Career Guide

The Phone Interview

Tips on finding your voice

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The Phone Interview
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“I Got a Phone Interview! Now What?”

In some cases, employers will email you to set up a phone interview. However, in many cases, the employer will call you *spur-of-the-moment* to (a) set up a time at a later date for a longer conversation, or (b) have the interview right then itself. Such “cold calls” can be nerve-wracking if you’re not prepared, and you can therefore be more vulnerable to blunders and mistakes. Thus, you must *always* be prepared. Sometimes you don’t have the chance to ask yourself, “Now What?” because you are already in the interview!

Why do employers conduct phone interviews?

- **Location**: Applicant lives too far away for an in-person interview
- **Human Resource Department Screening**: A screening method to develop a short list of candidates which will be forwarded to the Hiring Committee. HR Department ensures that “minimum requirements” are met.
- **Hiring Manager Selection**: Conducts preliminary interview to determine which candidates to invite for in-person interviews.
- **Third-Party Recruitment companies**: Recruiters are constantly keeping an eye on social media avenues for the ‘perfect’ candidate. Always be prepared for a phone call, especially if you are applying for executive positions.

**Types of Phone Interviews**

**Human Resource Department Screening Phone Interview**
- Short interview (10-15 minutes)
- HR representative will ask about:
  - your credentials
  - why you are applying for this position
  - details about your relevant experience and skills
  - They may also assess your “fit” with their organization.

The HR representative decides whether it is worthwhile to invite you for an in-person interview with the Hiring Committee. So, make a great first impression! She/He may have little or no expertise with the specific content and tasks of the position, so keep your language jargon-free and avoid overloading your responses with technical terms.

**Hiring Manager Selection Phone Interview**
- Full length interview (30-60 minutes) can be conducted by the Hiring Manager, a panel of employees from the department to which you applied, or Human Resources
- You will be asked about:
  - your specific credentials as they pertain to the job
  - why you are applying for this position
  - problem-solving skills, behavioral questions
  - your technical background in this field
  - in some interviews, you may be given short cases to ‘solve’
  - They may also ask you about your expertise to gauge your knowledge and skills

Feel free to show your knowledge of the subject by using technical language, but be focused and enthusiastic. They should end the conversation feeling that you are interesting enough to warrant an in-person meeting.
Differences Between Phone and In-Person Interviews

Either type of interview has advantages and disadvantages.

Advantages of the Phone Interview over the In-Person Interview are:
- You can take notes and have “cheat sheets”
- You can dress professionally but still comfortably (i.e. no fussing with makeup, shoes, etc).
- You can be in the comfort of your own home or in another familiar, relaxing place

Disadvantages of the Phone Interview compared to the In-Person Interview are:
- You cannot read your interviewer’s body language
- You may have to work harder to express your enthusiasm
- You might feel rushed to provide an answer to fill the quiet space

Unique considerations for a Phone Interview:
- Be extremely clear in your oral communication. This will take practice.
- Be patient in waiting for your interviewer’s response and realize that they may be taking notes or reading their next question
- Be ok with the silences and don’t overcompensate by speaking too much

Preparing for Your Phone Interview

As you are searching and applying for jobs, you should concurrently be preparing for phone interviews. You should be ready and equipped to get a call from an interested employer at anytime.

- Create a “Job Log” (Hint: Use Excel or another spreadsheet format) to jog your brain about the job should someone call you unexpectedly. Here is an example:
- Throughout your job searching process, you can continue to add columns, for example: Follow-up email

