

PHONE INTERVIEW TIPS FOR SAVVY CANDIDATES

BY HUGH ANDERSON

Dinner just ended and your kids are arguing loudly about the TV remote control when the phone rings. You try to quiet the kids, with little success. When you answer the phone, you find it's a recruiter from a major executive search firm.

Career-management experts estimate that more than 80% of job interviews are won or lost during the first five minutes of conversation. This includes telephone screening interviews. What you do next could have a major effect on your career future.

Since the recruiter is holding your resume and you're holding a copy of the day's paper, the recruiter has the upper hand. Do you try to muddle through, making idle small talk with the recruiter while waving your arms furiously at your children? Or is there an acceptable delaying tactic that will give you time to gather your thoughts?

Obviously, you need to clear your head and shift your focus from family to your career. You also need to level the playing field. Gain time by telling the caller that you must go to another extension or need to close the door to your office, then put down the receiver. Take some deep breaths, ask your children to be quiet and mentally clear your head of all thoughts besides your job search.

When you pick up the phone, ask the recruiter to repeat his or her name. Verify the spelling and write it down. Use the recruiter's name in your response. If it's truly inconvenient for you to talk, ask for a telephone number and a convenient time to call back. You're now ready to make a good impression during your first five minutes.

Here are eight tips to help you gain the interview response you want regardless of how chaotic your environment is when the phone rings:





1. BE PREPARED.

Any executive conducting a comprehensive job hunt should expect recruiters to call at unexpected moments. Be ready by:

- Having a place to keep notes and files.
- Keeping paper and pencils by the phone.
- Instructing family members on how to answer the telephone and take messages.
- Preparing three to five key statements about your strengths and listing them on 3-by-5-inch index cards for easy reference.
- Reviewing questions that you can reasonably expect to be asked and preparing answers for them.

2. SOUND POSITIVE, SELF-CONFIDENT AND FOCUSED.

What you say and how you say it is critical to your career future. If you're properly organized, take out your notes for easy reference during the interview.

The fact that the recruiter has called you indicates that your resume or a member of your network has given him or her a favorable impression of you. You need to confirm this impression. Put a smile on your face and into your voice. You need to demonstrate your enthusiasm and interest through your voice and telephone manner, says Rod Coffey, director of human resources for FANUC Robotics NA in Auburn Hills, Mich.

Some people find they sound more animated if they stand while talking on the phone. Others say it helps to keep one hand free. Having a lively sounding voice makes you seem upbeat and full of energy. Check how your voice sounds by taping yourself while role-playing a telephone interview. Listen to yourself, then decide if you would hire the voice you just heard. If not, make the necessary changes.

3. FOCUS ON WHAT YOU OFFER AND CAN DO.

Employers hire people for what they can do for them. The recruiter's mission is to screen candidates and recommend those who will best meet the employer's needs. Your goal is to be recommended for further consideration.

When describing your background, reinforce the positive and avoid the negative. You'll only get one chance to make a positive first impression, says Mr. Coffey. Stay focused by reviewing and use the key points you wrote down about your strengths.

4. BE A GOOD LISTENER.



Avoid interrupting and let the recruiter complete his thought or question before you respond. Ask for clarification. Use open-ended questions. The more information you can gather, the better you can respond.

5. MAINTAIN AN OPEN MIND.

Work towards creating a partnership with the recruiter. Look for areas of agreement. Build on the positive. Find ways to help the recruiter explain why your candidacy will make the employer's job easier and make the hiring manager look good, says Bob Spears, president of Fortune Personnel Consultants of Charleston, S.C. This can help you create a "win-win" relationship with the recruiter, he says.

6. THINK CREATIVELY.

Prepare responses to these typical interview questions:

- What are you looking for?
- Why are you looking to change?
- Are you currently employed? If not, why?
- What are your current earnings?
- What are your salary expectations?
- Are you willing to relocate? Change industries? Travel?
- What are your strengths and weaknesses?

Kathy Rogain, corporate employee relations manager for Compuware, a global software development services company in Farmington Hills, Mich., believes candidates' past behaviors are good indicators of their future success. She encourages candidates to illustrate their skills with actual examples from their on-the-job experiences.

7. WRITE OUT YOUR RESPONSES AND PRACTICE READING THEM ALOUD.

This will help you to remember the response and sound natural when providing it. By knowing what to say, you'll seem more confident, in control, organized and focused, all qualities that recruiters seek in candidates, says Ed Crowder, president of Crowder and Co., an executive search firm in Birmingham, Mich.

Most candidates usually are asked about their salary expectations during screening interviews. Recruiters and employers usually have a salary range in mind, and while often unwilling to share it at this stage, they expect you to answer.

Your objective at this point is to win acceptance and be recommended for further consideration. Accordingly, you may want to avoid providing a direct answer to this question and reply instead



by saying something like, “While compensation is important, other issues are also important. If they can be clarified, then the compensation issue won’t be a problem.”

These issues could include non-cash benefits and compensation, scope of responsibilities, work environment, job location, career advancement and others. It’s OK to ask the recruiter what the job pays, says Mr. Spears, and can help both parties in the screening process.

8. ASK ABOUT THE NEXT STEP.

At the end of the interview, tell the recruiter you’re interested (assuming you are) and want to pursue the matter further. Ask about the next step in the interview process as well as the hiring timetable. If you don’t receive a positive response and you’re sincerely interested, ask the recruiter if he or she has any areas of concern. If there’s a misunderstanding about you or the recruiter doesn’t seem certain that you’re suitable, try to clarify the problem, then ask again about the next step and timetable. While a positive response doesn’t guarantee you’ll be considered further, a cooler response usually signals that you haven’t been successful.

By using these eight tips, you’ll be more likely to win the first five minutes of the screening interview, which is key to reaching your career goal.