

Making an impression with THE PHONE INTERVIEW

HEGI FAMILY CAREER DEVELOPMENT CENTER

The Phone Interview is increasingly in use by companies and other organizations as an economical and efficient means through which to begin the process of hiring new employees.

Although similar to an In-Person Interview, the Phone Interview is subject to several differences, but presents a wonderful opportunity for a job-seeker to make a strong and positive first impression on potential employers. Consider these differences when preparing for the Phone Interview, as well as:

- ♦ *The **time** of the interview*
- ♦ *Your **surroundings***
- ♦ *Knowing your **strengths and weaknesses***
- ♦ *How to **project** both your ideas and enthusiasm*
- ♦ ***Researching** the employer and gathering questions to ask*
- ♦ ***Practicing** the various types of questions which might arise*

The Phone Interview is your first best step to securing a personal interview.

WHY CONDUCT A PHONE INTERVIEW?

Companies use phone interviews for a variety of reasons. The most common reasons for companies to conduct a phone interview with a prospective employee are:

1. To save time
2. To save money (specifically, travel expenses)
3. To pre-screen employees
4. To narrow down the search for potential face-to-face interviews

HOW DOES AN INTERVIEW ON THE PHONE DIFFER FROM IN-PERSON?

Phone interviews are similar to face-to-face interviews, despite the method of communication. Face-to-face communication consists of words, tone of voice, and body language. Phone communication consists only of the first two, so what you say and how you say it are most important. Use positive words like “challenge, solution, success, we, I, our, your, opportunity, can, good, between assignments.” Avoid words like “can’t, won’t, don’t, haven’t, unsuccessful, failure, problem, bad, unemployed, retired, fired.” Your tone of voice should be enthusiastic and positive.

One disadvantage of the phone interview is the loss of personal contact between you and the interviewer—a vital part of selling yourself. Due to this loss of contact, you sacrifice all control over the interview because you are an ambiguous person on the phone. You are deprived of visual cues: Office environment, culture, and the interviewer’s attitude toward others. The opportunity to gather a sense of the company, potential co-workers, and the interviewer is lost.

A face-to-face interview does a great deal more than allow two people to have a conversation about themselves and career. Within this process you have the opportunity to bond with the interviewer and to portray the best way in which your talents can mesh with the needs of the company.

Keep in mind, however, that there are some advantages to the phone interview. Since the interviewer can only focus on what has been said (and how it was said), then he or she will listen to your verbal expressions more intently than in a face-to-face interview. Also, you have the advantage of using any resources available while on the phone (copies of resume, job description, etc.).

WHEN SHOULD A PHONE INTERVIEW OCCUR?

Hopefully, you will get the chance to correspond with a company and set up a time to conduct a phone interview at your convenience. However, they may call you out of the blue, based on a resume you sent out months ago. The call could start out with “just had a few questions about your resume” and extend into an hour. Keep in mind that you have the option to say, “Right now is not a good time, but can I call you back in an hour?” so that you can collect yourself in order to give your best impression. However, keep in mind that it is important to be prepared for a phone interview on a moment’s notice. You never know when a recruiter might call.

WHERE SHOULD A PHONE INTERVIEW TAKE PLACE?

Place yourself in a private location, free from intrusions and distractions. Have your phone in a quiet room away from radios, televisions, family and friends, or anything else that may make a noise or take your attention away.

HOW WILL A PHONE INTERVIEW BE EVALUATED?

How you will be assessed in a phone interview differs with how you might be in person. Rather than making your first impression with body language and a firm handshake, your first impression will be your initial greeting on the phone. The interviewer may ask himself or herself the following questions after the interview:

- Did you have an **enthusiastic voice**?
- Did you answer questions **vaguely or directly**?
- Did you **research the company** well, or did you ask simple questions?
- Did you **express interest** in a second interview?
- Did you follow up with a **thank-you letter**?
- Did you **pursue this opportunity** with a phone call or e-mail?
- Did you send **supporting material** (resume, portfolio, etc.)?

PREPARING FOR THE PHONE INTERVIEW

Prepare for the interview just like you would for an in-person interview. Even shower and dress up, so that you will be in a professional and confident frame of mind. You will not do as well in your phone interview if you are lying in bed or draped over a couch in your pajamas.

Research the Organization and the Position

Before you go to the interview, learn as much about the company and position for which you are applying. Visit the company's web page or read company literature. Analyze the job description and try to match your experiences, interests, and abilities to what they are asking for.

Know Yourself

Be prepared to discuss your strengths, weaknesses, educational and work experience, personal goals, and values. Read the job description thoroughly and anticipate questions that may be asked of you.

Make a List of Questions to Ask

The questions you ask (or lack of) will reveal a lot about your level of interest in the company, and your level of preparation for the interview. Ask questions which demonstrate a genuine interest in and knowledge of the company and position. Some suggested questions are:

- What characteristics does a successful person have at your company?
- What are the most important factors sought in the ideal candidate at your company?
- What are the problems I will be expected to solve?
- What is a traditional career path for this position?
- Can you tell me something about how your career has developed working here?
- How is an employee evaluated?
- Could you describe a typical week within your organization?
- What are some of the reasons you believe people enjoy working here?
- Do you have any unanswered questions about my qualifications?
- What are the next steps in the hiring process?