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Organization (Location)</th>
<th>Position/Description</th>
<th>Date Applied</th>
<th>Hiring Mngr's Name, Title, Contact Info.</th>
<th>Key Words</th>
<th>Date of Phone Interview</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Oxfam (Boston)</td>
<td>Program Coord., HIV</td>
<td>02/14/09</td>
<td>Mariel Snow Vice President, <a href="mailto:msnow@mail.com">msnow@mail.com</a></td>
<td>Youth, statistics, global health, AIDS.</td>
<td>03/01/09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mkombozi (Moshi, Tanzania)</td>
<td>Volunteer Coord., OVC</td>
<td>02/16/09</td>
<td>Kate Child Director, <a href="mailto:child@gmail.com">child@gmail.com</a></td>
<td>Orphans, volunteers, supervision, live-in</td>
<td>Any day now...</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- Send date, Result of Phone Interview, In-Person Interview Date, etc.
- Know the job description and organization well. Make a “crib sheet” of notes for each job, and keep it by the phone if you have an interview scheduled.
- Memorize your resume!
- Know what questions you would like to ask the employer.
During the Phone Interview

Using Notes

Phone interviews require a lot of attention because your brain is simultaneously imagining the interviewer and trying to come up with impressive responses. For some people, having notes can be a distraction while for others it can be very useful.

Maximize your use of notes by doing the following:

- Keep your notes brief. You don’t want to have to sift through piles of notes during the interview. Use key words only.
- Some people like having post-its around their workspace with reminders like “Slow Down” and “Smile”.
- Have 3-5 examples of questions they are likely to ask: job-specific or organization-specific questions or behavioral and situational questions. If you have time before the interview, jot down a few answers for each.
- Try to put everything on one large sheet of paper. You don’t want the interviewers hearing you shuffle through multiple pages.
- Make sure you have blank space to take notes during the phone interview!
- It can help to have pictures of your interviewers in front of you so you visualize them.

Note: See Career Brief on “The Interview” for information on preparing for job interviews.

Demeanor, Attitude, and Voice

Even though your interviewer will not be able to see you, they can hear everything. They can “see” you through what they “hear”. For example:

- Your voice is your virtual handshake. When you call, introduce yourself by name clearly. Also be sure to write down the names of everyone who is present.
- Dress well and make yourself feel professional. Your confidence will exude and the interviewer will be able to feel it.
- Smile. A lot. Not only will this help you maintain a positive, enthusiastic attitude, it will also come across that you are a pleasure to talk and work with.
- Speak loudly, at a slower pace, and clearly (but don’t yell). You don’t know where your interviewer is and what other potential distractions might be present.
- Minimize distractions in your space. Turn the television and radio off, make sure you won’t be interrupted by another phone call or knock on the door, and find a space where you can be alone.
- Use people’s names as there may be multiple people interviewing you. It also shows attention and personalization, which can be a good substitute for the eye contact that you would normally have in an in-person interview
- Ensure excellent (read: flawless!) phone reception. It is advisable to use a land line as cell phones can be less reliable.
Making the Introduction

Similar to an in-person interview, the first few minutes of the meeting can make a significant impact on the interviewer’s impression of you, and for the overall tone of the conversation. This Career Brief includes a couple of examples of strong introductions.

In the examples that follow, notice how the interviewee does the following:

- Shows enthusiasm.
- Is calm, open, and friendly.
- Uses the interviewers’ names in conversation.
- Keeps answers brief and informative.

After: Following Up

Because the Phone Interview is often at the preliminary stage of the process, it’s important to follow-up after the phone call.

- At the end of the interview, make sure you have everyone’s e-mail address. At this time, you can also ask if they have a timeline on getting back to you about next steps.

- Spend a little bit of time reflecting on the conversation. Take some notes about your general impression, how you felt during the interview, what the “energy” was like, and what kinds of skills they were looking for. Also jot down some questions you might like to ask should you meet them again. This will help you prepare for a potential in-person interview.

- Send a brief Thank You e-mail to each person who interviewed you. Close with a soft invitation for them to contact you. Something like, “As we discussed on the phone, I am attaching three references whom you should feel free to contact. If you require any further information, do not hesitate to contact me.” You should send this email the same day as the phone conversation.

- Remember that while e-mail Thank You notes are acceptable, hand-written notes go a long way in making (and securing!) a fantastic impression. As always, double (and triple) check your grammar and spelling.

