



Careers Centre

Telephone Interviews

Telephone interviews are becoming more common as companies often prefer to use them as a screening process before they invite candidates to a face to face interview. Recent research by the CIPD has found that around 30% of organisations use this method now as part of their application process.

Telephone interviews are often used when there are a large number of candidates for a position. An organisation will also use this method to test a candidate's telephone skills, and communication skills on a whole, as a large part of the job may involve talking to people on the telephone. It will also test the candidate's ability to cope with the unexpected.

It is important that you do not underestimate the significance of a telephone interview. They are real interviews and are not a substitute for a face to face interview. You will not be offered the job based solely on a telephone interview, so if you do not perform well at this stage your application will not be progressed any further. This style of interview is an easy, quick and cost effective way for organisations to compare candidates fairly and discount unsuitable candidates.

There are key objectives for the candidates also, for example to gain information about the position and decide if you wish to proceed with the interview process. This is an essential opportunity for you to provide the company with the information you want to in order to secure a face to face interview.

In this booklet we will look at the nature and expected etiquette of telephone interviews, what you can do to ensure success, the telephone interview itself including some typical questions and some of the telephone contact with employers that you might instigate yourself.

Nature of the interview

Telephone interviews are a chance for employers to weed out random applications, those people applying to lots of recruiters without being particularly committed, and those that are unsuitable for the position. It will be used as an initial sift of those that have applied.

Keeping this in mind, you will need to show enthusiasm and specific knowledge from the very beginning.

Some companies and especially the larger ones contract this work out and use recruitment agencies and consultants to carry out the telephone interviews for them. In this case agents may ask structured questions on your competencies that are essential for the job and will write down your answer. The answers will most probably be passed onto someone else other than the interviewer and analysed by them.

Importance of research

Research! You will need to find out as much about the company and position as possible, including the organisations products, market, ethos, development, structure and competitors. You should know the organisations website in and out and be aware of the contribution you can make to their work.

You should also read the business pages of the newspapers as well as professional journals in the organisations sector so you are up to date with the current news and issues that may affect the employer and the work they do.

It is important you have all the companies' information and the job description in clear view when having the telephone interview. It will reflect that you have done your research and therefore you are committed and keen to work for them.

Practice!

It is a very good idea to practice the telephone interview before the real thing. It will give you the chance to prepare and practice the answers to possible questions. You could even get a friend

to phone you and give you a telephone interview. Through this you can gain feedback on how you sound and therefore assess your style.

If this is not possible, you could record yourself on tape and listen back to your answers. You can highlight possible problem areas e.g. stuttering, using a lot of erm's and ah's etc. You will also be able to get an idea about the correct speed and volume of your speech etc.

Get ready for the call

Prepare!

Success for any interview lies in preparation. Prepare answers to questions including examples you want to give in support of answers, your strengths and weaknesses and information about your skills and background. You may wish to prepare a very brief history to answer a typical question such as 'tell me about yourself'. Employers ask this question not only to learn more about you, but also to see how communicative you are and how you sound.

Using flash cards can help with remembering important details. But try not to make your responses to memorised; you need to sound confident and natural.

You may also be asked to do extra exercises during the telephone interview that are specific to the position you have applied for e.g. a sales pitch. You could also be asked to take tests e.g. personality tests, involving pressing different keys on the phone to indicate responses to questions. These are usually timed. Therefore you need to be prepared for such eventualities.

Timing

Employers take a number of different approaches to contacting candidates for telephone interviews. You might be called unexpectedly after submitting your application. However you should be aware of the telephone interview.

You may be given a fixed time for the interview, therefore it is important that you call at that specific time. You may be told to contact them within a specific time frame, e.g. 10am and 1pm. Therefore it is about getting a careful balance between being early and showing over keenness and phoning late showing your lack of

interest. Either way do not ring at 5:00pm as this would be unprofessional.

If you cannot get through, leave a message with the person who answers the phone, therefore you can show you phoned at the correct time. Ask for a convenient time to phone back to speak to the person you are contacting.

Setting

Ensure you have a quiet and private room for the telephone interview to take place in. You need to be able to focus entirely on the interview and so need to have no distractions around you. Turn off the TV/radio, do not have anyone else with you so get people to vacate the room etc. Do not be driving, on the bus or train etc., as if the interviewer can hear other people or a lot of background noise, this may affect their judgment of you.

Have a note pad, pen, your diary and CV handy when having a telephone interview. You can take notes and refer to information in your CV if you need to.

Think about your positioning, are you more comfortable or confident standing or sitting. Sitting at a desk may help you feel and sound more professional, rather than being curled up in an armchair or lying in bed.

Have a glass of water ready, with the amount of talking you will do during the interview your mouth may dry up. But don't gulp and slurp on the phone.

