

Interviewing Over the Telephone

By BNET Editorial

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Many hiring managers conduct telephone interviews in the early stages of the recruiting process because it can be a cost- and time-efficient way to narrow down a list of candidates. This method of interviewing also offers valuable insight for positions that require phone communication skills.

Managers generally conduct face-to-face interviews before making a final hiring decision, but telephone interviews can help them select the best candidates to meet.

What You Need to Know

What are the advantages of telephone interviewing?

There are a number of advantages of conducting employment interviews by telephone:

- Telephone interviews are simpler to arrange, and the process itself takes much less time than face-to-face interview sessions.
- When using this method as an initial screening process, the cost of interviewing a large number of candidates is much lower than if they were interviewed in person.
- Telephone interviewing also cuts costs when candidates live far away, since most businesses reimburse interviewee travel expenses. Using the telephone to screen out unsuitable candidates can greatly reduce these costs.
- This format is an ideal way to assess a candidate's telephone manner. This is particularly helpful if the job requires telephone communication skills or is heavily customer-service based.
- For automated interviews, the list of questions can be completely standardized. This facilitates more objective decisions based entirely on core criteria, removing personal perceptions or biases from the process.

Are there any disadvantages to telephone interviewing?

Although telephone interviews can be very useful, there are limitations. These include:

- Candidates may be unfamiliar with the format or uncomfortable using the telephone, which could make them nervous and/or provoke uncharacteristic responses.
- It is difficult to make a thorough assessment of a candidate over the telephone. Non-verbal behavior or body language, both of which are important in forming an opinion of people, cannot be gauged over the telephone.

- Telephone interview candidates learn less about your business than those who visit your premises and meet potential colleagues in person. The on-site experience helps candidates decide whether they wish to pursue the interviewing process. It is important to remember that the recruitment process works both ways, providing an opportunity for candidates to assess your business as it allows you to assess them.

What to Do

Know the Options

Telephone interviews typically take one of two different formats:

- *Automated interview.* Interested candidates are invited to call a toll-free telephone number at their convenience. An automated service asks multiple choice or yes/no questions, to which the candidate responds using the number keys. This format provides an efficient initial screening system and can reduce a large number of applicants to only those who meet the essential job criteria.
- *Pre-arranged interview.* Reflecting the traditional interview format more closely, a trained interviewer calls a candidate at a pre-arranged time and asks a standard set of questions to assess the candidate's suitability for the role. Questions typically cover such areas as skills, experience and qualifications; candidates are expected to answer as fully as they would in a face-to-face interview. Where appropriate, candidates may be asked to conduct a telephone presentation or role-play to demonstrate their handling of a particular business situation.

Touch Base with the Candidate before the Interview

With a pre-arranged telephone interview, there is no need to send detailed directions or make preparations to receive a candidate in the workplace. However, it is good practice to get in touch with the candidate prior to the interview to confirm the arranged date and time, any materials the candidate will need to prepare (such as reference materials or a presentation), and the expected duration of the interview call.

Plan the Interview

Plan telephone interviews in advance. Procure the items you will need, such as application form or résumé copies, a notepad and pen, and a list of standard questions to ask each candidate. In addition, prepare questions specific to each person—for example, you may wish to inquire about gaps in their employment history.

Determine who will participate in the interview. It is not uncommon to involve more than one person; when necessary, conference call facilities can make this easier. Consider that multiple interviewers can be confusing in a telephone interview, however, as the candidate may not be able to determine who is speaking. One option is to have one interviewer ask the questions, while another colleague listens in on speakerphone or conference call. Always disclose all participants to the candidate before the interview begins.

Secure a private, quiet room for the interview, where you will be free from interruption by other colleagues, telephone calls or visitors.

Prepare some background information on your business and have the job description in front of you when conducting the interview. You may wish to refer to these materials when answering the candidate's questions.

You may choose to record a telephone interview, for your records or to assist in making a subsequent decision. If you intend to record an interview, always inform the candidate before the interview gets underway.

Follow the Guidelines

To ensure a successful interview, follow these guidelines during the call:

- Put the candidate at ease by introducing yourself and providing a brief overview of the interview format, participants, and expected duration.
- Speak slowly and clearly, and avoid becoming frustrated if the candidate asks you to repeat questions.
- Avoid asking yes-or-no questions, which can make the conversation stilted and awkward. Instead, ask open-ended questions which give a candidate the opportunity to expand. Do not rush to fill pauses in the conversation—these are natural in face-to-face situations, so expect them in telephone conversations as well.
- Steer clear of questions that could be perceived as discriminatory. You must not discriminate on the grounds of sex, race, disability, sexual orientation, religious belief, or age. Avoid questions relating to marital status, family commitments, or plans to start a family.
- Avoid letting your perceptions be influenced by a candidate's tone of voice; focus instead on how their responses match the selection criteria you have established. Remember that you will have an opportunity to meet candidates in person before you make a job offer.
- Offer the candidate an opportunity to ask questions about the role, the hiring process, the company, etc. Provide detailed answers that will help the candidate better understand the position, as well as their suitability for it.
- Ensure that the candidate is clear about the next step before you end the call. For example, supply a timeframe in which you will relay the outcome to the candidate.

What to Avoid

You're Unprepared

It is essential to have a precise understanding of the role you are trying to fill, or it will be difficult to pinpoint the skills and experience you seek in the ideal candidate. Prepare for a telephone interview as you would for a face-to-face meeting; review the candidate's background and the questions you will ask.

You Place Too Much Emphasis on Telephone Manner

Be patient with candidates whose telephone manner or spoken English is less than perfect. Unless the job requires excellent telephone communication skills, this may not be an issue. It is also important to consider that speaking on the telephone does not necessarily offer a full representation of a person's communication abilities.

You Miss the Interview

A responsible hiring manager would not miss a face-to-face interview appointment unless there were extenuating circumstances. Telephone interviews should be taken just as seriously. Missing an interview, or canceling at the last minute, sends the message that you do not value the candidate's time. This will discourage qualified candidates from pursuing an opportunity with you.

You're Inflexible

Be aware that a telephone interview may not be appropriate for all candidates. For example, a candidate with a hearing difficulty or speech impediment may be unable to take part in a telephone interview, or may simply be more comfortable meeting face-to-face. Make the necessary adjustments to accommodate an interviewee who has indicated a disability or other challenge.

Where to Learn More

Web Site:

Department of Labor: www.dol.gov

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