

Preparing for the Telephone Interview

Quick Start Guide

How to Convert Phone Screens into Job Offers

The term "phone screen" has become popular as a label for the process of establishing mutual interest over the phone before committing to a face-to-face interview. Be aware, though, that phone interviews are *not* in the candidate's best interests. This is because phone screens are a tool used by company representatives to reduce the number of people they interview in person from among the many resumes they receive. You want to get on the interview short list, not on the reject list. To achieve this, you need to change your status from an interesting resume to a viable candidate during the telephone interview. Converting telephone interviews to the job offer you want involves the following typical steps:

1. Sell yourself on the phone
2. Schedule a face-to-face interview
3. Conduct the interview
4. Generate the offer
5. Evaluate the offer and make a decision
6. Accept the offer and set a start date
7. Do a professional resignation from the old employer
8. Decline any and all counteroffers
9. Be on time for work on the start date with the new company.

Getting from Step 1 to Step2 is the subject of this document. (For assistance in any of the other steps, please contact us or visit our Web site <http://www.jamesmoore.com> for a full menu of our services.)

Reply to Email or Voicemail Messages from the Company

When you get a message about an employment opportunity, take the time to research the company and the opportunity before returning the call. Check out the company's Web site, location, products and services, and the specific job opportunity for which you are being considered. Also prepare a list of questions for the interviewer. In fact, it is essential that you anticipate the call, by preparing, in advance, a list of 8 - 10 open-ended questions to get the caller talking. Questions that begin with "Tell me about..." are the best. If you can get the other person talking, you will have more control over the outcome and be less on the defensive. Once you are prepared, call the interested person at the

company. If you get the person on the line, you can either conduct the interview on the spot, or you can schedule a specific date and time for the call. Usually, it is better to schedule a phone appointment for a later date. This is because, if you interrupt the person in the middle of something, you are not likely to get their full attention and interest, and you will have difficulty getting a proper hearing.

Sample Questions

Typically, you will ask about the company's products or services, the mission of the department you will be joining, the role they have in mind, and the skills they are seeking:

- "Tell me about your role within the company."
- "How does the position relate to you?"
- "Tell me about your company [e.g., products/services, size and scope of operations, history]."
- "Tell me about the department or project that this position relates to [e.g., primary mission, size of project, technology]."
- "Tell me about the position for which I'm being considered [e.g., tasks, deliverables, technologies and skills involved]."

Field Cold Calls

Sometimes the company will reach you on the first attempt. If you are free to talk and they want to conduct the interview on the spot, use your list of questions to control the conversation. If you are not free to talk, say so and ask the person to call at a time when they can reach you and you will be free to talk. Be specific about time, date and phone number. Again, scheduled appointments are better than impromptu calls, when possible.

Be Persistent

Even managers with the keenest interest in you as a candidate will often send only one email or make only one call, leaving a brief recorded message, and, for lack of a response, move on to other candidates. Reply immediately to the email or find a private place for a call during regular business hours. If you don't reach the person, leave a clear message such as: "My name is _____. Thank you for your interest. I wish to pursue your employment opportunity and believe I have the skills you are seeking. Please call me at [phone number] right away or during the following hours: _____." If you don't hear back within 24 hours, call again until you connect. But don't leave a message every time you call. One message per day is sufficient to show your interest.

Note - If you have trouble connecting by phone, using email can be very effective in establishing mutual interest and getting the dialog started.

Sell Yourself on the Phone

When you conduct a phone interview, your goal is to arrange a face-to-face interview. Because phone screens are often used by employers to disqualify potential candidates, the first order of business is to convince the caller that you are a viable candidate. You can do this by showing a combination of several attributes as follows:

- Confidence in the use of skills that will be required on the job
- Enthusiasm for learning new skills as needed
- Flexibility on location or commute
- Willingness to be compensated fairly.

Divide and Conquer

Separate the hiring criteria into two categories:

1. *Skills you have used on the job* - Let the caller know that you have strengths in these areas, can contribute immediately with these skills, and will also bring confidence and energy to the job.
2. *Skills you have not used on the job* - Let the caller know that you are very eager to get into these new areas and that you will be up to speed very quickly, showing enthusiasm for new skills development. Mention that you have taken the courses or used these skills in personal projects at home when applicable. Specify, as appropriate, how employers have utilized your short learning curve in your previous assignments.

Note - Developers sometimes make the mistake of saying, “I don’t have that skill or experience”, which sounds like “I’m not interested in the assignment” to the audience. Better to say “Those skills and that experience would be areas of personal growth for me and are what I am looking for in my next assignment. I’m sure I would be up to speed very quickly.”

