

## Four Tips for Acing Interviews by Phone

By Sarah E. Needleman

Mindy Gikas was interviewing a senior-level manager on the phone in October when suddenly the job candidate paused. He said he was reading an email, recalls Ms. Gikas, a managing director in New York at Ogilvy Public Relations Worldwide, a unit of WPP Group PLC of London. "It showed me that his conversation with me wasn't very important," she explains. He wasn't invited to interview in person.

Job hunters often mistakenly believe that phone interviews are less formal than face-to-face meetings, recruiters say. Yet they're a critical first hurdle in landing a job.

For applicants, the goal of a phone interview is to secure an in-person meeting. For recruiters, it's to narrow their list of prospects. You can increase the odds of passing this initial screening if you follow the advice in these four tips:

### 1. Minimize distractions.

Flushing toilets, clamoring dishes and barking dogs sometimes interrupt phone interviews, recruiters report. If you have scheduled a conversation, plan to be in a quiet place, says Chris Wilkins, manager, strategic staffing, at the Montvale, N.J., office of Ingersoll Rand Co., a manufacturer based in Hamilton, Bermuda. If the call was unexpected, it is OK to ask to reschedule, he says.

Avoid using a cell phone, if possible, says Kathleen Downs, division director, finance and accounting, at the Orlando, Fla., office of executive-search firm Robert Half International Inc. "You never know when a signal is going to be problematic," she says. "I've had that happen several times with candidates. It was hard to hear them, and calls ended prematurely."

### 2. Sharpen your verbal skills.

Given a phone interview's lack of eye contact and body language, candidates are evaluated largely by what they say and how they say it, according to recruiters. Interviewers listen for clues indicating such qualities as passion for the job, professionalism and whether the person might be a good cultural fit.

In May 2005, Ruth Bielobocky, principal of Ion Design LLC, a marketing-communications firm in Frederick, Md., rejected a candidate for a senior copywriting job because she wasn't able to "get a sense of who he was," she says. "I couldn't imagine putting him in front of a client to communicate a concept, because you need to have enthusiasm and intonation in your voice to sell."

"Teen speak" and other unpolished speech habits are a common knockout factor, says Mr. Wilkins. "I've had people call me 'dude' and 'brother,' and use words like 'freakin,'" he says. Other turn-offs are gum chewing, smoking and eating.

### 3. Prepare in advance.

If you've scheduled or are anticipating a phone interview, keep notes and your resume at hand, says Amy Segal, director of talent management for Verizon Communications Inc., a New York-based telecommunications company. "The interviewer is none the wiser," she notes.

A bit of homework can go a long way. In January 2005, a candidate for a job as vice president of human resources at Ingersoll Rand impressed Mr. Wilkins by mentioning its acquisition of Italian manufacturer CISA SpA. "The press release came out literally the day we spoke," he says. Mr. Wilkins invited the candidate to interview in person, though the person withdrew because of the job's location.

Susie Klinck, manager of the site-management team at the Palo Alto, Calif., office of Xerox Corp., says a candidate for a content-manager position at the technology and services company emailed her some work samples, and they reviewed them together on the phone.

The candidate secured an in-person interview. While she didn't win the job, says Ms. Klinck, "being able to review her work together went a long way in her getting as far as she did."

#### **4. Follow up.**

After a phone interview, send a thank-you that recaps your best selling points.

Yvonne Gagnon, a part-time communications-management student at Manhattanville College's School of Graduate & Professional Studies in Purchase, N.Y., did just that after a phone interview in July. She had emailed her resume to a recruiter at an executive-search firm and called a few days later to follow up. She was interviewed on the spot for a communications job at a credit-card company. "I didn't know anything about the position or where her questioning was going," she says. Afterward, Ms. Gagnon crafted an email summarizing what they had discussed and information that she hadn't thought to mention.

"I'm really glad I did it, because I ended up getting five [in-person] interviews" for that job through the recruiter, she says. While she didn't get the job, she still makes follow-up emails a practice. "The face-to-face interview won't happen if you don't treat a phone interview with the same gravity," she says.

-- Ms. Needleman is associate editor at *CareerJournal.com*.