* See the Career Brief on “Interviewing” for some great tips and sample Thank You letters.
Sample Phone Introduction (Scheduled Interview): You Call Them

Secretary: Mr. Bodin’s office.
You: Good morning, this is John Lee calling. Is Mr. Bodin there, please?
Secretary: May I ask what this is in reference to?
You: Sure, I’m a graduate student at Brandeis University. Mr. Bodin invited me for a phone interview for the Program Officer position at UNEP. We are scheduled to speak today at 10:30.
Secretary: I’ll transfer you.
Mr. Bodin: Hi John, thanks so much for calling in this morning. You’re on speaker phone, and I have a few people I’d like to introduce you to who are here with me today. We have Julie Cash, who is the Senior Research Associate in our division, and Juan Gokhale who is the Program Manager for Water and Sanitation.
You: It’s really nice to meet all of you, and I appreciate your time for this interview. Ms. Cash, it’s great to finally talk to you over the phone as we’ve only had several email conversations. And Mr. Gokhale, it’s really nice to talk with you again after we last spoke at the APHA conference in Baltimore.
Mr. Bodin: Ok, great John. I think we decided we’d first like to start with a general discussion about the job and your extensive background, which we’re certainly impressed with.
You: Oh, thank you so much. I was really excited about the job description and to hear back from you. UNEP has always fascinated me.
Mr. Bodin: That’s great to hear! So we’ll go for about 20 minutes, and then we’ll turn the table over to you in case you have any questions for us. Does that sound ok to you?
You: That does sounds perfect with me, thanks.
Mr. Bodin: Ok, let’s begin...

1. Always be friendly and polite with whoever answers the phone, including (especially!) the administrative staff.

2. Use people’s names. It shows great personalization, and can substitute the eye contact that you have in in-person interviews. It also clarifies communication so they know you who are talking to!

3. Remind them of your relationship, if you have one.

4. Express your enthusiasm for the work and the organization.

5. Be agreeable to their guidelines. At the same time, if you need clarification on guidelines, don’t hesitate to ask. For example, if there are three men in the room, you might request that they say their names first before asking you a question.
Sample Phone Introduction (Unscheduled Interview):
They Call You

You: Hello, this is Sally Evans speaking.
Jane: Hello, Sally. This is Jane Brinkeroff calling from the National Association of Schools of Public Affairs and Administration. I received your application for our Graduate Fellows program, and I wondered if you might have a few minutes to discuss the position and your background?
You: Yes, absolutely, thank you so much for calling me, Ms. Brinkeroff.
Jane: Perfect, thanks for being flexible. I know I didn’t schedule this call, but I wanted to ask a few questions before we have an in-person interview.
You: Well actually I am really glad you called! I was really excited about the Fellowship, and was hoping to speak with someone about the program and my qualifications.
Jane: Ok, well first before we get into the details, can you give me a sense of your salary requirements?
You: I would be happy to discuss my salary expectations at a later time in the interview process, but please know that I am very interested in the position and will certainly seriously consider your best offer.
Jane: Alright, Sally, that sounds fair. Now that that’s cleared, I’d like to have about a 15 minute discussion with you about your qualifications and how you see yourself fitting into our Fellows program. I just have three questions for you, so we should be done by about 1:30. Is that ok with you?
You: Yes, that should be just fine.
Jane: Great! First, I wanted to know how you heard about the program and what you’ve heard about NASPAA...

1. When you are on the job market, always answer the phone professionally when you don’t recognize the number. It might be your future employer!

2. Even if it doesn’t “sound” like a formal interview, treat it like one. At this point, you will have done ample research on the organization to know who they are and what the job is about. You will have to gain your composure quickly.

3. If for some reason it is not a good time for you, do not hesitate to offer to reschedule the meeting. Something like, “Actually, Ms. Brinkeroff, I have another meeting at 1:15, and I would really like to speak with you at length without having to rush through. Can we schedule a conversation for later today? I am available anytime after 3, and all day tomorrow. I have a fairly flexible schedule, so could also speak with you at another time that is more convenient for you.”

