



## ARE YOU READY TO BE INTERVIEWED BY PHONE?

**By John Artise**

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Rick Boyd didn't have to wait long after mailing his resume to the CFO of a fast-growing IT Company located just 15 miles from his home. He got a call from the CFO a week later, who said he was impressed with Mr. Boyd's work experience. Eager to schedule an interview, Mr. Boyd quickly suggested several dates and times he could be available to meet. Much to his surprise, the CFO jumped in with, "I appreciate your eagerness, Rick, but if you've got about 30 minutes right now, Frank Merrill, our Chief Information Officer, and I would like to interview you over the phone in a conference call. We want to see if it's mutually beneficial for us to meet some time soon. OK?" Taken back by the suggestion and feeling a bit uncomfortable, Mr. Boyd hesitantly agreed. He didn't have his resume in front of him or a copy of the cover letter he'd sent to the CFO. He was nervous, felt unprepared and literally drew a blank at the CIO's first question, "What prompted you to apply to our company?" After flubbing the answer, he stumbled his way through the rest of his interview that went steadily downhill. The entire conversation lasted only 10 minutes and ended by the CFO's signing off with, "Thanks for your time, Rick. We'll be in touch."

All too often, job seekers aren't prepared to conduct a full-blown job interview by telephone. Yet employers increasingly are relying on the telephone interview to screen applicants more thoroughly to determine if there's a fit before flying them out. This way, employers save time and expensive of travel and lodging costs.

Mr. Boyd might have fared a lot better had he adhered to the following **4 tips on Telephone Interviewing**:

1. Always be prepared for a full-blown interview, not just a quick screening. Have copies of your resume and cover letter stored somewhere near your phone to use as a guide.
2. Be ready to answer why, when and how regarding your educational background and work experience. Telephone interviewers favor these types of questions because they help screen applicants faster. Typical queries include: "Why did you stay at XYZ Company for so many years? Why did you choose ABC University? How did you move from section supervisor to branch manager in such a short time?" and "When did you encounter the greatest challenge of your career to date?"
3. Take charge of the phone interview after the first five minutes or so, but not before. Telephone interviewers usually are practiced at taking control and need to impose their agenda right away. At this point, they're bent on doing more talking than listening, so listen carefully before you speak.
4. Be ready to give a 60-second commercial to interviewers that outline the highlights of your background, skills and knowledge. This description should qualify you and justify your reason for wanting to work for the company.

### **THE SOUND IMAGE**

Of course, one disadvantage of a telephone interview is that the interviewer isn't aware of your physical appearance. It's no secret that projecting an impressive image and using positive body language can significantly improve your chances of gaining an offer. However, you can compensate for not being visible by projecting a powerful sound image that allows hiring managers to "see" your personality and behavioral style via your voice.

The key to retaining listener's attention is to use clear, concise, fact-filled sentences and phrases when you speak. Also, interject short responses intermittently to acknowledge the interviewer's statements ("yes, I see," "I agree," "that's interesting ... smart idea," etc.) and show that you're closely engaged in the conversation. Also...you want to "Smile through the phone"...it changes the timber and pitch to your voice which projects you as an enthusiastic and confident candidate!

If you project a strong sound image, the interviewer is likely to make positive assumptions about your candidacy, such as:

- You're someone who's savvy about the industry and the impact you can make on the company.
- You're self-confident.
- You're experienced at selling over the phone. This is a plus, especially if the job requires client development and relationship management. You'll come across as a candidate who should be referred to others in the company for further interviews.

What's interesting about sound is that it grabs an interviewer's attention faster and more consistently than a visual image in a face-to-face meeting. That's because the interviewer is concentrating his or her auditory senses on your voice in an attempt to formulate a picture of you. The more positive points you relay in your message, the better the picture.

## **TOUGH QUESTIONS**

If you aren't accustomed to being interviewed by phone, some questions may seem particularly difficult to answer. Here are suggested ways of handling those common queries.

