

Telephone Interviews

Why do employers use telephone interviews?

Preliminary vetting of job applications is increasingly being undertaken by telephone. The use of this form of screening is particularly widespread amongst large graduate recruiters, who see it as a cost-effective way of handling large numbers of applications. Also, employers who are recruiting for sales and customer service roles use telephone interviews as a way of assessing communication skills at an early stage in the recruitment process.

Your performance in a telephone interview will determine whether or not you move on to the next stage of the selection process, so you will need to prepare as thoroughly as you would for a traditional interview. This means: re-reading your application and the information that the employer has provided; researching the job and the employer thoroughly; and thinking of recent, specific examples that you can use as evidence of the required skills.

Types of telephone interviews

Sometimes the employer will call without any prior warning, but in most cases the time and date of the interview will be agreed beforehand. Some employers will call you on your own landline or mobile number, but in other cases you will have to call the employer.

Employers who expect you to call may provide a Freephone number, but there may (very rarely) be times when you have to pay for the call yourself. The average length of a telephone interview is probably about 30 minutes, but they can last for as little as twenty minutes or as long as an hour.

There are four main types of telephone interview:

- In some cases the interview will follow the same pattern as a standard face-to-face interview.
- Alternatively, and especially if the employer has 'out-sourced' this stage of the selection process to a recruitment company, the interview will be highly structured, with the interviewer reading a set of competency-based questions from a prepared list. In this type of interview, once you have given your answer the person conducting the interview may simply move on to the next question without responding to what you have said.
- Another possibility is the fully automated interview in which you are asked a series of recorded questions and respond by pressing number keys on the telephone.
- Finally, if you're being interviewed for a sales position you may be invited to 'sell' something to the interviewer.



Preparation and practical considerations

You'll need to find a place where privacy is guaranteed and where you're not likely to be interrupted. So, if you're planning to use a mobile phone it's important to avoid making or taking the call in a busy public place. If you're planning to take or make the call at home you'll need to make sure that other members of your household are aware of this so that they don't do anything to disturb you while you're being interviewed.

If the employer is going to ring you on the landline at home, others in the house should be briefed so that they can answer appropriately if they pick up the call. If you have an 'answerphone' message, make sure that it sounds professional and be prepared to change it if you don't think it is one that you would want an employer to hear.

It's very important to have a copy of your application form/CV and your notes on the company available for reference. If these are stored electronically, remember to have your computer turned on and check your internet connection. It may be helpful also to have pen and paper available so that you can take notes during the interview. Ideally, you should have a desk or table close at hand.

The interview itself

The main way in which a telephone interview differs from a face-to-face one is, of course, the lack of visual contact. Research has shown that in face-to-face conversations tone of voice and non-verbal signals account for over 90% of the communication that takes place, and so in the absence of visual contact the way you sound on the telephone is of critical importance. Therefore, you might find it helpful to practice before your interview, for example by getting a friend to listen to you giving some answers over the telephone.

In addition, some of the following non-verbal techniques may help you overcome the disadvantages of having to communicate without being able to see the person you are speaking to:

- standing up during the interview, which can help you project your voice and remain focused
- smiling while you speak will help you to convey enthusiasm in your voice
- using the kind of hand gestures that you would use in normal conversation
- dressing as if you were attending a face-to-face interview

The following techniques will also help to make you less nervous, enhance your responses and help to overcome some of the problems that are specific to communication by telephone:

- sounding positive, interested and enthusiastic, as opposed to speaking in a monotone
- resisting the temptation to interrupt the interviewer in your enthusiasm to reply
- avoiding over-use of verbal 'spacers' ('you know', 'I mean')
- not saying something simply for the sake of it
- speak at an even pace, neither too fast nor too slow (here again it can be useful to practice with a friend beforehand)
- keeping the tone fairly formal and avoiding over-familiarity
- recognising that there might be brief periods of silence while the interviewer makes notes
- asking for clarification if there is anything that you don't understand

Finally – remember that a telephone interview is only the precursor to a face-to-face meeting. Very few, if any, organisations will offer a job on the basis of a telephone interview. However, a favourable impression created at this stage will help to lay the foundation for success at a face-to-face interview. If you are unsure about anything that you have read in this publication, or if you need any further information or advice, please speak to one of our staff.