

Professional Communication Skills:

How to successfully interview on the phone

1. **The basics:** why do employers use phone interviews?
2. **What are the pros and cons of phone interviews?**
3. **How do you prepare for an interview?** How to set up your space and find practice questions.
4. **Successful tips during the interview:** How to give answers that are concise, on point and personable.

1. The basics: why do employers use phone interviews?

There are two types of phone interviews: the first screen phone interview or later round interviewing. First screen interviews are the first contact from an employer who has received your resume, CV or cover letter. This brief conversation is usually with HR or the supervisor of the position. Their goal is to:

- Confirm the information on your resume/CV is accurate
- Tell you about the position
- Assess your interest
- Decide if they want to advance you to the next round and invite you for a longer, in person interview
- The conversation usually lasts about 15-20 minutes.



However, phone interviews are sometimes used to in place of an in person interview, particularly if the organization has several rounds of interviewing planned, or if you are interviewing long distance. These interviews can be with a single person, such as the position's supervisor, or a panel of key staff. Like an in person interview, their goal is to:

- Assess if your skills and experience are a good fit for the position
- Determine if you are a good fit for their team
- Convince you to work there
- Can last 30 minutes to all day

2. What are the pros and cons of phone interviews?

| Phone interviews are positive because: | Phone interviews can be challenging because: |
|--|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It means they are interested in you • You can have your notes/resume in front of you, so you don't always have to 'think on your feet' • You can interview in the comfort of your own home | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • You can't see whom you are speaking to, and therefore can miss all of non-verbal cues involved in a conversation • Phone interviews often have silent pauses (such as when you finish speaking), which can feel awkward • Candidates tend to lose their train of thought and ramble on the phone <p>Which means it can be harder to know and feel as if you are making a good impression.</p> |

3. How to prepare for an interview: How to set up your space and find practice questions.

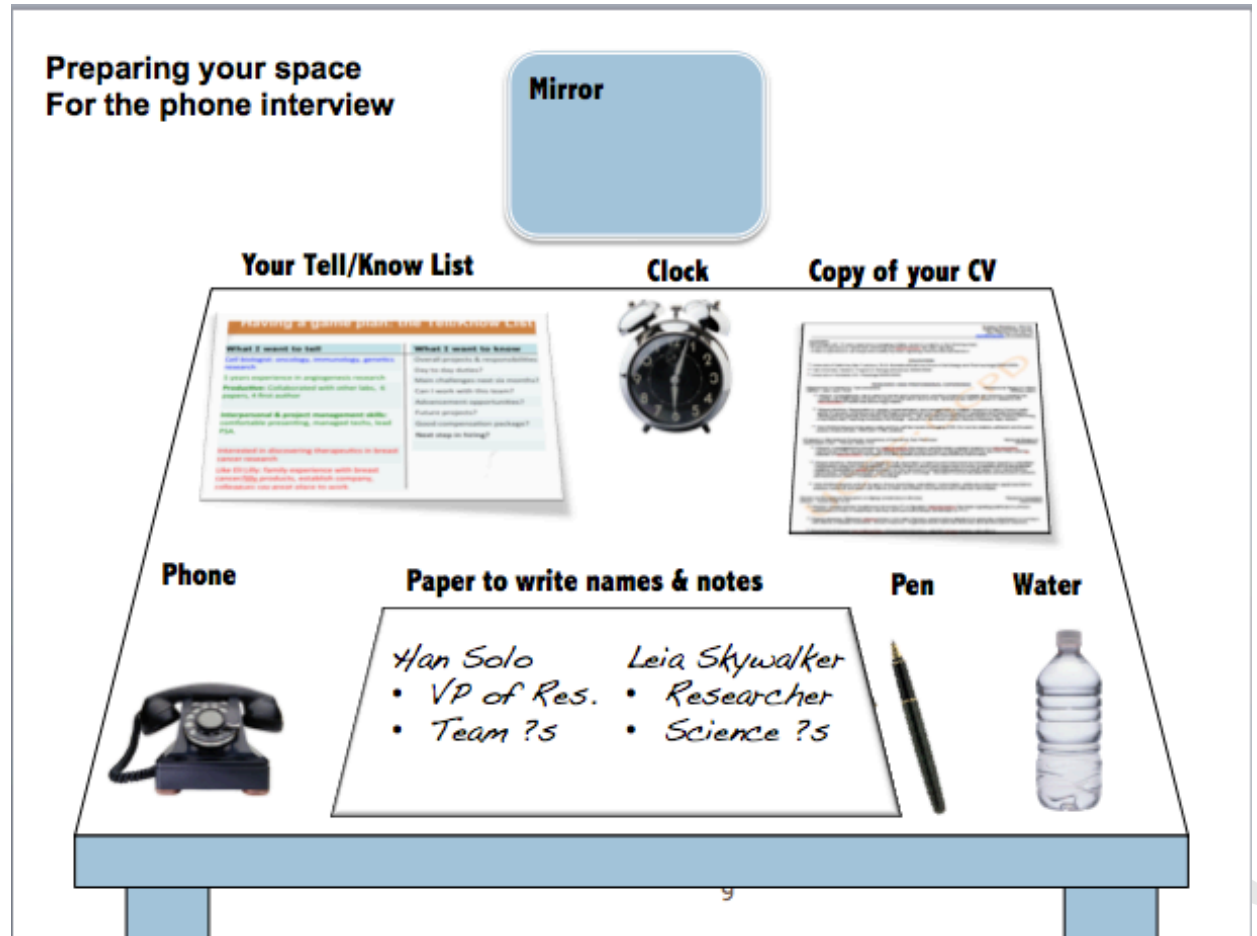
In addition to learning more about the organization, the specific additional efforts to prepare for a phone interview include preparing your space and practicing interview questions without the benefit of nonverbal cues.