4. Always be prepared for this question. Some employers use it as a “weeding out” process, especially if the candidate’s expectations far exceed what the employer can offer. The interviewer might press you for an answer; never give a number. If absolutely necessary, offer a broad salary range.

5. Listen carefully! There are two questions embedded in this: (1) how you heard about the program and (2) what you’ve heard about NASPAA.
Do’s and Don’ts

DO research the company. Know basic information including: the mission, company history, divisions, locations, etc.

DON’T chew gum, or eat or drink anything during your interview.

DO use people’s names and introduce yourself clearly: it’s your virtual handshake!

DON’T say anything negative about former employers, supervisors or colleagues.

DON’T bring up personal issues or family problems.

DO exhibit a positive attitude and an enthusiasm toward the company and position.

DO have your resume near your desk or computer at all times for quick reference.

DON’T inquire about salary, benefits, vacation time, retirement, etc. until you have been made an offer.

DO prepare for a question about your salary requirement and DO try to delay salary talk until after an offer has been made.

DO ask intelligent and engaging questions about the job, company or industry and DON’T ever NOT ask ANY questions—it shows a lack of interest.
Sample Interview Questions

**General Questions**

1. How are you today? Tell me about yourself.
2. What do you consider to be your greatest strengths? What about your weaknesses, or areas that need improvement? How could you improve yourself?
3. What interests you most about our organization? What excites you about this position?
4. What motivated you to choose this field, or college, or major?
5. What special aspects of your education or training have prepared you for this job? How does your college education or work experience relate to this job?
6. Could you tell us about your work history? What were your responsibilities in your previous jobs? What did you enjoy most about your last employment?
7. What do you consider to be your greatest achievement to date? Of which three accomplishments are you most proud?
8. Have you ever had any failures? What did you learn from them?
9. Why are you interested in this position and what do you bring with you that would make you the most suitable candidate? What can you contribute to this job? You have not done this sort of job before. How will you cope/succeed?
10. What is your current position and which aspects of your present work do you like?
11. What are your previous experiences with regional and/or international agencies with multi-cultural and multi-lingual environment?
12. Have you ever done any volunteer work? What kind?
13. What things do you look for in an organization? What would you most like to accomplish if you had this job?
14. How will you rate your written and oral communication skills?
15. Have you done any public speaking? What does the term two-way communication mean to you? When have you successfully used two-way communication?
16. What professional groups are you a member of, and how active have you been in those groups?
17. Is there anything not on your resume that you would like to tell me?
18. Are you considering any other positions at the moment?
19. What are some examples of how you have used creativity in your work?
20. Describe your experience using computers.
21. Have you ever been fired?
22. What are your salary expectations and when could you assume your new position?
23. Do you have any questions for us?
Sample Interview Questions

Behavioral Questions

1. What was your most difficult decision in the last six months? What made it difficult?
2. Have you ever had any subordinates who did not function to the level that you expected? If they did not live up to your expectations, what was your approach?
3. What do you feel contributed to your effectiveness as a supervisor? And what do you feel may have interfered with your effectiveness as a supervisor?
4. Have you ever led a task force of committee or any group who doesn’t report to you, but from whom you have to get work? How did you do it? What were the satisfactions and disappointments? How would you handle the job differently?
5. Have you had difficulty getting along with a former professor/supervisor/co-worker and how did you handle it?
6. How do you deal with stress? In your previous job what kind of pressures did you encounter?
7. In your work experience, how have you dealt with conflict situations? What has been your role in moderating and resolving that crisis?
8. Describe a time when you were under pressure to make a decision. Did you react immediately or take time in deciding what to do?
9. How do you react when you see co-workers disagreeing? Do you become involved or hold back?
10. Have you been on a committee or had a work-related situation in which you were asked to accomplish a task with insufficient guidance? How did you proceed?
11. Describe the most challenging situation you’ve had to deal with and the ways you dealt with it.
12. Describe a situation where you have thought of a new or creative way of dealing with a problem.
13. Describe your most successful effort in promoting teamwork within a group and how they responded.
14. Describe a situation when your work or one of your ideas was criticized. How did you respond?
15. Would you give us an example that would describe your ability to be proactive?
16. Can you think of a problem you have encountered when the old solutions didn’t work and when you came up with new solutions?
17. When you are in a team/group/committee setting, how often are you chosen to be a leader? Why? Are there times when you choose not to lead? Why?
Sample Interview Questions