Utilize Your Resources

Gather your tools by the phone:

1. Resume and cover letter you sent to the company
2. Pen and paper to take notes during the interview
3. Research you have conducted on the company
4. Questions to ask about the company and position
5. A loosely written outline of points to make or items to cover as you talk about the position
6. Comfort items: tissues, water, etc.
7. Job description

PRACTICING FOR THE PHONE INTERVIEW

Practicing may help you feel more comfortable with the process, because selling yourself over the phone is not as easy as it seems. Have a friend or family member conduct a mock interview, helping you to rehearse answers to questions that may be asked. Stop by SWT Career Services for more help concerning interview questions and answers, as well as mock interviews. A few typical interview questions are:

- What things do you look for in an organization?
- What has been a high-pressure situation for you in recent years and how did you cope with it?
- In your last review, what did your supervisor suggest needed improvement?
- How do you handle stress?
- What qualities do you look for in a supervisor?
- What would you say is the most important thing you learned from your college career?
- List three things former coworkers would say about you.
- Give me an example of a conflict you have encountered and how you handled it.
- What do you know about this company?
- What are your goals for the future?

TYPES OF QUESTIONS TO PRACTICE

Behavioral Questions

The most common type of questions are behavioral. The questions aim to determine how you would operate on the job. One strategy for answering behavior-based questions is to use the **STAR** formula (Situation, Task, Action, Response). The formula ensures that you deliver a complete and concise answer. For example:

Question: Tell me about a time when you were on a team and a member was not pulling his or her weight.

Theme: Teamwork

Answer: **Situation** - I had been assigned to a team to build a canoe out of concrete. One of our team members was not showing up for our lab sessions or doing his assignments.

Task - I wanted to maintain a good relationship with him, yet help him to work to his potential, so I met with him in private.

Action - I explained to him the frustration of the rest of the team, and I asked if there was anything I could do to help. He told me he was preoccupied with another class that he was not passing, so I found someone to help him with the other course.

Result - He not only was able to spend more time on our project, he was also grateful to me for hearing him out. We finished our project on time, and receive high scores.

Traditional Questions

Traditional questions include questions to clarify points on your resume, evaluate your accomplishments and goals, and assess your expectations of the company. When answering these questions, keep in mind what theme may be behind the question the employer is asking. For example:

Question: Why do you want to work here?

Theme: Measure of knowledge of company and interest in it.

Sample Answer: I have researched the leading companies in this industry, and yours seems to be the one that does the best job in terms of customer relations, encouraging risk-taking, and setting challenging goals. These qualities appeal to me.

Difficult Questions

Difficult questions are those questions you hope they do not ask. For instance, if your resume does not show continuous employment, you should expect to be asked for an explanation. In order to answer these questions, you will need to come to terms with the issue at hand, see the positive side of it, and demonstrate that you are eager to move on with your career.

DURING THE PHONE INTERVIEW

- Have a self-confident and enthusiastic voice
- Smile as much as possible—the tone of a smile brings about enthusiasm
- Speak succinctly so that you are not rambling
- Keep the conversation going with prepared questions
- Do not eat, smoke, or chew gum while on the phone
- Speak directly into the phone so that you can be heard clearly
- Do not take other calls while on the phone—try to turn off Call Waiting if you can
- Sit in an upright position or stand while talking—your voice will sound stronger
- Avoid nervous habits that will create noise
- Do not interrupt the interviewer
- Listen to what is said and asked and ask for clarification if needed

ENDING THE CONVERSATION

- Let the employer end the interview
- Thank the employer for his/her time and reiterate your interest in the position
- Find out what the next steps are so that you can follow-up appropriately
- State that you would like to meet personally

FOLLOW UP WITH THE INTERVIEWER

Send a thank you letter to the interviewer as soon as possible to show your appreciation and enthusiasm for the position. Make sure that the timetable of the hiring process and future steps have been discussed so that you are aware of where you stand in the interview process.

PREPARE FOR THE FACE-TO-FACE INTERVIEW

A phone interview may be all that is needed to convince your interviewer that you are the right person for the job. However, many companies prefer to meet job seekers in person before making any decisions. Consult with the SMU Career Services office for help with face-to-face interviews. They have many resources and handouts, and can work with you during a taped practice interview to assess your interviewing strengths and weaknesses.

Hints to Help You Transition to the In-Person Interview:

- Focus on what you can offer the company since they last spoke with you
- Offer new information if possible
- Give new examples of what you have accomplished
- Ask more specific questions
- Let your research show

While in the in-Person Interview:

- Arrive 5 to 10 minutes early
- Express a positive and enthusiastic attitude
- Pay attention to your body language
- Show confidence without being arrogant
- Open up to the interviewer so that he/she gets a glimpse of who you are
- Be neatly groomed and display good hygiene
- Dress accordingly and demonstrate good posture
- Maintain good eye contact throughout the interview
- Give a firm handshake before and after the interview
- Maintain interviewer's pace and style of speech
- End interview with gratitude and enthusiasm for the job in a closing statement