A. Prepare your space before interviewing:

- Select a quiet area with a table
- Clear off your table except for your 7 key items.

What are the 7 key items on your table?

- A Tell/Know List:** This is your interview game plan. This list is a summary of the key points you want to tell your interviewer(s) and what you want to know from them by the time your conversation is over. This will help you keep on track.
- Your Resume/CV/Cover Letter:** To remind yourself what you shared with the employer
- Pen and Paper:** To jot down names of the individuals you meet on the phone. Particularly with panel interviews, it is easy to forget individuals' names. Also, you will be able to write down key points about the position to review later.
- A Clock:** As we mentioned earlier, candidates tend to ramble on the phone. Clocks let you determine if you've been speaking for longer than 2 minutes at a time (the average length of response to each question).
- A Mirror:** People tend to sound more animated when they can focus on a face – even their own. Use a mirror to talk to yourself when interviewing – just imagine it is the interviewer.
- Water:** Just like an in person interview, sometimes the throat gets dry. Have a beverage at hand.



Additionally, the types of questions you will be asked on the phone are similar to the ones you will be asked in person. **Therefore, have a look at sample interview questions on our website at career.ucsf.edu.** Practice answering questions to see if your answers are on point, or rambling. Try looking at yourself in a mirror while responding. If you aren't going to use a mirror, practice using no visual cues at all. For example, practicing answering questions while looking at a wall. Are your answers well organized, on point and do you end them decisively rather than petering out? If not, read the next section for tips.

4. Successful Tips during the interview: How to give answers that are concise, on point and personable.

The main strategy during a phone interview is to address the issue of missing non-verbal cues during the discussion, including head nodding, raised eyebrows, smiles, etc. that let you know that you are being understood.

