



Powerful Phone Interviews

By Dale R. Kurow, M.S.

With increasing frequency, companies are relying on phone interviews to narrow the pool of likely candidates. Phone interviewing has proven so cost effective that it has become the norm. Recruiters now pack an entire arsenal of tools, honed over years of experience, designed to quickly eliminate marginal candidates.

Consider this: a phone interviewer's primary goal is to **eliminate** the candidate before wasting additional company resources. Sound unfair? Welcome to the world of phone interviewing. So how do you help clients make it past the HR gatekeepers and to the next round—the face-to-face interview?

Research the Company

Second only to lacking the requisite skills, the main reason candidates don't get to the next step—the face-to-face interview—is failure to properly research the company. Undertaking in-depth research is just as vital for a phone interview as for an in-person interview! It is a key ingredient in getting a ticket to the next round. Your clients should have answers to the following questions at their fingertips:

- ◆ What are the company's products and/or services?
- ◆ What is the size of the company, number of employees, rank within the industry?
- ◆ Who are the company's primary customers and competitors?
- ◆ Where are the company's offices, plants and facilities located?
- ◆ What are the company's goals, philosophy and mission statement?
- ◆ Who are the key players (Chairman, CEO, President, etc.)?
- ◆ What is the financial health of the company?
- ◆ How was the company's performance in the last year?
- ◆ What media exposure and/or major articles have appeared about the company within the last 3-6 months?

Research Resources

Research the company's web site first. Get the company's annual report if it's a publicly owned firm. If time is limited, visit these web sites to view annual reports for free:

- ◆ Annual Report Gallery - <http://www.reportgallery.com>
- ◆ The Public Register's Annual Report Service - <http://www.prars.com>

Next visit these two web sites. They provide company profiles and an insider's view of what it's like to work at the company:

- ◆ Vault.com - <http://www.vault.com>
- ◆ Wetfeet.com - <http://www.wetfeet.com>

Additional sites to do on-line research:

- ◆ Brint - <http://www.brint.com>
- ◆ Hoovers Online - <http://www.hoovers.com>

Some information is fee based, but plenty is available for free.

Use Hands-Free Headset

One of the few advantages that a phone interview offers over the in-person interview is the ability to consult notes during the interview. In fact, advise jobseekers to use a hands-free headset so that they can look up notes on their computers if necessary. They should be sure to take copious notes that demonstrate their familiarity with the company and their enthusiasm for landing the job.

Telephone Speaking Voice

Candidates will be judged by their telephone speaking voice BEFORE the actual phone interview. How? By the message(s) they leave to set up the appointment. We live in a world of answering machines and voice mail. Candidates will probably have to make two or three calls before getting a live person on the phone. In fact, chances are, they won't get past the automated voice mail system. Beware!

People will form opinions based on these brief phone messages alone!

Here are tips to help your candidates improve telephone speaking manners:

Do not speak quickly. Don't make employers replay a message two or three times just to understand what was said! Slow down, especially for those who have an accent.

Repeat your name and spell it, if necessary. Pronounce your name slowly. You don't want the recipient to have to struggle to figure out who's calling and why.

Repeat your name and phone number at the beginning AND end of the message. This way, the recipient won't have to replay the entire message from the beginning.

Give your phone number slowly. This is one of my pet peeves. I can't tell you how many times I've had to replay messages because the caller sped up when leaving a garbled telephone number. Recall the times when you have tried—and failed—to decipher a phone number and message left on your own answering machine. In a job search, your endeavors will end right there.

Tell the recruiter when he/she can reach you. Leave a preferred date and time to return your call. Also leave the preferred telephone number. This gives the recruiter a better chance of connecting with you.

Do not leave long messages. Give the recruiter the information he/she needs and leave the rest for a live conversation.

Have a smile in your voice. Being professional means sounding calm, collected and positive even if you've just had the worst "bad hair day." Your voice needs to be warm, polite and upbeat.

When jobseekers are asked this question, don't let them wing it! The subject and focus of their questions are key indicators of their professionalism and preparedness—and their enthusiasm for the job. Further, the way they respond to this question will be the final impression they leave with the interviewer. Need I say more?

Here are examples of key questions jobseekers can ask the interviewer:

- ◆ What is the company doing to stay competitive?
- ◆ Where do you see the most opportunity for growth this year?
- ◆ How are you staffing the growth?
- ◆ What is the most important contribution I could make within the first 30-90 days of my employment?
- ◆ Who does this position report to? Who will I report to?
- ◆ How does this position fit into the organizational structure?

A Final Note

When candidates are speaking to a recruiter, bear in mind that the recruiter's primary objective in a phone interview is to determine their viability for a position, and the potential ease or difficulty of marketing them to the client/company. Don't let your candidates make the recruiter work hard! Coach them to make it easy for the recruiter to sell them to the client/company by doing an outstanding job of preparing themselves!

What Questions Do You Have?

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