



## When the phone rings for you: how to handle the interview scheduling call

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Many people view the ad-answering phase of a job search too narrowly, as if it were only a two-step process: 1) You answer the advertisement, and then 2) you interview with your potential employer. The most ignored aspect of this activity is as important as a steppingstone in the middle of a fast-flowing stream.

In the time between sending the letter containing your resume and the actual job interview is a critical intermediate step: the phone call that asks you to come in for a meeting. The outcome of your interview hinges upon how well you handle this crucial scheduling call. It's surprising, after all the care lawyers take designing their resumes and writing creative cover letters, that they respond so inadequately when taking a phone call to schedule a job interview.

Although responding to a request to come in for an interview seems a relatively easy matter, it is critically important to the hiring process. It is something most job seekers take for granted, but there is a right and wrong way to schedule an interview. This article will show you how to turn that simple phone call into a great opportunity to stand out from the crowd. Appropriate responses will be outlined, as will a few simple rules for answering an interview-scheduling phone call.

### When You Answer the Phone

#### Rule 1: Take Control of the Situation

The critical element in responding correctly to an invitation for a job interview is that, right from this very first phone call, you put yourself in the driver's seat. Your goal must be to turn this simple conversation-and the whole interviewing experience-into a great opportunity to make yourself memorable and present yourself as someone a cut above the other candidates being considered for the advertised position.

This is a subtle process. It certainly doesn't mean that you talk nonstop about yourself and your credentials, try to intimidate the caller, ask inappropriate questions, or make unreasonable demands. Simply put, it does mean that once you begin answering ads, you have a plan for the way you're going to handle phone calls inviting you to interview.

You should know, generally, when the phone rings for you, how you are going to respond, paying particular attention to the tone of voice you use when talking to a potential employer. A good first step to take control and steer the hiring process in the direction you intend is to photocopy the scripts on the pages that follow and leave them by your telephone as soon as you start mailing out resumes.



## **Rule 2: Stall for Time**

Often, when law firms call to request an interview, they are in a hurry to hire and want to schedule the initial meeting as soon as possible. Your first step in guiding the interview in the direction you desire is to buy yourself some time. Use a socially acceptable excuse to delay the interview date for just a few days to give you an opportunity to prepare. Most reasonable people, who have to juggle their own schedules from day to day, will accept your request and readily negotiate an alternative time for your interview. When a firm calls one evening and asks you to interview the next day, or within two or three days, say something like this:

*Let me check my schedule to make sure I'm free tomorrow afternoon. You know, I see that I have another appointment at the time you suggest. Would next Tuesday at the same time be convenient for you?*

Offer any acceptable reason for the delay (e.g., dentist's appointment), and then suggest an alternative date. Why ask for a later date? Because you need that time to do some basic research on the firm or company that wants to interview you.

What if they say no, they can't reschedule? "If you want to interview," a law firm representative might reply, "you'll have to come in Friday afternoon. That's the only time convenient for us." Their answer tells you, right then and there, all you need to know about the climate of the firm, doesn't it? But that kind of response is the exception. Most employers, even busy law firms scheduling interviews, will accept a reasonable excuse and reschedule.

Information is power. Use the time you've gained to go a public listing, or better, to consult your recruiter, employment advocate, or job counselor. You may also check the business section archive of your local newspaper, and especially the firm's own homepage, to find out general background information you need about the firm-its size, its practice, and the names and credentials of the other lawyers who work there. Especially look for "links" among its personnel-lawyers who are alumni of your law school or have worked previously in firms or agencies where you have worked.

As a last resort, if you can't find the information you need through research, then call friends, if only to find out the word on the street about the firm and a realistic salary range for someone with your credentials and number of years out of law school.

If you are interviewing with a corporation or business entity, you will need to do some background reading on trends in the company's industry or the company's products or pull up their website so that you can be reasonably knowledgeable about their business. You make this effort, obviously, so that you can ask some intelligent questions of your own at the interview to determine if the advertised position is a right fit for you.

Your efforts will also communicate to the interviewer your interest and your initiative. They indicate that you are likely to hit the ground running and will prove yourself an immediate asset to the company.



A more mundane reason to stall for time is also that you may want to improve your appearance with a haircut. If you haven't had time to do much shopping recently, you may need to use the time to look for a new shirt and tie or suit and blouse.

*Rule 3: Reduce the Interview Unknowns*

After agreeing on a time and location for the interview, but before the caller hangs up, make an effort to establish a rapport and try to ask a few well-chosen questions that will not only help you prepare for the interview, but will ease your anxieties of an unknown situation.

Be careful of your tone of voice when you are asking these questions. Many lawyers find it difficult to switch from the direct speech patterns of their legal lives. Deliberately change the pace of your "legal speech." Use an upbeat and warm affect when you speak, and frame your queries in a casual, confiding, and friendly way. Some career consultants would even go so far as to advise their clients to assume a standing position for these phone calls, believing that this posture encourages a more self-confident, "take charge" attitude.

In any event, the questions you ask when scheduling a job interview are very important because the information you may be able to uncover before the interview will help reduce the ambiguities of the upcoming meeting with the firm. The questions that follow will also help you:

- Display a professional approach to your job interviewing. You will come across as a serious candidate, someone who, as the saying goes, "has his or her act together."
- Gain a powerful advantage over other job seekers who have not thought about gathering this kind of pre-interview information and are relatively unfamiliar with the firm or company.
- Stand out from the crowd of the other job candidates who do not know how to take charge of the interviewing process.