The telephone

If you are planning to use your mobile, you will need to ensure it is charged, switched on and with you at all times. You will also need to make sure that the signal is going to be perfect. You may wish to consider using a landline so you have no interruptions.

Check your voicemail message, if an employer hears this, is it going to make a good impression.

If you are going to use a landline and you share a house, ensure everyone in the house knows you are having an interview and if they answer the phone they do so in a professional manner. Also make sure everyone knows not to disturb you.

First impressions

First impressions count enormously as people can make up their mind about you within the first few seconds of speaking with you. Making a good impression is especially hard when you are on a telephone, as there are a number of barriers you will be faced with, for example not being able to see the interviewer's body language and facial expressions and them not being able to see yours. It is very difficult to make up for a poor start to a telephone interview, therefore it is essential to prepare carefully to make a good initial impression. You should think about your greeting etc. You need to sound prepared for the call and not surprised that they have actually contacted you

The call

Have an effective telephone manner

The first and most important thing to remember is to smile. Not only will it help you to relax but it will project a positive image to the interviewer and help you sound energetic and enthusiastic. A monotone voice is worse when holding a telephone interview so ensure you show your interest.

Do...

...announce yourself properly, either 'This is Fred Smith speaking' or 'Hi, this is Fred Smith'.
...speak clearly and more slowly than usual and enunciate.

...take your time; it is ok to take a moment or two to collect your thoughts, just let your interviewer know you are doing this.

...listen carefully. It is no good nodding, as the interviewer will not be able to see you, therefore give a verbal response, e.g. say 'yes', 'mmm', 'I see', 'I understand' and not 'yeah' or 'cool'.

...use positive words, which tend to be verbs in the past tense e.g. organised, delivered, participated, demonstrated etc. but try and be varied. Also with the research you have carried out you should be able to use the words of the industry. This will impress the interviewer.

...keep notes of the conversation and anything they tell you about. You can always use the notes of questions asked as preparation for the next interview. Due to the format of the interview it is unlikely you will receive feedback. Therefore after the interview jot down notes and how you could have improved some answers.

Do not.....

...call the interviewer by their first name, unless invited to do so. Use their name throughout the interview as well as the company's name.

...eat, drink, chew or smoke while on the phone. Noise travels.

...swear, use jargon, slang or colloquialisms.

...use mannerisms e.g. 'you know' 'basically'.

...waffle. Keep the answers straight to the point and cover the information you want. It is hard to see if the interviewer has 'switched off' and so be aware of them going quiet. If this happens, ask them a question such as 'shall I tell you a little more about my time at...'. The interviewer is writing things down throughout the telephone call so don't continue even when you have finished and there is a delay; wait patiently for the interviewer to continue speaking.

...interrupt the interviewer.

...give into the temptation to be too casual and chatty. This may be how you usually communicate while on the phone, but it is not the style you want to hold a telephone interview in. Tone of voice is the most important aspect of this type of interview.

Nerves

It is only natural to get nervous when having any type of interview. Many people get especially nervous when using the telephone as they are unsure who is going to answer and what they are going to be like and some people having difficulties explaining what they want etc. Don't let nerves affect your performance, so breathing evenly will help with this. It will also help you with the speed you talk.

Closing the call

When closing the call, end on a positive note. Thank the caller for their time and express your interest in the position. Don't be afraid to ask what the next step is. Say something like, 'Well, this certainly sounds just the job I am looking for, I'd really like to visit you to show you what I can do, when can we meet?' or simply ask, 'When I am likely to know the outcome of today's interview?'

If you are invited for a face to face job, then ensure you get the relevant details, when, where, with whom, what should you take, what will the process be e.g. one interview, or tests as well etc.

Typical questions and how to answer

Questions asked in a telephone interview are fairly similar to the questions asked at a face to face interview, however can be more general. Below are some examples of possible questions:

- Tell me about yourself
- Talk me through your CV
- How did you choose the university you attended and the degree course you studied?
- What do you know about our company?
- Why do you want to work for us?
- What would you like to know about us?
- What are you looking for?
- What interests you about this job?
- Why do you want this job?
- Why should we hire you?
- Is there anything about the job or company you would like to know that I haven't covered already?
- What five words best describes you?
- What are your strengths?
- What are your weaknesses?
- What skills and attributes can you bring to the position?
- Can you give me a time you used your leadership skills?
- Describe a time when you have exceed a customer's expectations
- Describe a time where you have had to motivate another individual/group
- What do you think is important when communicating with others?
- Tell me a time you have demonstrated your teamwork skills.
- What motivates you?
- How do you handle stress/pressure?
- When have you used your initiative to achieve a goal?
- Have you had ever meet deadline? How did you achieve this?
- How do you manage/organise your time?
- Describe a typical working day/week
- Describe your last role for me, what were your responsibilities etc?

