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## Taking the mystery out of telephone interviews

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*Special to the Legal*

As more and more human resources personnel in corporations, law firms and recruiting firms throughout the country are working smarter to save money and time, utilization of a telephone interview is becoming a popular tool to screen candidates for open positions and weed out weaker candidates.

In today's competitive legal market it is imperative for job seekers to understand the significance of a telephone interview and how to prepare for it. Far too often job seekers brush off a telephone interview, wrongly equating it with a mere "phone call." This mistake proves to be a costly career error, usually taking candidates out of consideration for positions for which they may have been well-suited and in which they had a genuine interest.

### THE TRUTH ABOUT TELEPHONE INTERVIEWS

The fact of the matter is that telephone interviews are real interviews. After prospective employers carefully review candidate resumes for particular positions, they may choose to use a telephone interview as the next phase in determining which job seekers will be invited for face-to-face interviews and which will be removed from the process. An interviewer's initial objective is to determine if job seekers are articulate, telephone personable and qualified for an

open position and whether, at least at the most basic level, they will fit in well with a department or office.

Typically, an interviewer will place a telephone call or send an e-mail to job seekers to schedule telephone interviews. When scheduling a telephone interview, job seekers should ascertain how long an interview is expected to last, verify who will be initiating the call, obtain or provide an appropriate telephone number, then block off the appropriate calendar time. Always allow a little extra time for telephone interruptions or for a conversation that runs long. Job seekers receiving a voice message or an e-mail requesting availability for a telephone interview must respond quickly. If you have been away or received a request late in the evening, it is best to respond immediately, even if the response is made after regular business hours.

One of the best ways to respond to a missed telephone call or e-mail may be, "I am sorry I missed your call. I just returned from vacation but remain most interested in speaking with you about the environmental litigation position. I am available on April 17 between 11 a.m. and 1:30 p.m. Is this time convenient for you?" This kind of message lets a recruiter know you are interested in the position and explains why it has taken you a while to return the call.

If a recruiter calls you directly and asks if you currently are available to speak about an open position, it is up to you whether you actually have time and are

prepared to discuss the position. It is perfectly permissible to let a caller know it is not a convenient time. You may try saying, "I am so pleased you called because I am really interested in the position, but you caught me at a bad time. I am in the middle of preparing for a deadline, but I am available tomorrow. When would it be convenient for me to call you?" This response lets callers know you are interested in speaking with them and also provides you with the opportunity to prepare for the interview and have the interview at a time when you can focus on and give your full attention to it.

While a telephone interview may seem awkward or downright scary to some people, others enjoy the opportunity to get a feel for the position without having to devote several hours or a half-day to meet with human resource personnel for 15 to 20 minutes. The key to a successful telephone interview is treating it as if you were meeting the interviewer in person for the first time. A good telephone interview also should provide a job seeker with a preview of what the position entails and insight into the culture and philosophy of the firm or corporation.

Telephone interviews should not be taken for granted and require careful planning and consideration. While face-to-face interviews may prove to be a challenge, a telephone interview is different and often intimidating, but it can be mastered and may actually offer some advantages. They can be a good interim step before the face-to-face interview.

## 10 TIPS FOR A BETTER TELEPHONE INTERVIEW

**1. Preparation:** As with any interview, a job seeker must be prepared. Take time to review the firm or corporation's Web site and read carefully the overview section. Play close attention to the department where you will be interviewing and become familiar with the key partners or associates in the department. Read the attorney biographies, focusing on particular areas of interest and case law that may have been made by these attorneys. While this interview is not a memory contest, review of the relevant material will give you an idea of the types of matters you may be working on for the firm or corporate entity. In addition, this preparation will help you direct your focus on a brief overview of your accomplishments to demonstrate how your previous experience ties in with the work being handled by the department or group.

If the firm or corporation does not have a Web site, conduct a Google, an Edgar or a Hoover's search or look at Martindale-Hubbell to get better acquainted with your prospective employer.

**2. Location:** If you will be at home during your interview, make certain you have selected a room in your home that will be quiet and free of distractions and noise. If you have children or pets, make arrangements ahead of time for someone to come over to watch them in another part of the house. Turn off all appliances, radios and televisions. You want to convey to the interviewer that you are professional and value the time being made for the interview.

In addition, a quiet location will help you focus on the conversation.

Like most interviews, telephone interviews typically take place during regular business hours. If you know you will be working on the day of the interview, find an available conference

room in your office or another location where you will not be interrupted by a co-worker or an employee. It is best to find a location away from your work site. When possible, ask a colleague from another office/firm or a professional organization ahead of time if you may borrow a conference room or an empty office to use for a designated period of time.

Job seekers working with legal recruiters should make arrangements to use one of their offices or interview rooms.

In these days of mobile telephones a parked automobile is another possible office substitute, but be certain you are in a consistent cell coverage area without extraneous parking lot noises.

Avoid locations such as restrooms, restaurants and heavy traffic areas. It is not appropriate to subject your interviewer to flushing toilets, clanging dishes and cutlery and other distracting noises. Again, you want to maintain a professional backdrop for your interview.

