

Telephone Interviews

This newsletter is a slight revision of one published early last year. Many of you have commented about the volume of phone interviews you are experiencing. In some cases you are having two or three with the search firm prior to any contact with the hiring company. Frustrations abound and it seemed appropriate to revisit this topic with some minor updates.

A former sales contact once described a phenomenon he called, “selling through the close”. When I pressed him to explain, he said that this was a problem common with many professional sales people. They have arrived at a point with their customer where they have convinced them to make the buy, but oblivious to that, they then keep talking and in the end, kill the sale. This is more prevalent in telephone or inside sales due to the visual disadvantage but can happen in person as well. Perhaps it’s a cultural thing with us. We hate silence, so we keep talking hoping we will get the response we want from our partner. It is almost an art form to be able to articulate your message in a concise, direct manner and then “shut up” and wait for a response. The tension created by the silence can be unbearable. If you have proposed marriage to someone during your life, you will know exactly what I mean. We spend our lives trying to get “buy” decisions from others and we sometimes keep talking nervously until we get a signal from them. This is a sign of desperation. I’m not a card player, but the expression “poker face” has great relevance here. Casual observation has taught me that most successful poker players do not betray stress or inner feelings and the similarity to the telephone interview is remarkable.

Let’s first explore why phone interviews are popular. Recruiters, corporate human resource screeners and hiring executives alike obviously use them to save time and money. They are fact-finding missions. You can “slice through” more candidates and shorten your list of potentials via some targeted questions on the phone much faster and at far less cost than you can in person. Creative accounting aside, in these days of corporate belt tightening, expenditures for plane tickets, rental cars, expensive meals and lodging for questionable fits is tolerated by few CFOs. Retained search consultants must document and justify all expenses when submitting them to their clients if they want future business. The SARS epidemic has taught companies doing business in Asia, that videoconferencing works well, much to the chagrin of airlines and the hospitality industry. The pressure is on everyone and there exist a variety of approaches:

- Executive recruiters want to determine as quickly as possible if you are an appropriate candidate. In our present market, a recruiter or research assistant may be calling hundreds of people. They will probably ask a few targeted questions to see if you possess the four or five “must haves” that place you in their search universe. You may have impeccable credentials and an impressive background, but if you don’t have what they want, you may find yourself speaking to a dial tone. Perhaps this is abrupt and unfair, but they are trying to shorten their list and will only consider you if you have the right ingredients for their client. This is the first of many “filters” you must pass through and may be followed by another phone call to probe deeper, before taking any big steps toward a client meeting. A retained search consultant is usually under pressure to produce qualified people within thirty days of launch. It is amazing how quickly time flies when you work on retainer. Clients become justifiably anxious when they have paid a substantial amount

of money up front and no suitable candidates are showing up. Be prepared to have multiple phone conversations with the search firm before being presented to the client.

- Corporate human resource people are asked by the boss to phone interview potential candidates to save time. While these “screeners” are not final decision makers, they can end your candidacy if you are rude or impatient with them. They may spend more time on the phone with you than will a third party recruiter, because they are corporate insiders and will not only want to check job fit, but will also try to assess your cultural fit. Some executives will ask their administrative assistants and HR people how executive job candidates treated them. If you talk down to these people your candidacy ends abruptly and without feedback. Always treat assistants and support staff with the same level of courtesy and respect you extend to executives. In brief, sell them, too. When you hang up from a call with a corporate screener, you want them to run to the hiring executive saying, “You have to see this person”.
- Executive managers who perform phone interviews possibly have serious interest in you and may want to validate an initial instinct before meeting with you. A phone interview by one or more of them represents the final check before they call the corporate travel people to fly you in for a day of meetings. They will be seeking assurance that you fit the job and the culture, not to mention that you must resonate with them. Time is precious and they may allocate thirty or forty minutes, early or late in the day, to avoid interruptions. They may be speaking to you from a cell phone while waiting for a flight or from a rental car. Be prepared for a conversation that may be very focused, specific and brief.

One leading search industry trainer commented many years ago that a candidate has a thirty per cent chance of receiving an invitation to interview in person, as the result of a phone interview. This comes as a surprise to some because the interviewer has two choices, yes or no, which would indicate fifty per cent odds. If a company has a field of six or ten candidates and only wishes to meet the top three, the phone interview becomes the first major cut and is used like a machete. Mistakes may be made and good candidates overlooked, but companies don’t care because they feel the supply is now plentiful and more will show up. The phone interview, like Email, allows companies to keep everyone at a distance, until they are ready to establish relationships with a few select finalists. In a tight job market, its usage increases dramatically, because a high volume of candidate resumes overwhelms companies. Many human resource departments have been downsized or outsourced to minimum staffing levels and lack the time to deal with this problem. The phone interview has become another shortcut to the bottom line.

