

Phone calls are increasingly used by hiring companies as vehicles to recruit, screen, and interview. As the cost of travel increases, the pressure for companies to be more efficient and effective during their hiring process also increases. What does that mean for you? You need to be prepared to be as amazing on the phone as you are in a face-to-face meeting.

And once you are an employee of a company and attending conference calls or web conferences, you need to be the best on the phone, as well.

However, that's not you right now. Most millennials prefer e-mail and are not taking the phone or web-based-audio technology seriously enough.



### **Solution:**

Pretend you are in front of the other person and this phone call needs to be your *best moment*. Some common characteristics of phone interviews or meetings:

- You want to understand them clearly and you want to be heard clearly.
- You want to answer their questions concisely.
- You want to be prepared in advance of the call.
- There is a limited timeframe to cover a lot of information.

There are some real advantages of a phone meeting AND some real disadvantages:

#### **Advantages:**

1. You get to cheat! YES, you can and should have multiple sheets of paper or digital information in front of you.  
For job interviews, minimally, have:
  - your résumé.
  - the job description (with any notes or questions you have).
  - page prints of some key webpages for the company (About, Divisions, People, Values).
  - top Interview Questions and your 3 bullet-point answers per question.
  - top questions you want to ask them.
  - Paper and pen to write down the questions they are asking and to take notes of their comments, insights, and answers. You will need these for the thank you note you will write immediately following!

Spread them out and mark each one clearly so you can find it in the moment.

2. As a result of “cheating,” you should be able to have great answers and express your interest in the position.

Disadvantages:

1. You will have a tendency to ramble. No, you *will* ramble. You are nervous, you want to sell them on so many points, and you have no clues on how you are doing. See the first TRICK below.
2. It's harder to understand the question. There are a variety of reasons this can occur: English as a second language for one or both of you, the other person talks quickly, OR the question was just unclear. See the second TRICK below.
3. You can't read their non-verbal body language. You don't know if they are smiling or rolling their eyes. They can't see your hand motions or eye contact. See the third TRICK below.
4. Time will run out and you may not have said all you wanted to share. See the fourth TRICK below.



**Tricks:**

1. ***The Law of Threes:*** Say no more than 3 things and stop talking. Repeat: Say no more than 3 things and SHUT UP. This will not only prevent you from rambling, but it gives time for the other person to write and think. Learn how to pause. Take a breath. If the caller wants more, he/she will ask. If you are concerned it was too brief (if you just said 3 words), then you can ask, "Would you like me to elaborate on any of the points?"
2. ***Ask for Clarification:*** If you did not understand the question, then ask them to repeat it. This is not a sign of weakness and it's important that you answer the right question. Just try not to do this on every question. Two ways to ask: "Can you repeat the question please?" or "Can you expand on the question so I am clear on what you are looking for?"
3. ***Stand Up and Smile!*** : Even if you can't see them and they can't see you (unless it is a web conference), stand up when on the phone. Your voice will project better and you will sound more confident. If you have a headset, use your hands, too. Nobody is seeing you, but if it helps you to be in a presentation mode, then do it. I do! Did you know that smiles come through the phone? Yes, when you make a statement like, "Ms. Miller, I believe I am the best candidate for your position because I'm \_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_," there is a different tonal inflection if you have a smile versus without. They will hear a more up-beat, positive candidate if you are smiling.
4. ***Block Prep and Travel Time:*** Block 30 minutes before the phone interview and 30 minutes after the phone interview in your calendar. A common excuse I hear for being 5 minutes late for a phone call is, "Sorry, I was on another call." Well, then you should not have accepted one of the times since they were back to back.