As mentioned earlier - the absence of these cues leads to rambling, as candidates can't use the interviewers' reactions to shape their answers. Additionally, silences after responding can become awkward, as a candidate isn't always certain if the silence is the result of an employer writing notes, or disagreement, or confusion. Additionally, during panel interviews, it isn't always clear which person is speaking on the phone. In light of these issues, you may have to remind yourself not to psych yourself out by imagining that the interviewer doesn't think you aren't interviewing well or the panelists are exchanging eye rolls and laughing at you. Psych yourself up by imagining that the interviewer is nodding their head, considering your response, smiling and taking notes.

Review the additional effective strategies to have a successful interview where you connect with the interviewers and leave a positive impression:

- **At the beginning of the interview, during introductions, identify and label each interviewer**

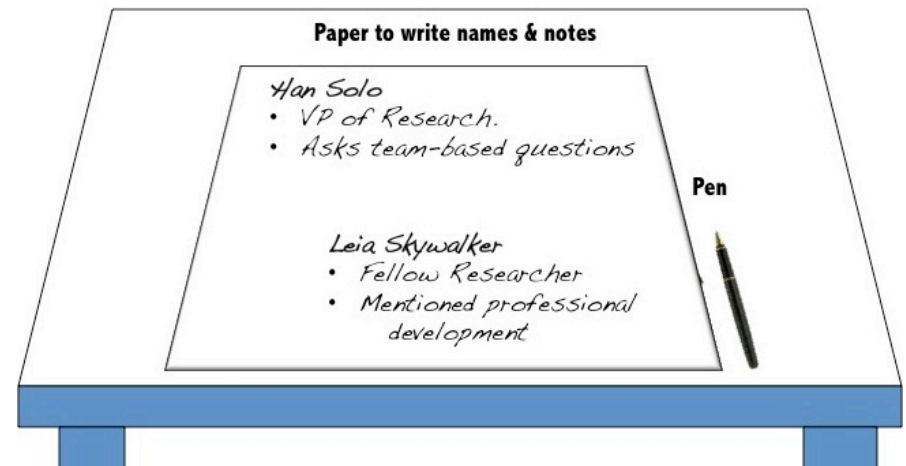
- At the beginning of the interview, write down each person's name as they introduce themselves, so you remember who is on your panel.
- Also – and this is important – ask for each person's job title, if they do not include that information when introducing themselves. Write down the answers. Are you speaking with potential colleagues, your potential supervisor or individuals you will be supervising? What kind of questions are they asking – team based questions? Research focused questions? Knowing their position and relationship to the position you are interviewing for will help you understand more about the person's questions and perspective.
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- Throughout the interview, jot down bullet points of their questions and statements, so you can reference them again later in the conversation.

- **Give personalized verbal cues at the beginning of each of your answers**

- If you know who is speaking, say their name at the beginning of your response to personalize the conversation.
 - "Well, Han, my interest in the position stems from....."
 - "Leia – similar to what I shared with Han earlier, my clinical (research/etc.) experience includes...."

- **Jot down a bullet point outline for common questions – particularly the first question**

- Some questions, such as, "Why are you interested in the position?" or, "Can you summarize your relevant skills and experience?" are so common that you can even write out an outline beforehand to make sure you cover all your points. This is particularly useful at the beginning of the interview, because it can feel good to 'start strong' by nailing the first question. But as the first interview question is usually a variation of a request for you to summarize your skills and interest in the position, you can jot down an outline of your answer and follow it when responding. This will help you keep on track, even checking off key points as you share them.



- **Keep the answer to your first question to between 2-3 minutes.**

- The first question is often one that candidates flub by taking too long to answer the question. If you only have a 30 minute phone interview, and the interviewer has 6 questions, it is unwise to burn up a great deal of time – say 7 minutes – just on the first question. If you do nothing else, practice answering the first interview question in under 3 minutes. Write out an outline and practice responding to variation of the question, “Tell me about yourself,” Which is just another way of asking, “Can you summarize your skills and interest in the position?” until you can answer effortlessly.