Don’t Let the Money Question Eliminate You

This is too early in the process to enter into salary negotiations. Therefore, compensation questions need special handling. It’s OK to let the company know what your current salary is and when you had your last raise. However, when asked what salary you are seeking, the answer needs to be non-numerical. Here’s an example: “Dollars are not my top priority. If you made me an offer that would fit within your company structure and be competitive with the market for my skills, I would probably accept it.”

Get a Commitment for an In-person Interview

You may be familiar with the phrase "A picture is worth a thousand words." The root of this saying is the fact that human beings get 80% of their information through their eyes. This means that, over the phone, the company can evaluate only 20% of your capabilities and potential, and you can ascertain only 20% of what the opportunity has to offer you. Therefore, at this stage it is essential that you project enthusiasm and confidence and avoid making hasty judgments about the opportunity. Many interviews that would result in a great job offer die at the phone screen stage for lack of enthusiasm on the part of the candidate. Unless you are 100% convinced that you are not interested, always go for the face-to-face interview! Say something like: "That sounds like me, I think we ought to get together", or "I think I would be a good match for the job because _____. When can we meet?" In the in-person interview you will be able to sell yourself more effectively and also gather the information you will need to evaluate any potential offers.

Handle the Noncommittal Interviewer

Sometimes interviewers will be reluctant to make an on-the-spot commitment to schedule an interview. Common responses are "I'd like to think about it and get back to you", "I'd like to discuss it with some other people", or "I have several more people to interview." In this case, it is essential for you to find out how you did because interviewers form opinions about you during the interview. These opinions turn into conclusions shortly after you hang up the phone. If their opinion contains serious concerns about you, you will likely not be called back. Therefore, you must uncover any concerns in the mind of the interviewer and put them to rest while you are still on the phone with them. Be gracious, but be persistent. Later will likely be too late. One way to do this is to say the following:

"I don't want to put you on the spot by asking you for a commitment, but I *would* like to know how you feel about me. At this point, I am simply asking for your opinion. What do you think are the positives that I bring to the position?" Then wait for an answer.

When the interviewer lists positives about you, agree with him or her. Then expand on the positives by giving further examples that support his or her opinion and by stating additional qualifications that you possess that are relevant to the job.

Next, ask, "Do you have any concerns? What are they?"

When the interviewer discusses his or her concerns, listen to them carefully, restate them in a question form to make sure that you understand the concerns, and then explain them away. Some of these concerns may be simple misunderstandings; e.g., they don't think you have a certain skill because they forgot to ask you about it. Answer these concerns directly by pointing out that you do possess the necessary credentials.

Other concerns may be more difficult. They may be looking for a skill that you don't have or don't have enough of. In this case, try to minimize the deficiency and point out your compensating strengths that are important to the position. Additionally, emphasize your confidence that you would be able to get up to speed in the position and be productive quickly. You may not always be successful at this, but you will be surprised at how often a persistent, confident approach will overcome the interviewer's concerns.

Remember that perfect candidates are rare and that, even if one were available with 100% of the desired skills and experience, they would not necessarily want the assignment, because there would be no technical challenge, personal growth or new learning involved. You may even point this out to the interviewer, if appropriate, and emphasize that what you find attractive about the position is the opportunity to learn new skills and that this would make you a good long-term employee. When discussing each concern, don't move on to the next one until you have gotten agreement from the interviewer that this concern should not stand in your way of getting an interview. If you can't answer the interviewer's concerns, you are not likely to get the interview.

If you succeed in getting agreement that there are no concerns about you at this stage, then restate your interest in the job and company and in meeting in person. Give some alternative times and dates when you would be available to meet, and then get an agreement for a specific follow up action item and date. For example, you could say, "Thank you for your time. It sounds as if I've answered all your questions satisfactorily. I'm very interested in this opportunity and would be available to meet any day next week. I look forward to speaking with you again after you have completed your other initial interviews. With whom and when should I follow up regarding the next step?"

If none of the above techniques work, there is not much more that you can do. Nevertheless, it is essential to ask for feedback, because if you fail to ask for it and don't get the interview, it might have been because you were afraid to uncover and answer any concerns. Candidates who confidently ask for feedback and address interviewer concerns have about double the success rate of those who don't.

We hope that these guidelines and tips will be as helpful to you as they have been to many of our other candidates. If you need assistance in other areas of your job search, please contact us or visit our Web site <http://www.jamesmoore.com>.