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# Information Guide No. 15

## Telephone Techniques

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## Telephone Techniques

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# 1. INTRODUCTION

In the job search, the telephone is vital for:

- Effective self-promotion
- Establishing and maintaining contacts
- Arranging and confirming appointments
- Follow-up

The advantage of the telephone is its immediacy, as compared with an exchange by letter. A conversation on the phone can be informal and spontaneous and responses can be tailored to the type of reception received and the degree of interest shown.

The disadvantage is that an unsolicited phone call is an intrusion and this provides the recipient with a plausible reason (excuse) for rapidly terminating the conversation, so aborting your approach.

For this reason, every telephone conversation you initiate must be meticulously prepared, with a checklist of points you need to cover in order to achieve the objective of your call. To establish any contact at all with a key executive or potential employer you may have to operate a strategy for getting past a departmental or personal secretary.

## 2. USES OF THE TELEPHONE

### 2.1 Keeping up with Contacts

Letters are all too frequently laid aside; a phone call can focus a person's immediate attention on what are matters of the moment for you.

### 2.2 Fixing Appointments

This is the most important way in which use of the phone can further your job search. It is usually easy to fix an appointment with someone whom you know, but to arrange a meeting with a 'cold' contact or to follow up a speculative letter requires a well thought out strategy.

### 2.3 Confirming Appointments

You must always confirm you are able to attend an appointment. When an appointment has been confirmed for more than a week ahead, a confirmatory phone call should be considered nearer the time. (Be aware, though, that it may give the person an opportunity to cancel!)

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## 2.4 Reinforcing a Job Application

The telephone provides a means of making personal contact with a potential employer and establishing your interest in, and qualification for, a particular job opportunity (which may be a specific vacancy or a possible opening in the unadvertised job market).

The sooner this contact is achieved, the more advantage you have to put yourself 'into play' for serious consideration ahead of the competition. When successful, such a phone call should lead to an appointment for interview.

## 2.5 Follow-up

The phone can be used to follow up a letter, a meeting or an interview, especially when additional information or some action is required. Such an approach can be useful in reminding a potential employer of your availability, or of an undertaking made on your behalf. It is important, however, not to appear too 'pushy' or persistent, the advantage may be lost.

## 3. PRACTICAL TIPS

Stand when you are talking – you will sound positive and dynamic, smile from time to time as this can be detected in your voice and will give an impression of someone who relates well to other people.

Your voice is the only indicator that the listener has to judge you. We recommend you listen to a recording of your voice on the telephone to assess your style. Use simple and precise vocabulary and avoid negative language such as 'problem', 'trouble', 'doubt', 'perhaps', 'maybe' or 'never'. Take a genuine interest in the person you are talking to, even though you can't see them, remember small details you can use in future conversations.

Talk clearly into the mouthpiece of the phone; don't raise your voice, don't mumble, don't have anything in your mouth during the conversation (e.g. don't eat, drink, chew or smoke), as this will be detected; at the very least, your opposite number in the conversation will expect you to show courtesy and to receive your full, undivided attention.

## 4. STRATEGIES

### 4.1 Preparation

Check that your surroundings are comfortable but professional; if possible, replicate an office-like environment with everything at hand. Balancing a pad on your knee whilst you sit at the bottom of the stairs will not foster a professional frame of mind.

Before making the telephone call, make sure you will not be interrupted.

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Have to hand:

- Copies of all relevant documentation (correspondence, advertisement or job description, etc)
- A copy of your CV
- A notepad and pen
- Your diary (updated with your commitments)

## 4.2 Circumventing the Barriers

Your preparations will be to no avail if you fail to get past the secretarial 'barrier' to speak to the prospective employer/key executive, which is the primary aim of your call. To do this, you will need to be self-confident, persuasive and firm, whilst maintaining politeness and avoiding bombastic behaviour.

When your call is answered by the receptionist, ask for the name of the Secretary/PA of the person you wish to speak to, so you can address him/her personally at your first contact.

