

Telephone Interviewing: Help at both ends of the Phone

*This is a series of articles: Prepare Before the Phone Rings;
Telephone Interview Hints; Telephone Interview Tips and
Questions; Concluding a Telephone Interview*

This series gives you a few pointers so your telephone interviews are successful whether you are the one *interviewing* or the one *being interviewed*.

For the hiring administrator or the candidate, effective interview skills are essential.

For the hiring administrators: *Effective interviewing in the hiring process saves problems later.*

For the search candidate: *Presenting yourself in an articulate and organized manner is key to finding your new position.*

Telephone interviews often follow an initial resume review by the hiring school or search consultant. Used to screen out unqualified or inappropriate candidates, they can save the time and expense of unproductive face-to-face interviews. You may be called unexpectedly, or a routine telephone call to check on your documents might turn into an interview. If you are asked to schedule a telephone interview with the caller, ask how much time they would like you to allot. Your goal is to be invited for a next interview or to decide if that next step should occur at all!

Some of the caller's goals may be to:

- Assess your communication skills,
- Ask questions to determine your motivation and level of interest,
- Fill in missing information on your resume,
- Ask questions to get a sense of your skills and qualifications,
- Decide whether to invite you for a next interview,
- Record the call for other interviewers to hear.

Prepare *before* the Phone Rings

How?

- Anticipate the conversation: questions that might be asked and key points for your answers.
- Focus on skills, experiences, and accomplishments.
- Practice speaking concisely and clearly.
- Ways to improve your interviewing skills:
 1. Hold a mock interview with a colleague or two. Give them typical interview questions to ask you, and then answer those questions.
 2. Practice until you are comfortable.
 3. Record on tape and then critique your responses.
 4. Any speech pattern problems?
 5. Take out of your delivery trite or empty filler phrases:

*“Uhhh...errrrr” -- “You know: -- “Needless to say” -- “To be honest with you....” --
“Frankly...” -- “Well, actually” “What I’d like to say is this...”*

It's OK to be silent for several seconds as you compose your answer. It tells your interviewer you're being thoughtful.

Relax and enjoy the conversation. You got the call because they're interested!

WHAT?

Organize key information next to the phone:

- Your resume.
Keep a copy of your resume by the phone. The caller will have it handy! The interviewer may ask about individual job details, your roles, responsibilities, major accomplishments, management style, and your involvement in key projects. Refer to your resume quickly and answer the question promptly.
- Reference list
- School fact sheet
- Several key talking points
- Q & A cards you have prepared
- Notepad and pen to jot down notes, especially caller's NAME.
- Questions you would like to ask at the end of the interview
- Date book (for next call or on-site interview availability)

WHERE?

- Know in which room you are going to take or make interview calls.
- Tell others in the house not to distract you during the interview.
- Keep all your materials handy in that room.
- Use a good, static-free telephone, avoiding a cordless or cell phone, if possible.

WHEN?

A call may typically come in the morning or late afternoon. Be prepared to NOT take the call, or ask if you can call back in a few minutes if there is background noise or any confusion reigning in the house. If you feel at a disadvantage, try to reschedule surprise interviews. You will not be your best with a surprise interview. If you were called unexpectedly, try to set an appointment to call back by saying something like: "I have a scheduling conflict at this time. Can I call you back tomorrow after work, say 6 PM?"

If you get a surprise call, and are willing to take the interview, note the name of the person and the school; then ask for permission to put the caller on hold while you transfer to your "interview" room. "Ms. Smith, if you will hold for a few moments, I'd like to go to my library." Take a deep breath or two, compose your thoughts, and go to your planned room for the interview. Get your information in front of you and resume talking.

TELEPHONE INTERVIEW HINTS

WHEN THE CALL COMES

Confirm pronunciation and spelling of interviewer's name and title.

Refer to the interviewer with his/her family name and Mr. or Ms. until invited to do otherwise.

Take notes. List key phrases that will help you answer the question being asked and also serve as reminders when writing your notes after the interview.

Be prepared to give 2 - 3 sentence answers. Provide facts about your skills and accomplishments.

Listen closely to the questions asked. Most interviewers work with a specific list of points they want to explore, looking for gaps or inconsistencies in your resume and seeking clues to your qualifications.

Be positive and appropriately assertive. Let enthusiasm show in your voice. Smile when you are speaking. Sit up tall. Speak directly into the telephone. Control the speed of your answer; without visual cues, telephone speech needs to be a bit slower and more precise.

