



OFFICE OF CAREER & LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

Don't Wear Pajamas for a Phone Interview

By [Anne Fisher](#),

NEW YORK (Fortune) -- **Dear Annie:** What's up with all the phone interviews lately? The last time I looked for a job, about 10 years ago, I never once was interviewed over the phone. Now, I've been job hunting for about 4 months and have had seven phone interviews, none of which has led anywhere. Is there some kind of secret to successfully interviewing on the phone? I'm trying to figure out where I've gone wrong. --*Discouraged in Dayton*

Dear D.D.: With an average of eight applicants for every job opening, more and more employers are using phone conversations as a way of quickly screening out candidates.

And quickly is the operative word: "The first five minutes of a phone interview are the most important, since only about two out of 10 people will still be under consideration beyond that," says Annie Stevens, a managing partner at Boston executive coaching firm [ClearRock](#). "So you need to be prepared right from the start to make the most out of the limited time you'll have."

Adds Paul J. Bailo, who runs Phone Interview Pro, an online coaching service: "Companies are so inundated with job applications that phone interviews -- a relatively fast, cheap screening tool -- have become the norm." Bailo wrote a nifty little 92-page book called "The Official Phone Interview Handbook" (available for \$14.95 [from his website](#)) that is based on interviews with about 500 hiring managers on the subject of what they want, and don't want, to hear when they call you.

Without listening in on your interviews, it's impossible to say where you went wrong, if in fact you did. It's possible that the employers you spoke with didn't get back to you for some reason unrelated to your phone performance. But take a look at this list of tips from Annie Stevens, which might be useful next time:

Be enthusiastic. "Some people find it helps to smile while they talk," Stevens notes.

Use a land line, and disable call waiting. Interruptions caused by dropped or incoming calls just add stress you don't need.

Have a list of questions prepared. Well-thought-out questions show you're really interested in the company and the job. Also, have your resume in front of you. Make sure it's the same version the interviewer has.

Match your style to the interviewer's. "If the interviewer uses a lot of technical terms and industry jargon, so should you," Stevens says.

Never interrupt. Silently count to two or three seconds after the interviewer stops talking before you start.

Avoid negative words. "Banish negative verbs like 'can't,' 'haven't' and 'don't' from your vocabulary," Stevens advises. "Employers want people who can offer solutions, not potentially create problems."

Recap your "fit" for the job. Be ready with a 30-second summary of why you're right for this job, using an example or two from your work history.

Ask about next steps. At the end of the call, ask how well your qualifications meet the company's needs. This will give you a chance to address minor issues immediately. Then ask when you can meet with them in person.

Say thanks. Follow up with an e-mail or a handwritten note. While you're at it, briefly remind the interviewer how your skills and achievements can help the company meet its goals.

A few more suggestions, from Paul Bailo:

Wear business attire. Of course the interviewer can't see you, but "you won't feel, or sound, as businesslike in your pajamas," Bailo says.

Eat a cough drop before the call. A medicated cough drop (especially one with menthol) will be good for your voice, says Bailo: "It's a small but helpful thing."

Have a photo of your interviewer on your computer screen. This could be from LinkedIn, Facebook, the company website, or anywhere else your interviewer's face might appear online. (You have Googled him or her in advance, right?) "It makes the interview a little more like an in-person conversation," Bailo says.

Avoid saying "um" or "ah." Try replacing those sounds with a pause, which Bailo says is "a sign of intelligence."

Take notes. Jot down topics and questions that seem to be of particular interest to the person interviewing you, so you can touch on these when you send your thank-you.

Even if you decide you don't want the job, proceed as if you did. People sometimes realize during a phone interview that the job in question just isn't for them. "At this stage, you still don't have the full story," Bailo notes. "You never know whom you might meet at in-person interviews, and what networking opportunities could result. Until you get a firm offer and must make a final decision, keep your options open." After all, that's exactly what the company is doing.

Talkback: Have you been interviewed, or interviewed a candidate, over the phone? How'd it go? What do you wish you'd done differently? Tell us on Facebook, below. ■