

Top Tips for Doing a Telephone Interview

by Dr Catherine Armstrong

More employers, universities and commercial companies are using telephone interviewing as a way of filtering out large numbers of applicants. This is not usually instead of a formal interview but a previous stage to it, where perhaps hundreds of applicants are reduced to 10 or so. Although many of the same principals apply to telephone interviewing as formal face to face interviewing there are also some particular problems associated with telephone interviewing. This article will explore some of those and tell you how to improve your chances of getting through that stage of selection.

Purpose of telephone interviewing

It is important to remember that usually a telephone interview will not be the last stage in the interview process so employers are looking for a very quick first impression of whether you will fit into their team and whether you have prepared well by researching their company or university. Being able to sound knowledgeable and prepared is vital but equally do not feel you have to go into great depth at this stage. Employers will be looking to reduce their pool of candidates drastically so they may include some unusual questions in a telephone interview designed to show how adaptable and quick witted you are. The telephone interview will usually not last too long, often less than half an hour so do not prepare long answers full of complex information that you want to convey.

How to prepare?

Be ready to talk about why you want to work for that company and what you can offer to them, as you would for a face to face interview. It is important to be able to convey information clearly and succinctly. Rehearse speaking slowly and making your points quickly. You will not have to go into a lot of detail about your past experience and skills but make sure you know what the employers are looking for and how you fit the criteria.

How to get your message across?

Try to speak naturally; it is tempting when doing a telephone interview to speak from notes but the danger here is that you answer a different question to that which has been asked. Also reading from a pre-prepared script can sound

unnatural and stilted. Even if you say more 'ums' and 'ahs' without notes this will come across better than if you read from notes.

It sounds strange but many people dress up to do a telephone interview. Of course no one would know if you wore your pyjamas to take the interview call (unless you are being video conferenced) but dressing smartly can help you to psychologically prepare for your interview making you concentrate and feel fully alert.

It is vital to cultivate a good telephone voice. Remember the sound of your voice is the only thing that interviewers have to go on. Normally they would respond to all sorts of visual cues in a face to face interview situation. When you are speaking to someone who is in front of you they read messages sent by your facial expressions that make your message easier to understand. Without that it can be harder to convey complex information so speak slowly and clearly and do not waffle round the point. Even if the job does not involve telephone work itself, a telephone interview is a great test of the skill of oral communication and if you are unable to make yourself understood clearly then you will struggle in many workplaces.

Technical problems!

There is a particular set of problems that can occur when doing a telephone interview and most of these involve technical problems of some sort. The employers will often be broadcasting the interview on a speaker phone with conferencing facilities enabled and this can cause strange echoes and delays on the line.

There may be quite a few people involved in your interview at the other end and it can be difficult to work out who is speaking to you. Try to allow time for each person to finish speaking; don't be tempted to interrupt them.

If you haven't been able to hear something that has been said then say so, don't try to guess what was said, you might get it disastrously wrong! If the equipment malfunctions completely then you may have to ask them to call back.

In case of problems your end it's best to use a landline for telephone interviewing, asking them to call a mobile can lead to problems with batteries and signal. And of course make sure that your phone line is clear at the appointed time for your interview. If there's a risk that someone else in your household could be using the phone then arrange for another line to be used. It's important to take the call in a quiet undisturbed environment away from the distractions of family or outside noise.