Please note that these are not the ultimate, perfect questions for each and every interview-scheduling phone call. They are merely topic suggestions. You may wish to change the format of the words and the order in which they are asked and tailor your queries to your own verbal style and the needs of the situation. But ask as many of these questions as you feel appropriate to the call and the degree of rapport you are able to establish with the caller.

You can usually find the information you need about the uncertainties surrounding the interview with either one of the two following questions:

A) Before we hang up, would you help me with something? Who will be interviewing me?

The interviewer has a significant impact on the importance of the interview. If you will only be talking to someone in the human resources department, then you can expect to fill out a standard application form-name, dates, and social security number-undergo a quick resume review, and submit to the usual "Tell me something about yourself" line of questioning.



On the other hand, if you're told that you'll be meeting a senior partner, the whole hiring committee, or some of the other lawyers at the firm, then expect an in-depth discussion of your credentials, your cases, your portables, and professional experience.

You can discover the same information by focusing on another aspect of the interview with this alternative question:

B) Before we hang up, perhaps you could help me with something? How much time should I allow for the interview?

If the answer is "about an hour," then you'll probably be having just a short screening interview with one lawyer or the firm's human resources person. Most likely, you'll be asked the typical screening questions, such as "Why do you want to leave the Public Defender's Office?" or "How well did you do in law school?"

If the answer is "a couple of hours" or "all afternoon," then you're probably facing more than just a resume screening and will be talking with a senior partner or meeting with several lawyers and can expect a more comprehensive discussion of the firm's practice, your recent cases, work habits, and so on.

#### *Rule 4: Identify the Hiring Criteria*

No matter what job qualifications are stated in the legal advertisement, human nature being what it is, some employers will have underlying hiring criteria that may not be immediately obvious, that they may not even recognize themselves.

All other credentials being approximately equal, one interviewer may favor well-dressed applicants. A Midwest firm might be impressed with East Coast law school credentials; another firm might have a slight bias towards lawyers who have good literary and writing credentials, and so on.

Sometimes these hidden criteria are subtle, hard to discover. But at other times, they can be identified. The next two questions are designed to help you uncover, if possible, the significant criteria that inclined the interviewer to ask you in for an interview.

*First, ask casually:*

*Just out of curiosity-have you received many resumes in answer to your ad?*

This query is just a lead-in to the next question. The person calling will probably answer "Yes," or give an estimated number.

Next, ask this critical question:

*The reason I asked . . . I put a lot of time into writing my resume . . . and I was wondering what it was in the resume that suggested you call me in for an interview?*



This question may help you identify the bottom-line criteria the firm is using to make its selection. The answer may hint at what strengths it values, at what it would like to hear during your interview. Just as lawyers who know the legal, political, or judicial preferences of a sitting judge will sometimes, as the saying goes, “feed the monkeys” and frame their arguments in legal theory or language attractive to the bench, so too will job applicants emphasize in their answers those elements of their backgrounds and experiences they believe the interviewers would be most interested in hearing.

*Rule 5: Be Prepared for Screening Questions*

It is more common today for law firms, indeed all employers, to use the phone as a screening tool. Rather than take the time for office interviews with 20 potential new hires, it is easier to evaluate these candidates on the phone and weed out the ones who don't meet minimal qualifications for the position or who, for one reason or another, disqualify themselves as viable job candidates. As a result of these phone interviews, the caller then decides, say, on five potential hires who will be brought into the office for face-to-face interviews.

Sometimes, when the phone rings for you, you may be asked one or two threshold questions before the interviewer decides whether or not to schedule a time to interview you in person. But your response to a screening call should be the same as any other phone interview: Establish rapport and describe your career accomplishments and credentials. It helps enormously, as you start answering advertisements, to develop a script, or “cue sheet,” for these inquiries, just as you have prepared answers to other interview questions and to have your script handy for easy reference.

Screening Question # 1:

*We've received your resume. Could you tell us a little more about yourself?*

Your answer is easy. You should have a “profile statement” that you can use to introduce yourself at self-marketing meetings and job interviews. This is nothing more than your “opening argument”- your 60-second sound bite, your infomercial-that tells interviewers where you're coming from, where you want to go, and your credentials to get there. If you haven't yet completely memorized it, print it up and leave a cue-card copy by the phone.

Screening Question # 2:

*We've received your resume and we're wondering what kind of a salary you're looking for?*

The short answer is that you want to avoid a premature disclosure of your salary requirements. In other words, you're not about to give up a negotiating advantage or commit yourself to a certain level of compensation before you have a better understanding of the job description and the employer's expectations for that position.

Your answer - You handle this query exactly as if the question were being asked in a face-to-face job interview. One excellent way to avoid a specific figure and, at the same time, take the initiative away from the interviewer would be to reply in this manner:



*"My salary requirements are negotiable . . . I'm interested in finding the right opportunity and I'll be open to any fair offer when I do . . . What's your salary range for this position?"*

6

### **Summary**

- Be prepared for unexpected job-related phone calls, especially those you may receive late in the evening.
- Take charge of the interviewing process, starting with this interview-scheduling phone call.
- Keep copies of your profile statement and scripts within easy reach of your phone and do not hang up without asking questions that will help you better prepare for the interview.
- Stall for more time if your caller requests that you come in for an interview on short notice
- The friendlier and more upbeat you sound over the phone, the easier it will be for you to connect with the caller.
- Do your homework and research before the interview, and you will make yourself memorable as a candidate after the interview. Knowledge is power.