

Acing The Phone Interview: Preparation is Key

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Before you face the hiring manager, you'll probably spend some time on the phone with the company's HR department. Here's what it takes to win them over.

If your resume passes muster for a job to which you've applied, a phone screen will probably be your next stop. [Human-resources](#) and hiring managers just don't have time to grant every promising resume a face-to-face interview. Instead, top performers in a **phone interview** with HR will advance to in-person interviews with a hiring manager.

In my many years as a recruiting manager, human-resources business partner and director of human resources for Fortune 100 companies, I've conducted my fair share of phone interviews and screens with candidates. I know what HR representatives are looking for and what it takes for a candidate to win them over.

With these experiences in mind, the **following recipe** can help take qualified candidates from the phone to an in-person interview:

1. **Save your applications**

1. Must be able to create advanced Excel spreadsheets
2. Must be able to analyze data
3. Must be able to create macros in Microsoft Office documents

When you pick up the phone and an HR representative asks to speak to you for five minutes, you don't want to be scrambling for a description of the job or trying to remember which ones you've applied to.

Keep a copy of all the jobs that you have applied to in a separate folder in your e-mail In box.

When the recruiter calls, be sure to get her name, company and the job she is referencing. You can cross-check this with the job description that you have in your "Job Posting" or "Applied for Jobs" folder in your In box.

If you have applied for more than one job with a company you want to ask what job they are referencing so you can be prepared for the phone interview.

Having the **job description in front of you** during the phone interview is **critical**.

Typically, job descriptions are written with the primary job responsibilities listed in descending order of importance. For instance, a simple job description may read like this:

The most important part of this job will be a candidate's ability to create advanced Excel spreadsheets, followed by data analysis, then macro creation.

Having the description handy will let you speak to each of those requirements in order of importance, even if the recruiter doesn't bring it up. If you absolutely can't find the original job description, ask the recruiter to **send you a copy before your phone interview**. It's best to ask rather than try to wing it and not get that in-person interview.

2. S.T.A.R.s

1. **Situation:** Analyze the activity you faced, in this case determining why sales have steadily decreased by 5 percent from the previous fiscal year.
2. **Task:** Describe the tasks available to respond to the situation. In this case, identify why sales were decreasing and provide a solution.
3. **Action:** Describe the steps you took to resolve the issue.
4. **Result:** What was the result of your action? What did you take away from the resolution? What if anything would you have done differently?

Create an **S.T.A.R. document**. This is an acronym for **Situation, Task, Action, Results**, and it is the key to answering behavioral-based interview questions.

The HR representative will probably ask questions about how you handled specific types of situations in previous jobs. After all, it's a common HR tool to test your professional experience and gauge your aptitude.

The HR representative is looking for you to respond to each in a clear and succinct manner. Here is an example of a behaviorally based question:

Tell me about a time when you most effectively used financial or quantitative data to identify and solve a critical problem.

You want to answer the question in way that demonstrates your ability to handle the situation and I recommend you break it down into **Situation, Task, Action** and **Result**.

Situation

Sales within my department had decreased 5 percent from the previous fiscal year

Task

To find the catalyst and provide a solution to stop sales from continuing to decrease in my department

Action

- Sent out a survey to all customers to canvas if customer satisfaction and the decrease in sales were linked
- Put together a brainstorming task force of internal employees to provide additional insight into the customer experience and products
- Looked at previous year's products to see if the decrease in sales were due to a difference in the quality of our products

Result

After a three-month study was able to find a direct link between customer satisfaction which had decreased by 15 percent from the previous year, and our decrease in sales. Customers were taking their business elsewhere due to the lack of service. Explained to management that perhaps decreasing resources in our customer service department was premature. We should look at other parts of the organization to build efficiency and hire qualified customer service representatives to assist our employees. This was done within two months, and six months later our sales increased by 3.5 percent over the previous fiscal year; yielding a total 8.5 percent increase and totaling 500k in additional sales.

Create at least **two S.T.A.R.** documents for each position on your resume. Then attempt to map each STAR to job responsibilities listed in the job description. You will thank me later when your answers come out polished and prepared as you clearly communicate your challenges, successes and results. Without it, you're bound to stall and appear as if you can't substantiate what is written in your resume.

3. **Print it out**

- Resume
- Bio
- Cover letter
- S.T.A.R. document

Keep the following documents printed out and with you at all times:

This way you aren't constantly looking for these documents.

You never know when that interviewer might call, and you want to be prepared.

You should also review these documents every day so that you are keenly familiar with each. I've known executive candidates who were forced to admit they forget some of the content written in their own resumes or bios.

Now that you're prepped, read part two of "Acing the Phone Interview" next week for tips on how to handle the conversation when the phone rings.

[Tanjia M. Coleman](#) is a recognized expert in human capital and executive hiring. For more than a decade she has advised corporate human resources departments on strategic staffing decisions and executive development. Now, through her firm [Your Best Career Now](#), Coleman advises mid-career executives on their career decisions and professional development. She has a Master's degree in Industrial/Employee Relations and Organizational Development from Loyola University Chicago. She can be reached at tanjia@yourbestcareernow.com.

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