- **Structure your responses**

- Help your listener follow you by giving structured responses. For example, if you say, “I am interested in this position for three reasons....”, you can list them numerically before you elaborate on them, helping the interviewer understand how far along you are in your answer. This will minimize any antsy feelings they have in wondering how long your answer is going to continue, particularly if they somehow were inattentive and missed part of your answer. For example:
 - “Lando, there are 3 steps I use when organizing a new project. First, I do X. Second, I do Y. Third, I do Z. I have found this to be a consistently successful strategy because....”

- **Give verbal cues to signal that you are nearing the end of your response to their question**

- Use closing and outcome words like ‘finally’ and ‘to summarize’ to signal you’re wrapping up.
 - “Finally, I think it is important to consider X with providing culturally competent care to patients.”
 - “In sum, those are my main reasons that my skills and experience would help your organization solve X.”
 - “Ultimately, the clinical team was able to....”
 - “The final outcome was positive; I.....”
 - “As a result, we were able to move our research in the direction of.....”

- **End each response decisively**

- Candidates often struggle to finish their responses decisively. They start strong, but end with a hesitating, tentative phrase, or mumbling, or stopping abruptly. In addition giving a verbal cue to signal you are wrapping up, you can:
 - Repeat the question in your final sentence
 - “...and that, Luke, is how I would summarize my work.”
 - “...which is how I would manage a challenging patient.”
 - Repeat the person’s name, and ask if that addressed their issue
 - “Does that respond to your question, Leia?”
 - “Dr. Yoda, did that address your concern?”

- **Allow for silences throughout the conversation**

- Silence, after responding or between questions, can feel awkward because you can’t physically see your interviewers. As we said earlier - it’s during these silences that candidates sometimes imagine the worst about their performance – that they were unclear or offensive in some way. It is highly unlikely your worst case scenario is occurring - most likely interviewers are silent because they are writing down your answer, or absorbing what you’ve said. We have two suggestions to address this issue:
 - Use your clock! After speaking, look at the time and allow 5-10 seconds to elapse before speaking further
 - Rather than beginning to speak further and try to ‘fill in’ more information that you imagine you missed, determine what information you should share, if any. Ask a question, don’t give an answer: an effective question in addition to the ones previously mentioned is, “Is there anything

further I can clarify about that point, Han?”

- **Personalize Q&A responses**

- The opportunity to ask questions as a candidate can also be challenging without the ability to see your interviewers. In all types of interviews, the opportunity for you to ask questions is where your notes become most useful, because you can ask a particular interviewer to elaborate on a point they raised earlier in the discussion. In panel interviews, this is where the earlier strategy of asking about job titles becomes helpful. With that information, you can also personalize your questions to specific individuals. For example:
 - “Luke, you mentioned that you needed the person to get up to speed quickly in light of upcoming deadlines. What would you say are the three most important outcomes for this person to achieve in the first 6 months?”
 - “Dr. Yoda, you mentioned earlier that you appreciated the professional development opportunities available. Could one of you speak more about development and training opportunities that are possibilities with this position?”
 - “As the person in the position will be managing a team that you are a part of, can you talk about what one quality you are looking for in a supervisor, Darth?”

- **End the interview by saying everyone’s name one last time**

- Take the time to end the interview professionally, rather than rushing to end the conversation as the discussion winds down. One simple way to do this is to once again reference each person you spoke with:
 - “Boba, Annakin, JarJar – thank you for the time. It was a pleasure to speak with you all.”
 - “Thank you Obi Wan, I appreciate the opportunity to learn more about the position.”

5. Next Steps: What will you do?

Would you like more help to interview effectively? The Office of Career and Professional Development can help:

- Look at common interview questions and strategies about how to respond effectively, on our website at career.ucsf.edu
- Check out books in our resource library on negotiating and interviewing well.
- Schedule an appointment with a career counselor in the OCPD to practice a mock interview by calling us at 476.4986.