- What major challenges did you face? How did you overcome them?
- Why are you looking to leave your current position?
- What is your career aim?
- Where do you see yourself in 5/10 years' time?
- What is your most significant achievement?
- What has been in the news recently that would have an effect on our organisation?

If you are asked to demonstrate a skill or give an example of particular situation, you must try and be specific, concise and analytical. When answering competency questions the **STAR (situation, task, action, results)** format can help you to describe your experiences in a clear and structured way.

Firstly give an overview of the **situation** in which you demonstrated the skill that the employer has asked about. For example when answering a question about management capabilities you could say: 'Whilst at university I had a part time job in a restaurant where I worked front of house in a management capacity.'

Next describe the **task** that you completed. For example: 'I supervised other team members to ensure that all customers were served to a high standard in a timely way.'

Then describe the **action** that you took to complete the task. This should form the bulk of your answer and it should follow a logical, step by step order. For example: 'When supervising staff I ensured that we had a group briefing session at the beginning of the shift where I allocated specific jobs to individuals and ensured that everyone knew what their responsibilities were. Throughout the service I kept track of how each team member was doing, allocating more support to those who needed it. I motivated staff members to maintain standards and speed by praising them for their progress and by passing on compliments from customers. I also intervened when staff faced difficult and time consuming problems such as customers complaining.'

Lastly describe what the **result** of your action was and point out how this experience will help you in the job that you are being interviewed for.

For example: 'My leadership skills were commented upon favourably by staff resulting in my manager giving me an increase in supervisory responsibilities. I feel that I learnt a great deal about how to motivate other people and how to co-ordinate them which will be beneficial in this role.'

Remember, if the interviewer says something negative, try and overcome the objection.

Your questions

Possible questions you can ask:

- What qualities are you looking for in the person you would like to join your company?
- What, in your view, is the most challenging part of this position?
- Why is the last person who held this job leaving?
- How would you describe the company culture?
- Is there travel involved in the position?
- Is there overtime expected in the position?
- What are the opportunities for advancement in the company?
- What is the training/personal development like within the company?
- Are there any other questions I can answer for you?
- When can I expect to hear from you?

Don't ask about detailed elements of the contract – you are a long way off that.

Speculative telephone calls

You may need to make speculative calls during your job search. These types of calls establish a link between you and an employer. You could be asking about the various ways you could get involved with them or gaining further details about a position being advertised or requesting an application form.

However, the main objective of these calls is to source possible vacancies that are not being advertised, as well as it being a key method of networking. The person you spoke with will remember you if you make a good impression. Making speculative calls to companies will reflect motivation, commitment and initiative.

You may have to speak to a number of people within just one organisation before you speak to the correct person. You will be asked what

business you have with the person you are trying to make contact with. Remain patient and enthusiastic throughout.

Remember do not waste peoples time, therefore you should contact companies that you have a genuine wish to get information from.

And finally...

It's a good idea to keep a log of the applications you have submitted, the date you applied, the closing date, organisation name, job title, job description, person specification and be familiar with this. If you have made a number of applications, you will need to know who you are talking to and what position it is for straight away.

There may not be a chance for you to gain feedback from your telephone interview and therefore it is a good idea to directly after the telephone interview you make notes of what you were asked, your responses and what you could have improved upon. It will help you when preparing for the next telephone interview.

Good Luck!

Further information and help

You will find our publication **Interview Skills** useful in your preparation for any sort of interview. It is available in the Careers Centre or online:

www.wlv.ac.uk/careers > Careers Library Online section

Other sources of information include:

www.prospects.ac.uk > applications and interviews section

<http://targetjobs.co.uk/graduate-jobs> > general advice > interview techniques

<http://careersadvice.direct.gov.uk> > jobs and advice > interview skills

Reference books

We have many books in the Careers Centre which contain sections about telephone interviews including:

Martin John Yate *Great Answers to Tough Interview Questions* Kogan Page, London, 2008

University of London Careers Service *How to Succeed at Interviews*, London, 2000

Judith Johnstone *The Job Application Handbook* How To Books Ltd, Oxford, 2004

Workshops

We run workshops about how you can use the telephone effectively to enhance your career. Check our latest events programme on www.wlv.ac.uk/careers and book a place on line. If you are one of a group of students who would like to talk about how you could enhance your telephone skills, why not contact us about organising a session just for you, or ask your tutor to arrange it with us for you?

Speak to a Careers Adviser

Our Careers Advisers can talk you through what may happen in a telephone interview and suggest ways that you could use the telephone effectively to find work experience, placements

and jobs. Why not arrange a mock interview with an adviser and practice before the real thing?

Advisers are available in the Careers Centre on the MD Concourse from Monday to Friday: 11:00am – 4:00pm in term time and from 1:00pm – 4:00pm during vacation. Special arrangements operate on other campuses. Ring 321414 or see our website for details.

Titles in the employability series

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- **Telephone interviews**

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