

Tips Sheet: Telephone Interviewing

The type of telephone interviewing used depends both on the nature of the vacancy and on your organisation. Telephone interviews can be:

- a short, highly structured interview, aimed specifically at identifying and discounting unsuitable applicants. This is likely to highlight essential criteria from the job specification and might include establishing the candidate's willingness to work in certain locations, to work shifts and (for example in graduate recruitment) ensuring they have the level of qualifications required by the organisation.
- a longer initial interview, using multiple-choice questions, to gauge suitability for the job against the required competences and maximise success rates at the next stage of selection.
- an in-depth interview conducted over the telephone. For senior and managerial positions.

Conducting a telephone interview

- It is important that interviewer(s) have some skills such as listening and empathising. Broadly, the same rules apply to telephone interviews as to other forms of interviewing.
- plan the interview beforehand and work to a schedule of questions, aiming to match the candidate against the job description and person specification.
- ask roughly the same questions of each candidate - personal details, education, career history, experience.
- avoid discriminatory questions.
- ask open questions which require the candidates to express their answer in their own free style.
- take brief notes during the interview but not at the expense of the dialogue, and let the candidate know that you are doing this; allow time to write longer notes immediately afterwards. It is legally permissible to record the interview if you have sought permission from the candidate, but recording can be off-putting to candidates and you will have to find time to review the interview and produce notes.
- Allow candidates the opportunity to ask questions and make sure that the interviewer has sufficient information about the job to answer any reasonable question.
- advise candidates on the timescale for what happens next, depending on whether they have been successful or unsuccessful.

Advantages of the telephone interview

- interviews can be arranged more quickly and the entire process takes less time than other conventional methods.
- it is cost effective both when used as an initial screen and when used for more senior positions (particularly when recruiting internationally).
- it is the ideal way to check on a candidate's telephone manner and is particularly helpful where telephone manner and customer contact are key parts of the role (such as call and contact centres).

Limitations of the telephone interview

Recruiters should be aware of the limitations of telephone interviewing, although these are generally similar to those in other forms of interviews.

- the lack of non-verbal communication can lead to awkward silences, unintentional interruptions or misunderstanding (on the part of either the candidate or interviewer).
- interviewers tend to prefer people 'like them' which, in the case of telephone interviews, would be people with a particular accent or manner - see 'avoiding discrimination' below.
- unstructured interviews are notoriously unsuccessful at choosing the right person, so the interview must not be allowed to turn into 'just a chat over the phone'.
- the interviewer has a greater responsibility for providing information (but without dominating the interview) in order to enable the candidate to judge the organisation.

Avoiding discrimination

Telephone interviews are subject to the same legal restrictions as any other selection procedure. Anyone conducting a telephone interview must be aware of the laws relating to unfair discrimination. In theory, with telephone interviewing there is less for candidates to be being discriminated against on the basis of race, age or disability as interviewers are more focussed on the task of interviewing and less likely to be distracted by interpersonal aspects. It is important that interviewers do not favour certain accents over others and be aware of this if this is the case.

Although a telephone interview may provide useful information about people who will need to use a telephone in the course of their work, employers must beware of unintentional discrimination when recruiting for jobs where the use of a telephone would not be required. In these circumstances, you should not discriminate against people who are either not able to use a telephone through disability or are simply not very confident telephone users or a candidate's English skills are not up to Oxford standard (unless this is required for the job).

Telephone interviewing can be a highly cost-effective means of choosing the right candidate.