**3. Charged battery in cell phone or portable phone:** Whether you are using a cell phone or portable telephone for your interview, the last thing you want is to have the call dropped or interrupted by a poorly charged battery. Make sure your telephone is properly charged or has a strong battery and check in advance for dead zones or no service areas.

**4. Resume:** Having your resume in front of you during your interview will prove beneficial, especially if this is your first telephone interview. One of the real advantages to the telephone interview is that you can have your notes in front of you and make reference to them, without calling attention to the fact.

Remember, too, to be prepared to answer difficult questions regarding why you have left prior positions and be able to account honestly for any gaps in your resume.

In addition, should you be asked about a particular position in your past, especially a date, you will be able to glance at your resume and provide the information needed.

Having the job description in front of you will aid you in answering questions, too, by correlating your work experiences and their hiring needs. Rehearsing your answers will help ensure a smooth interview.

**5. Pen and paper:** Make certain you have a pad of paper and a writing instrument in front of you. Have one sheet of key points you want to make certain to cover during the interview. You can check them off as each is discussed. You also should jot down notes about specific areas of focus during an interview to aide in preparing for a subsequent interview or to answer later in this interview. During the interview your notes will help ensure you have fully answered questions, and they will serve as a reminder of things you might need to clarify about a previous answer before the interview ends.

**6. Smile and dress for the interview:** While it may be tempting to interview in your pajamas or lounge wear, keep in mind that, although an interviewer cannot see you during the interview, you want to maintain a professional aura even if the call takes place while you are at home. Dressing well and putting your interview face on help you set the tone of the interview itself. While you do not necessarily need to wear a suit and tie, being dressed will help you be prepared psychologically. When we feel good about ourselves and dress for success that confidence comes out in our voices and in the way in which we answer questions. Smiling and maintaining good posture during the interview will also put you in a positive frame of mind, and that confidence, certainly, will be conveyed over the telephone lines. This poise also will help

you stay positive, during even the most challenging of questions. Studies have proved smiles actually can be detected over the telephone by the quality of a speaker's voice.

**7. Professional address, tone and articulation:** Just because an interview is taking place over the telephone does not mean you can let your guard down. Be sure to address your interviewer in the same polite and professional manner you would use if you were meeting them face-to-face. Be sure to use proper forms of address such as Ms., Mr. or Mrs. when speaking with your interviewer. Remember to speak clearly and slowly and use proper grammar and diction.

Avoid phrases such as "you know," "hum" and "ya."

Whatever you do, convey that you are interested in the position. Interviewers are listening for clues about your personality and how well you will interact with their clients and executives over the telephone. Stay engaged in the conversation and answer in complete sentences, avoiding the temptation to say merely "yes" or "no" to a question. Not only is an interviewer trying to assess your working history and skills, he also is trying to establish how well you will work under pressure and if you are able to think out of the box.

If at any time during the interview you cannot hear an interviewer, politely ask for the question to be repeated. Be mindful of the tone of your voice. Again, you do not want to sound defensive or too laid back.

Be certain to remove gum or mints from your mouth before you pick up the telephone.

In addition, it is important not to interrupt or speak over an interviewer. Give your interviewer the courtesy of listening

to each question posed and then answer each question as fully as possible.

Maintain a positive attitude and do not say anything negative about your present or past employer.

**8. Ask appropriate questions:** When there is a lull or pause in the conversation, that's your clue to ask an appropriate follow-up question or questions. These questions may be clarifications of areas the interviewer has already touched upon or those that will show that you have taken the time to get acquainted with the firm or company. It is appropriate to ask the names of the attorneys to whom you will directly report and the types of projects or cases the department handles or how a firm utilizes its paralegals.

Avoid questions regarding salary, overtime, benefits, hours or parking.

A telephone interview is meant to provide insight as to what the firm is about as well as keeping the company or firm interested in wanting to learn more about what you have to offer them. Asking questions shows you are intelligent and well prepared and affirms your serious interest in working with them. It is smart to have a couple of prepared questions before the interview. Be sure, however, to check them off, if the subject is covered before you get to ask the question.

**9. Close the call on a high note:** An interview is not finished until a job seeker has effectively conveyed interest in a position. Reaffirming your qualifications and offering to provide additional information are ways to assure you will get that next interview. Make certain you do not forget to thank interviewers for their time and consideration before a call is ended. Regardless of whether you initiated the call or an interviewer did, let interviewers hang up first to allow them

time to review their notes to make sure nothing was forgotten.

**10. Immediately send a written thank-you note:** As with face-to-face interviews, be courteous and send a written thank-you note. This note will demonstrate that you are a professional who values the time spent in the interview.

While a successful telephone interview will not guarantee you will be offered a position, it certainly should ensure you will be invited for a face-to-face interview. Keeping these 10 tips in mind before your next interview will give you the edge over the competition and prevent a telephone interview catastrophe that may sideline your career objectives.

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