Work and Personal Style Questions

1. Do you consider yourself to be thoughtful, analytical or do you usually make up your mind fast? Give an example.
2. Are you a person who likes to “try new things” or “stay with regular routines”?
3. How would you rate your ability to adapt to new working styles? Give us an example of a time when you needed to adjust quickly.
4. What type of person do you like to work for most/least? Do you prefer working alone or in groups?
5. What motivates you most in a job? What management style gets the best results out of you?
6. Are you able to work on several assignments at once? How do you feel about working overtime? How do you feel about travel?

Career And Personal Development Questions

1. What is your long-term employment or career objective? How does this job fit in with your overall career goals?
2. What kind of job do you see yourself holding five years from now? What do you feel you need to develop in terms of skill and knowledge in order to be ready for that opportunity?
3. What are your self development goals?

Unexpected Questions

1. If you could be any cell in the human body, which would you choose to be and why?
2. How do you explain your low grades/dropping of classes/low GRE/TOEFL scores?
3. Describe three people who have profoundly influenced you.
4. If you could spend one hour with the President of the United States, what would you talk to him about?
5. Teach me something not related to your schoolwork in five minutes.
6. Describe an event in your life that has had a major impact on you.
7. Have you ever undertaken something just to prove to yourself or others that you could do it?
8. If you don’t get a job with this agency, what will you do?
9. Have you had a person who acted as a mentor at some point in your life? Tell me about him/her.
10. Why have you had so many jobs in such a short period of time?
11. What does it mean to be successful? According to your definition, how successful have you been so far?
### International Development Questions

1. What is your definition of effective international development?
2. What motivates you to work in international development in the US or overseas?
3. Describe your experience managing project budgets and supervising staff on an overseas development project: what problems did you encounter and how did you handle them?
4. What experience do you have writing proposals or fundraising?
5. What experience do you have with obtaining funding from USAID or reporting on the progress of a project to this agency? What experience do you have with other major donor organizations such as the U.N., World Bank, CARE, etc.?
6. Describe in detail an international development project that you designed, implemented, evaluated, and completed. How did you define and measure success in this project?
7. How has your Peace Corps (or equivalent international) experience influenced your views of international development?
8. Describe your experience working in international development with diverse people in the same country (i.e. indigenous, tribal, or ethnic minorities as appropriate).
9. What have you done to promote the involvement of the local people in projects or activities who are functionally illiterate and/or are non-speakers of the primary language of the country?
10. Based on your past experience and coursework, how would you set up a program in your major area of interest now?
11. What have been your most challenging situations in a development project and how did you handle them?
12. What if anything, does current research or literature say about international development projects like the one(s) you’ve implemented?
13. What are the most important (democratic/environmental etc.) challenges in the x region? What are the appropriate responses, by both the International community and by our organization?
14. What do you see as our strengths in the area of… in this region?
15. What are the most effective tools that we can use to significantly contribute to improvement of the framework of… in this region?
16. What does resource mobilization mean to you? Which area(s) of… do you consider the most/least appropriate for resource mobilization activities?
17. What do you think should be the role of our organization in the context of growing presence of other multilateral partners such as x/y/z?
18. What in your view should be the priorities for Governments of the region in confronting…? Describe some of the strategies that you would recommend for addressing the area of…
19. Imagine the situation: you are responsible for organizing a 3-day sub-regional training course focused on…. For about 21 local government decision makers. What do you do as far as: a) professional agenda b) logistics
20. What do you think is the biggest challenge or difficulty in working with “interdisciplinary” projects, which cover several different areas?
21. Have you worked on a project that involved both government and NGOs? Tell us about it.
22. What is your understanding of the phrase “capacity development/human development/sustainable development”?
23. Describe your experience with administrative and financial issues.
24. What are your contacts with ministries, NGOs, local authorities?
25. Do you have any experience with Results-Based Management systems?
26. Please describe your program management and program monitoring experiences.
27. What is your understanding of the difference between a plan of action, business plan and a monitoring mechanism?
Sample Interview Questions