5. **Script Your Outbound Calls:** The nice part about the phone is that they can't see you reading from your "script." So write your script. Regardless of whether the person picks up the phone or if you get their voicemail, you will be clear, concise, and action-oriented. Now, write out the email that will follow this phone call so that the minute you hang up from the phone, you can push "send" or make minor changes based on the results of the phone conversation. Write your script at least 24 hours in advance so you can review it and not be rushed.
6. **Leave Great Voicemails:** It will be rare that you get the person on the phone, so look at voicemail as a great opportunity to shine. Some rules:
  - Introduction: Make one. Don't assume they recognize your voice. "*Hello, this is Jane Miller...*"
  - Clarity: Pick up your handset, avoid ear buds, and don't be driving in a car or calling from airports or noisy areas.
  - Pace: Speak slowly and articulate more than you would in normal conversation.
  - Engaging First Sentences: "*Hello, this is Jane Miller. Doug, you and I met at an industry event six months ago and I'm calling to ask for your help. I'd like to apply for the marketing manager position at your company and am requesting your help in navigating my way to the hiring manager.*"
  - Brevity: This voicemail is not replacing an email you will follow up with. It is an introduction to an email you will send. Do not assume the listener is writing anything down, either. They could be listening while in their car or at the airport.
  - Call to Action and Close: Close every voicemail with the next step that YOU'RE going to take. I have received so many calls that end with, "*Dana, please call me back at XXX-XXX-XXXX so we can discuss.*" Or, worse: "*Let's discuss.*" I call those "plops." You just plopped the follow-through on the middle of the virtual table, and nothing will happen as a result. Here are some recommendations:
    - *Doug, I will send you a follow-up email today with this request and my credentials attached. It will be in a format ready for you to forward to the hiring manager.*
    - *Doug, if you would like to reach me by phone, my number is <slowly> XXX-XXX-XXXX. Again, it's Jane Miller at XXX-XXX-XXXX.*
    - *Thank you very much, in advance, Doug.*
  - If an Administrative Assistant answers, ask them to put you into their boss's voicemail instead of having them take a message.
7. **Have Professional Phone Behavior:**
  - Change your voicemail message to say "*Hello, this is James Smith and I'm sorry I missed your call. Please leave a message and phone number and I will respond as soon as possible.*" Check your voicemails often and play them in their entirety prior to calling the person back.

- When answering your phone “live,” unless you are sure you know the call is not a job search-related call, always answer, “Hello, this is James.” They will appreciate your professionalism.

8. **Be Ready for Video:** Have interview-appropriate attire on above the waist. See Chapter 17 on interview attire. Even though the phone call arranger says “phone meeting,” more and more of them are becoming video phone calls. If they use Skype, that is an indicator that it will be video. However, even if you are sent a link to a conference call, that, too, may end up on video. Better to be over-prepared and ready to be seen.



### Mistakes:

**Mistake #1:** Being late. Yes, it happens all the time, even for a phone interview. “Sorry, there was traffic, my last call went long,” or some other excuse.

**Mistake #2:** Missing the call entirely because of time-zone confusion. It is your job to clarify the time zone in advance. Figure that out.

**Mistake #3:** Your phone goes dead, headset dies, PC battery dies on a web conference, etc.

**Mistake #4:** Dogs barking, babies crying, airport announcements, TV on in the background, etc.



### Excuses:

**Excuse #1:** *“I don’t have a quiet place to have a phone interview.”* Find one. Worst case: the inside of your car, parked in a quiet place. You’ll need to arrange your preparation documents wherever you are as well. OR ask a friend if you can come over to take the call. If you can’t find a place, then finding a job is just not that important to you. Don’t make the call in a loud coffee shop. Hotel lobbies are good choices.

**Excuse #2:** *“I don’t do well on the phone; it’s too hard for me.”* Learn how. This is the trend, not only for winning a job, but for networking, too. And guess what? Interviewers are observing your phone skills, as your job may require you to host numerous phone calls with customers, partners, peers, and managers from all around the country or the world. So if this is hard, you may not have the skills for the job.

**Excuse #3:** *“I keep leaving voicemails but I’m not getting any return calls.”* In today’s era, people take longer to reply to voice messages than other types of communication. When it was introduced in the early 1980s, voicemail was hailed as the number one productivity tool. But in an age of instant information, the burden of having to hit the playback button or dial

into a mailbox and enter a pass code and sit through “ums” and “ahhs” can be too much for many managers. The technology is heading toward obsolescence, driven by the younger generations. Fortunately, voice-to-text technology may ultimately land your voicemail into the recipient’s email or text inbox. Text messaging has increased, but I do not recommend texting anywhere in the job search process today. That may change in future but don’t use text or Facebook messenger.



### Homework Assignment:

- 1. Prepare your phone interview checklist. That way you can repeat your best phone interview skills every time and not scramble at the last minute. Print copies of:
  - Your résumé
  - The job description
  - Page prints of some key webpages for the company (About, Divisions, People, Values, etc.)
  - Top interview questions and your 3 bullet point answers per question
  - The 3 questions you want to ask them
  - Paper and pen to write down the questions they are asking and to take notes of their comments, insights, and answers. You will need these for the thank you note you will write immediately following!
- 2. Be ready in your quiet phone environment 30 minutes before the scheduled call time. Check that your cell, portable phone, and headset are charged. Make a call to a friend to check that the audio is loud and clear, ask family members to be quiet, let the dog out, etc. Never schedule an interview from an airport, a coffee house, or driving along in your car. And never eat or chew gum while on the phone. It comes through loud and clear.
- 3. If using a different phone, turn your cell OFF during the call.
- 4. If using a computer for a phone or web conference **or** to reference information, turn off computer alerts and all other applications, including pop-ups for new email messages. These are called “desktop alerts,” and if you don’t know how to control them, type “desktop alerts” into the search bar on Microsoft.com and you will see how easy it is to turn them off and back on again.

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