him. Try to sound enthusiastic. Smile even though you cannot be seen, because you will be surprised how smiling can improve the way you sound on the telephone! It will automatically give your voice a friendly tone!

In most interviews on the telephone, there may be only one interviewer at the other end. However, in some cases, the interview may be a conference call where a number of interviewers fire questions one after the other. Sounds unnerving, but don't lose heart! Just follow the basics-Speak to each person in the same pleasant way, as you are not aware of the hierarchy at this stage! Answer the person who asks the question and follow this for each further question. If you can catch the names of the interviewers if they introduce themselves, try and remember them or quickly jot them down so you can address the individuals personally. This is not absolutely necessary- if you do it right it will work for you, but if you mix up the names and voices of the interviewers, it can be extremely embarrassing! Use this tactic only if you are good with matching names to voices over the phone!

Be positive in what you say

You should approach your answers in a positive way i.e. do not criticize your former employer or give a negative picture of why you want to leave your former employer or give a negative picture of why you want to leave your current job. You are obviously looking for a change because you are unhappy with your existing job, but you can still be diplomatic about the reasons why!

Give the real reasons, but put it across in a positive way e.g. why you feel the need to move on in your career etc. And if you are looking for a change because you cannot get along with your present boss, there is no guarantee that you will get a better boss in your new job! Be sure why you are changing jobs-delving deeper into your career plans will give you more convincing reasons for why you want to quit your existing job.

Ask questions to show interest in the job you have applied for

To avoid just a one-sided conversation on the telephone, where you just speak when spoken to, if there is an opportunity, you could ask the interviewer certain questions about the organization or the job that you are being interviewed for.

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For example, you could clarify the responsibilities that your job will entail, the number of people working in the group/department or team that you will be joining. You could also ask what your immediate priority would be if recruited, in terms of a problem that the organization is currently facing in that area, or any project that you may need to initiate as soon as you join.

This will just go to show that you are a serious candidate for the position, and that you are really interested in the job.

Try and avoid initiating any salary talk unless the interviewer brings it up. Salary negotiations are better discussed at a later date. Right now it is more important that you convince the interviewers to short-list you for the next stage in the selection process, rather than worry about the salary you will be getting!

Keep important papers accessible near the telephone

Since you may receive your telephone call without warning, it would help if you kept important papers within easy reach of the telephone. As you cannot be seen, you could quickly glance at the papers for any assistance that you may need in answering questions that you had not anticipated. Keep papers such as your resume, the cover letter and any other information that you may have researched on the employer such as company size, market share, turnover, job responsibilities etc., easily accessible near the telephone.

Also keep a paper and pen or pencil handy to down any points or names that you may need to, during the course of the telephone interview.

You can use the fact that you cannot be seen to your advantage in terms of referring to your prepared points or resume to assist you in your answers. However, please do not be in a situation, where you have a friend or relative prompting you as this could turn out to be disastrous. It could even may you hesitate or stumble over words while answering questions and could get you thoroughly confused! It is best to be cool and think on your feet to answer surprise questions. Your preparation should have taken care of other questions and answers so that you did not need to refer to anything anyway!

Ensure that there are no distractions such as the blaring noise of the TV set or anything else at home, while the interview is going on.