Here are some “dos and don’ts” for phone interviews:

- During each phone interview, you are a sales representative, trying to sell the services of an executive. Your mission is to convert this to an in person interview. Plan your call in advance. If you were to phone interview a candidate, what would you want to learn about them that would help you to decide whether to interview them in person? Try to anticipate lines of questioning and prepare possible answers. Research the company and be ready to address its issues like an insider.
- Show up on time. Second chances are rare when such a negative first impression is created.

- Do not use a cell phone or an older model cordless phone although your interviewer may be using one. The phone interview deprives you of the advantages of eye contact and body language. Over eighty per cent of the human sensory experience is visual, so you are almost flying blind. Don't make it worse by using phone equipment that offers poor fidelity and masks critical voice inflections, emphasis and pauses. I have had cell phone conversations with people that end simply because the signal was lost as they walked through their homes. You cannot risk this. If your interviewer's mobile phone loses signal, she or he will call you back. If your phone loses signal, the interview may be over prematurely.
- If you will be at home find a quiet place, away from distractions, such as television, stereo, pets and family sounds. If you are working with an outplacement provider, you may wish to use its facilities. You must be totally focused on your interviewer. Misinterpreting the tone of voice in a question is just as damaging as missing the substance. Wrong answers derail candidacy.
- Learn to describe yourself and your experience briefly but effectively and to the point. Distill your value statement to the point that it is readily apparent to any listener. Be able to create "word pictures" for your interviewer that offset their inability to see you. One of the best ways to do this is to link your achievements directly to metrics that represent revenue enhancements or cost savings. Numbers create excellent visual images.
- Be honest. Don't say things that you think the interviewer wants to hear. That shows desperation.
- Be upbeat. Many people project themselves poorly on the phone. If necessary, call a friend and speak with them. Ask them to critique your phone communications for tone of voice and clarity. Many of us have no idea how we sound to others. Get feedback from people you trust.
- Don't ramble. Many candidates are unable to briefly articulate their experience and nervously prattle away explaining their experience from the beginning of time. A few of them may have heard me snore into the phone. Practice being brief. Practice your ninety-second elevator speeches. Practice stating a brief summary (see the comment about value statements three items above) of how you impacted a business and why it was better for you're having worked in it.
- Listen carefully to your interviewer's questions. Answer the question. Provide amplification only when asked.
- Show sincere interest, but don't show desperation. At the end of the conversation ask your interviewer what they think the next step will be and its approximate time frame.
- If the phone interview does not lead to a personal meeting, try to analyze the call and look for ways to improve your presentation for the next one. If you lack the right skills mix, there is nothing further that you can do except to move on. Remember that this is not personal and you are faring no better than many other job candidates.

Phone interviews place the interviewer and the candidate alike at a disadvantage. Unless a job is totally uninteresting to the candidate, most of the decision power to go to the next step belongs to the interviewer and the burden of selling rests primarily with you the candidate. If during a phone interview,

you feel that an interested client is hedging on buying plane tickets, you may suggest a videoconference interview as an interim step. Many companies are turning to this method and own videoconference equipment. Your outplacement provider may have it as well and some Kinkos Stores offer videoconference facilities connected via the Sprint Network. I have used Kinkos facilities to evaluate candidates for retained searches. When I last used it, it cost about \$450 per hour. While it is expensive, it almost always represents a considerable savings over travel and allows some visual interaction. Companies are increasingly accepting this as a suitable alternative and fly in only the top two or three candidates for further scrutiny.

If you feel you are a serious candidate for a position, and if you have the resources to gamble, you may offer to pay your own travel and lodging costs for a personal interview. In a recent search, a candidate offered to do this when my client was hedging. My client agreed to reimburse him, if they hired him. The company was very impressed by his initiative and self-confidence. During his personal interview, the company informed him that it would pay for his travel expenses before it made any hiring commitment. However, he had thoroughly researched the company, its industry and its customers. He impressed the company by his ability to speak as an insider and it hired him in the end. Nevertheless, this likely would not have happened, had he not taken the lead and shown the courage by offering to bear the interview costs. This does not mean that you should offer to pay travel costs to convert every phone interview into a personal one, but this is but another example of how initiative, faith and a creative approach may lead to your next position.

Do you have questions on this newsletter or any career related issue? Call me. I'm glad to help you.

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