Health Care Field Questions

1. What prompted your interest in healthcare? Tell us about your experience in this field.
2. What specific area of healthcare are you targeting in your search?
3. How will your education/curriculum be valuable in the job that you hope to pursue?
4. As an administrator, how would you reconcile business and humanitarian concerns regarding managed care?
5. What are the attributes of management success in the healthcare industry?
6. What are the most important issues emerging in healthcare management? Prioritize them and give some recommendations on addressing one of them.
7. What functional skills will you bring to a hospital environment?
8. Why did you choose to attend X program? If you could do so, how would you plan your academic study differently and why?
9. What are the components of a quality health education program? How would you prioritize these components, along with giving justification for your choices?
10. What are some of the issues facing someone trying to implement health programs in the field? How do you propose balance the needs of the community, government and funders?
11. What is your opinion on the best practices being used in the health policy field around the issues of ....?
12. How is US health policy impacting the global stage?
13. Where do you see health care in the US in 20 years?
14. What do you think about the way health care policy is being coordinated globally? What can be done to make it more efficient and effective?
15. What do you think is wrong with the current health care system in the US?
16. What have you recently read in the press about health care?
17. List three issues that confront the health field today. Of the three, which is the most important and why?
18. What do you think should be done to control health care costs in this country? Globally?
Sample Interview Questions

Public Policy Questions

1. What areas of public policy/administration particularly interest you? Why?
2. What, in your mind, is the most significant item on your resume?
3. How committed are you to service for the poor?
4. What if any interests do you have in service to the public generally?
5. What are some of the policy issues you have dealt with or studied?
6. Do you have experience evaluating policy? If so, what?
7. What areas of community development interest you most?
8. Tell me about a time when your ethics were challenged and how you handled it.
9. Using the state of Pennsylvania as an example, site the most important policy problems in the state. Now pick one of those issues and identify the nature of the problem. What can be done about it? What information would you need to gather?
10. What do you think of the welfare reform bill?
11. How do you approach a problem for which there appears to be no definitive answer?
12. Tell me about a situation in which your personal obligations and business/school commitments conflicted. How did you resolve the conflict?
13. What attributes do you have that would make you an effective public servant?

Academic/Research Related Questions

1. Describe your research. Tell us about your research program. What are you working on currently? What do you plan to look at next?
2. What audiences are you addressing, what are the other relevant books or scholars in your field, and how does your work compare with theirs?
3. Can you explain the value of your work/research to an educated layperson?
4. What is your basic teaching philosophy and how would you teach…..?
5. What are your plans for publishing?
6. How do you plan to support your research?
7. What are you research plans for the next 2/5/10 years?
8. How will you seek funding to support your research?
9. In which journals do you plan to submit your research?
10. Describe how you’d teach an introductory survey course in your discipline (or an advanced seminar)?
11. What courses would you like to teach?
12. What course, not currently in our catalogue, would you like to develop?
13. How does your research inform your teaching?
14. What are your plans for integrating students into your research?
15. Why do you want to work here?
16. How do you structure your courses?
17. What distinguishes your teaching from those of your peers?
18. What theorists have you found most useful in formulating your dissertation project?
19. What critical approaches do you find most persuasive? How do they translate into your teaching?
20. How would you view your role as a faculty advisor?