Be prepared to think on your feet. If you are asked to participate in a role-playing situation, give short but concise answers. Accept any challenges or criticism with grace and tact. If you need to, ask for clarification or for the question to be repeated. Keep your answers brief and to the point. People blow interviews by not knowing when to stop talking. Know your answer and stop as soon as you have given your key points. Be truthful about limitations. Say "I don't know" or "I haven't experienced that, but I could learn quickly". Interviewers are positive and receptive to honest responses.

Keep your answers brief and to the point. People blow interviews by not knowing when to stop talking.

Telephone Interview Tips & Questions

It's not all that difficult to predict what questions you might be asked in a telephone interview. Preparing answers to them lets you later apply that preparation to similar or related questions asked. So, mentally anticipate questions and rehearse answers. Listen carefully to the questions and provide precise answers with practical examples from your own experience. Let your interviewer know that you've faced and overcome challenges. Don't volunteer other information.

Here are some universal tips:

- Be cooperative and courteous
- Never ask about salary or benefits in the initial interview
- Keep answers to 2 or 3 main points; people rarely remember more than that.
- Use facts. Reinforce your positions with exact information: actual achievements; documented events; names and dates; statistics and numbers.
- Be honest. Credibility and truthfulness go hand in glove.
- Be positive by emphasizing your strong points. Negative statements only have the effect of reflecting badly on you.

Questions an Aspiring Head of School May Hear

Tell me about yourself.

The interviewer's goal is to get you to talk, to say something unscripted, or get you to reveal things not on your resume." Concentrate on your most recent experience. Whatever you say, say it with expression, enthusiasm and passion.

Why do you want/are you ready to be a school head?

Focus on things such as growth potential, your skill development and your professional and personal goals. Give a persuasive rationale why now is a good time for you and what accomplishments have brought you to this juncture in your career.

What leadership qualities do you think are essential for success?

You might want to talk about leadership skills such as vision, performance goals, ethics, team approach, communication or empowerment. (Look for a future Leading Ideas article on leadership qualities.)

What skills would you in particular bring to this headship?

Here it is important for you to know or anticipate the school's needs, and match your career achievements to the value you would add to the school's needs and goals. Tell how you meet the required leadership specifications of this position.

What other skills and experiences make you stand out?

This is an excellent opportunity to bring in the kinds of *personal and communication skills* not detailed on the usual resume.

What do you know about our school?

Think about the key mission and value aspects of this school. Telling what you *know* also tells the caller what you think is *important*.

Why are you interested in this school?

Make the match between your interests and strengths and how you could make a difference by being this school's leader. Be clear and specific about what you can do to help them meet their needs and goals.

What are your goals?

Think of three or four key personal and professional goals and list them here. Have a mix of shorter and longer-term aspirations you have.

CONCLUDING THE INTERVIEW

Your caller has indicated that the interview is almost over. But you have a few more things to do. After successfully completing the interview process, most interviewers ask, "Do you have any questions?" Your answer is always, "Yes."

Ask questions

WHEN?

During the interview, having a conversation is usually more effective than a separate question and answer period at the end of the interview. An exchange that consists of your asking both direct and follow-up questions will seem more comfortable. It will also project a sense of more equal footing and more confidence on your part, rather than a more passive exchange where you just respond to the interviewer's question and wait for the next one. Also, the earlier you find out specifics, the more effective you can be during the conversation. If the interviewer seems bent on going through a prepared list of questions, just go with the program and save your own questions for later. If the caller doesn't ask if you have questions, state that you do, and ask your prepared questions.

WHY?

- To express interest in the job
- To clarify issues that came up during your reading or the interview itself
- To get more information:
 1. If you have not seen it, ask for a position description.
 2. Ask about the timing and flow of the search process.
 3. Find out about next steps if you do not already know.
 4. Use the opportunity to expand on previous ideas:
 5. You've mentioned "X" several times in our conversation. Could you expand on the school's plans for that? Where is the school in that process?
 6. Under what circumstances will the school achieve that goal?



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IN CLOSING

- Make a significant statement ...something the interviewer will remember, or,
- Tell a brief story or give a funny or interesting example to underscore a point, or
- Repeat a main point or two. Phrase them in different ways to make sure they get across or are illustrated.
- Construct a close: "I am most interested in exploring the possibility of pursuing this headship, and hope we will be talking soon about the next steps in your process and an opportunity to meet in person."
- Thank the interviewer for calling. Say, "Thanks for your time" or "Thanks for your time and this opportunity to talk." You might want to add that you've enjoyed the conversation and learning more about **A** and especially, **B**. "A" and "B" will be very specific, and probably come from notes you've taken during the conversation.

Lastly, after you've put down the phone, and for future reference, write down all questions and your experience. Recall what and how you did. Note where you can improve.

If the interview was extensive, write a thank you note. Not an email...a real and personal handwritten expression of your thanks.