

The Phone Interview Ambush

It is no longer sufficient to be an exact perfect fit for a potential career position. The content of your resume is what attracts a potential employer and earns you an interview. Many executive candidates are unknowingly eliminated early in the hiring process because of unintentional errors committed during a brief phone screening interview.

Hiring executives use the phone interview as a quick initial evaluator. They frequently review the resume for fit and use the phone interview to provide valuable insight into your hidden qualifications: communications skills, ability to establish instant rapport and credibility, executive presence, poise, enthusiasm, energy level, interest and perceived sincerity, to name a few.

The phone interview can be a giant killer. Executives who are perfect fits for great jobs are being eliminated after phone calls of only twenty to forty minutes duration. Some of the typical feedback heard from hiring executives are that candidates lack enthusiasm, are unable to articulate themselves, fail to ask relevant questions, seem disinterested, awkward or uncomfortable. The administrative assistant of a client described one particular phone interviewee as lacking warmth, as she connected him to the interviewer.

The goal of a phone interview is to gain a personal interview. If you expect a potential employer to bear the expense of having its key executives spend valuable time with you as well as pay your travel expenses, you must prepare in advance to ensure the call is successful.

Here are some timely tips:

- During each phone interview, you are a sales representative, trying to sell the services of an executive. Good selling is not unsubstantiated hype but it is the persuasive presentation of facts that summarize and illustrate the benefits of your accomplishments and their potential value to your prospective employer.
- Research the company on the Web beforehand. Study the position specification if you have one and prepare some focused questions to ask your interviewer.
- Take the interview in a standing position. Pace the floor. Most people find that it keeps them focused and upbeat. Relaxing in your favorite chair automatically makes you sound more laid back.

- Show up on time. Second chances are rare when a negative first impression is created unless it is a genuine emergency.
- Do not use a cell phone or an older model cordless phone. 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 and auditory processing accounts for slightly more than ten per cent. Don't worsen your odds by using phone equipment that offers poor fidelity and masks critical voice inflections, emphasis and pauses. I have had conversations with people using cell phones that ended simply because the signal was lost as they walked through their homes. You cannot risk this. If you are pacing the floor, a late model cordless phone with a new battery or a landline with a long cord will suffice.
- If you have a poor or noisy phone connection, ask the interviewer for her or his number and offer to call them back.
- If you will be at home find a quiet place, away from distractions, such as electronic media, pets and family sounds. If you are working with an outplacement provider, you may wish to use their 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 will end your candidacy.
- Standard English is the only means of communications. Slang, colloquial expressions and profanity of any sort are toxic. While it is essential to be pleasant, most attempts at humor fail over the phone unless they are shared between people that know each other well. Light chatter about the weather, busy schedules and the like are acceptable icebreakers, but avoid all the typical taboos, such as politics and religion.
- Avoid the continued usage of verbal attends: "you see", "you know", etc. If you have a nervous laugh, sub-conscious and continual throat clearing or other affectation, do your best to eliminate it. Such interruptions are distracting and annoying and will make you sound nervous and lacking confidence. If you need to call your new CEO, do you wish to convey such an impression?
- Learn to describe your value and accomplishments briefly but effectively and to the point. Be able to create "word pictures" for your interviewer to support their lack of seeing you. One of the best ways to do this is to discuss business problems you encountered, your strategy to resolve them and the outcome of your efforts. Numbers create excellent visual images. Use vignettes and facts to support your elevator pitch.
- 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 be afraid of silence and don't ramble. Many candidates are unable to briefly articulate their experience and nervously prattle away explaining their experience from the beginning of time to "fill in" silence on the line. If you answer a question and the line is silent, give your interviewer the opportunity to process your last statement and take some notes. Unless you have a question, let them ask the next one.
- Practice being brief. Practice your ninety-second elevator speeches. Practice stating a brief summary 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 interest, but don't show desperation. Politely ask your interviewer what the next step might be and when you may next hear from them.
- 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.

The success rate of advancing from phone to personal interview is approximately thirty to forty per cent. You can increase your odds by planning for the call. Think about what your goals would be if you were the interviewer and then prepare yourself to meet them.

If you have further questions or need advice concerning proper telephone techniques, please feel free to call me at any time.

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