

# Surviving the Phone Screen



*By Christopher Jones*

The first personal interaction many job seekers have with a recruiter is the phone screen.

A phone screen is a brief telephone conversation between a job seeker and a recruiter. The screen helps determine which candidates will reach the interview stage of the hiring process.

Many job seekers assume that a phone screen assures an interview. Not so. In fact, a poor phone screen usually assures only one thing: That the candidate will be dropped from consideration altogether.

## **When Is Not a Good Time to Talk?**

Recruiters are trained to begin phone screens by asking job candidates if it is a good time to talk.

Before you get swept up by your enthusiasm and answer "yes," there are a couple of situations in which you might want to reschedule the conversation.

If you are in a room with coworkers, on a cell phone, distracted, in a noisy environment or completely unprepared, reschedule the call.

Many people assume that they will get "extra points" by talking with the recruiter even if it is a bad time. Unfortunately, that's not the case and the job seeker usually pays a hefty price for their good -- but uninformed -- intentions.

Many recruiters have been trained to be sensitive to timing issues, so if their call finds you at an inopportune moment, follow these steps:

1. Express your enthusiasm: "That's great news! It's so nice to hear from you,"
2. Explain briefly that "now is not a good time for me to talk,"
3. Write down (and confirm) the recruiter's phone number and name as well as a good time to return her call,
4. Thank the recruiter sincerely for his or her call: "I really appreciate your call. I look forward to talking to you soon."

## **Prepare Beforehand**

If you've arranged to call a recruiter back for a phone screen, take some time to prepare by practicing the following:

- Standard interview questions: Why would you like to work for us? What is your greatest strength? Greatest weakness?, etc.

- A brief summary of your background as well as any difficult topics that are likely to come up (a lapse in your work experience, for example),
- A response to any salary questions. (I usually recommend giving a range, rather than a hard number. Keep in mind that if your range is drastically outside the target area, you will most likely not reach the interview stage.)

### **Other Tips**

- Take the call in a place where you will not be interrupted and where you can speak freely. If you're in a room with a TV or radio, turn it off.
- Make sure your answering machine greeting is professional. One recruiter I interviewed for this series recalled a message that went like this: "Yo! Yo! Yo! Ain't Home! Bye!" Needless to say, that person was dropped from consideration.
- Some people suggest that your voice sounds stronger if you speak while standing up, but if this feels uncomfortable to you, by all means sit down. The most important thing here is to be relaxed and comfortable.
- According to folks who talk on the phone a lot, this makes you sound more positive.

I've been pretty liberal with the term "phone screen" this week, but I would never advise job seekers to use this word in a telephone conversation with a recruiter. It would reveal that you know more about the process than they might be comfortable with.