DO NOT fall into the trap of leaving messages with a secretary and NEVER accept an arrangement for them to ring you back. It may never happen, and means you lose the initiative. You should establish when Mr X will be available, say you will phone again at a precise time, and ask the secretary to mention this to him. Thus when you phone, you will be able to say with authority, 'Mr X is expecting my call'.

Don't assume the person answering the call is the secretary. With the many cutbacks in organisations, responsibility for answering the phone can be shared by everyone.

If asked about the subject of your call you might respond, 'It is a personal matter (on which I have already had some correspondence with Mr X)'.

If you find that your letter has been received and has been referred by Mr X to Mr Y, ask for Mr Y's title. If Mr Y seems to be at the right level of responsibility, you can proceed as suggested. If not, you can respond by saying 'It appears there has been a mistake/misunderstanding; could I speak to Mr X please, in order to rectify the matter?'

If you are asked, bluntly, whether you are seeking employment, you might reply along the following: "My letter states I want to discuss a personal matter with Mr X, connected with the developments in the..... Industry. I would appreciate it if you would allow me to speak to him.'

An alternative strategy is to call just before, or just after office hours, when the line may be switched directly through to the executive's office, or your call will be received by someone less 'protective' than the personal secretary.

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### 4.3 Achieving Your Objective

Frequently the objective of a phone call is to gain a meeting or an interview. Always start by saying, 'This is just a short call, is now a convenient moment?'

Then you might continue as follows:

'My name is ..... you should have received a letter I wrote to you on (the date) in which I asked whether it would be possible to arrange a brief meeting for the purpose of obtaining some advice from you.

As my letter indicated I'm not asking you for a role but your experience in the ..... Industry could provide me with the type of help I'm seeking about decisions I need to make. I'd be very grateful if you could spare me 10 or 15 minutes sometime soon. When would this be convenient?'

You may obtain the response 'I don't see how I can help...' or 'I don't think I'm the right person to be advising you...' or 'There aren't any openings here...' or 'What do you want to know...'

Then you should come back confidently with an assurance that you are not asking for or expecting information about a specific job, adding a simple explanation of why you want the meeting, paraphrasing the main point of your letter. This should break down any resistance and get you an appointment for an interview.

Clearly, your approach will be modified if you are following up on a speculative letter (see Information Guide on Letters).

### 4.4 Avoiding the 'On the spot' Interview

Do not allow yourself to be interviewed on the phone. Beat a diplomatic retreat along the lines, 'I don't want to take up your time now, Mr/Ms X; could we arrange a brief meeting at some mutually convenient time in the near future?'

If the person you are speaking to fails to respond to your request for a meeting, remind him or her about the nature of your enquiry, e.g

'Have you had the opportunity to read my CV? As I noted in my letter, what I am hoping to gain from you is some suggestions about the right move, at this stage in my career, and the type of organisation that I might contact to discuss this'

Adding, if necessary:

'I am disappointed you are unable to see me, I don't know of many executives like yourself who could give me the information and advice that I am currently seeking. Could you possibly suggest the names of people whom you think I should contact?'

When an appointment is offered, ensure that there is no clash with a previous engagement; make a note of the date, time and place and repeat these arrangements aloud, over the phone, to be certain that there is no mistake.

Confirm the appointment in writing.

#### **4.5 Answerphones / Voice Mail**

For many people the answerphone / voice mail is a dreaded curse, but during an active job search campaign it becomes a valuable asset on two counts:

- i. You are always available, especially if you have the type of machine that you can interrogate whilst you are out. At times, the job search process can move frustratingly slowly, but when things start to happen, the pace can move into overdrive very quickly, and you don't want to miss out on the action just because someone could not contact you quickly.
- ii. Your job search campaign should be a full-time activity, but from time to time you need a break to relax at the end of the day. Unfortunately, not everyone follows a neat work pattern, especially head-hunters who often call prospective candidates at home during the evening. It is far more professional to respond to an answerphone message in your own time when you are prepared and alert.

During a job search campaign, an answerphone rapidly becomes a wise investment as does a mobile phone if you don't already have one.