"Tell me about yourself!" When answering, give a concise, one-minute, fact-filled account of your most current achievements. Be sure to come out of the starting gate running hard with a confident, clear description of your strongest skills and achievements. A suggested response: "I'm currently a design engineer for XYZ Co., focusing on high-technology, waste-treatment microprocessors for industrial use. Several months ago, I designed and led a key team project for the city of Denver. The results brought about an annual cost savings of \$500,000 for the municipality and the installment of low-energy utilization technology with a high output in waste-treatment efficiency." This type of answer opens the door to a series of probing questions focusing on your leadership ability, skills and expertise. Remember, in order to respond fluidly, keep your resume, and a separate list of accomplishments nearby or, better yet, a list of descriptive projects pertaining to your background and experience.

"What would you like to do in our organization?" This is another "screener" question usually asked at the beginning of the conversation to determine the need for further discussion. A suggested response: "I've decided to pursue a controllership at this point in my career since all of my previous experience has prepared me for this move. However, I'd like to bring an additional dimension to the job that will add value the function." Stop here and wait for the interviewer's response.

"What's the added dimension?" Now you've sparked the interviewer's interest. "Well, I'm confident that I can bring valuable expertise in investment management, especially in new, state-of-the-art technology. As your controller, I can take an active role in advising you on the best, most cost-effective monetary investments in cutting-edge automated systems." A statement like this maintains the interviewer's interest, especially when articulated assertively.

"How much money are you looking for?" This question can be tricky, since your negotiating strength is greater in person when you can use facial expressions and body language to make a point. You might try to defer the issue until the end of the interview by saying something like: "Frankly, I'm not prepared to discuss compensation until I know more about the job." Then take charge with your next comment: "Let's talk about the content and requirements of the position so that we can better discuss compensation." Another approach is to avoid giving a direct response by reversing the question: "You've read my mind. What's the salary range you're offering for the job? I'm sure that I can be flexible." If you respond quickly and assertively enough, you'll probably get the interviewer to cooperate.

### **ACT LIKE YOU'RE READY**

Being prepared for a possible phone interview worked well for an employment manager at a New Jersey bank who answered an executive ad in the Wall Street Journal. Several weeks passed without a response, so she assumed the company wasn't interested. But one Sunday evening, the firm's personnel director called her at home. Fortunately, since she'd kept her resume, cover letter and copy of the ad next to the phone, it was easy for her to come across as well prepared. "When they respond to your application for a job ad, they're usually ready to grill you ... and they almost always call you in the evening," she says. "My advice is to act like you were expecting the call and that you want to get down to business. Also, have a few intelligent, probing questions prepared for the caller, and don't be afraid to ask one or two early in the interview.

### **CLOSING TECHNIQUES**

On the phone, feel free to close earlier than you would when face-to-face, especially if you sense that the interviewer has relinquished control to you and is impressed with your presentation. Don't hesitate to suggest a personal meeting at the interviewer's convenience.

Some good closing lines include: "Well, Mr. Smith, I feel real good about the job as you've described it, and I am interested in talking further. Can we schedule to meet in person over the next few days?"

If the company is far away, say: "I'd like to pursue this further. When do you plan to be in my area so that we can meet?" or "When would you be willing to fly me out to meet with you? The position really sounds like a great match, and I'm eager to meet your colleagues at the company to get a better sense of the overall fit."

Even if you use the best closing line remember that it's still easier for interviewers to reject you by phone than in person. Distance has a way of reducing their discomfort. A classic line used by phone interviewers to "disconnect" from you goes something like this: "While I think your background is impressive, I really don't see a match here. You're not quite what we're looking for." Sometimes, the interviewer is playing devil's advocate and is really testing to see if you're tenacious and can make a firm case for your candidacy. Some suggested responses include: "I'm quite surprised to hear you say that. Let me recap the match points between my background and the job as you've described it. If you need additional information or more supportive evidence, please jump in and ask." This type of response leaves the door open for the interviewer to cover more bases and fill in the cracks, which could change the picture in your favor. You also might say: "I'm not sure we're in agreement. What areas are you uncomfortable with? I'd like to address them point by point." Or, "I realize that it's difficult for both of us to make a sound, informed decision over the phone. I think it would be worth our time to meet in person before we come to a joint conclusion. Can we meet briefly next week?" If your image is better projected in person, press for a personal interview. That's the only way you can convert a "no" into a "yes."