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THE ARTHUR J. KANIA SCHOOL OF MANAGEMENT

Mastering the Phone Screening

Many job seekers think of a phone screen as a formality: The employer is clearly interested, so all you have to do is sound relatively competent and set up an in-person interview, right?

Wrong. This is actually a first-round interview, and you should be prepared to make a stellar impression over the phone just as you would if you were meeting in person. Phone interviews are often more impromptu, so you should familiarize yourself with the job posting, and then follow these ten steps to phone screen success.ⁱ

1. Make sure you have a professional-sounding outgoing voice-mail message.

Imagine you're an employer looking to find a responsible employee to fulfill a management position. How do you think you'd react to an outgoing message of your promising candidate singing "I'm wasting away again in Margaritaville—can't get to the phone"? You probably wouldn't even bother leaving a message. The moral of this story: Record a professional-sounding message on your voicemail with no singing, no gimmicks, and no slang.

2. Express appreciation for the call

Even if you're caught completely off guard by the call, be welcoming and enthusiastic. "Hello, I'm so glad you called!" Smile when you say it—the person at the other end of the phone can't see your expression but will be able to hear the warmth in your voice.

3. Make sure it's the right time and place

Maybe you get the call while you're at work, with your boss breathing down your neck, or the phone rings when you're out with friends or walking home from class. If the interviewer catches you at a bad time and asks, "Is this a good time to talk?" your response should be something along these lines: "Actually, is there a time I can reach you tomorrow or the day after? I'm very interested in the position and I want to give you my undivided attention, but I'm afraid now isn't the best time." Make plans so you can receive the call in a quiet place where you won't be interrupted.

4. Be sure you're speaking on a land line

A poor cell phone connection can leave both parties feeling frustrated, and you don't want to inadvertently hang up on your interviewer. If you're speaking on your cell phone, ask if you can call your interviewer right back on your land line.

5. Have your resume, notes, and date book in front of you

Your interviewer may ask you specific questions about your work history, and giving vague answers will not make a good impression. The phone screen is like an open-book exam.

6. Be an active listener

Hear out your interviewer's questions in full, without interrupting, and make sure you ask follow-up questions for clarification if need be. Your interviewer cannot see you nod, and may interpret your silence at the end of the phone as a dropped line—so be sure to interject the occasional active listening cues, such as: "I see," "right," "okay," "that's interesting," and "absolutely."

7. Expect elimination questions to come first

Unlike in-person interviews, phone interviews often cut right to the chase, without a lot of preliminary chitchat. Prepare for tough, awkward questions to be asked right away, such as:

- Why do you want to work for us?
- Why did you leave your previous job(s)?
- What are your greatest strengths and weaknesses?
- What's one problem you wish you had handled differently at your last job?
- What traits do you like most and least in a supervisor?
- What salary would you expect in this position?

8. Avoid verbal tics

You know how some people, when they're, like, all nervous and stuff, say things in a way that, ummm, makes them sound, you know, kind of, well, less than professional? Be aware of your verbal mannerisms on the phone since your interviewer will have few other cues by which to judge your professionalism.

Another verbal tic that interviewers tend to associate with younger, less experienced candidates is "upswing," a tendency to have the cadence of the voice rise as though every sentence (or portion of a sentence) ends in a question mark. With upswing, this statement sounds much more dubious and less impressive than if you said it using a more factual, even cadence.

9. Earn your 15 minutes in the spot light

With in-person interviews, most interviewers will grant you at least 15 minutes out of sheer politeness, but over the phone, interviewers feel much freer to abruptly terminate interviews that don't seem promising. So don't save your best stories for last—make a favorable impression early on.

10. Inquire about next steps

When the interviewer takes steps to conclude the interview by thanking you for your time or asking whether you have any additional questions, respond with, "I'm very interested in the position, and I would like to know about the next steps in the hiring process. Could we set up a time to meet in person?"

Even if your interviewer does not seem particularly enthusiastic during the interview, you should still ask—HR reps in particular are trained to give as little indication of interest as possible, to test your

perseverance and to avoid raising any candidate's hopes prematurely. If your interviewer declines your offer to set up an interview on the spot, ask when you should follow up.

Finally, enthusiastically thank your interviewer again for taking the time to call. Your graciousness, appreciation, and interest will leave a positive impression.

ⁱ <http://www.wetfeet.com/articles/mastering-the-phone-screening>