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CAREER TRACK

Advice for Twentysomethings

Tips for the Telephone Interview

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Wendy Jolley-Kabi, 35, didn't bother dressing up for her last job interview. She figured sweat pants and a ratty old T-shirt would suffice for her meeting with the executive director and board of the Maryland-based nonprofit where she wanted to work. As the interviewers fired away questions about her skills and track record, she propped her feet up on the desk and sipped a Diet Coke.

She got the job, director of development. Of course, it helped that her future employer couldn't actually see her during the interview. Jolley-Kabi was thousands of miles away in Kenya; the interview was conducted by phone.

Teleconferencing has become a common tool for employers, especially in the preliminary stages of evaluating potential hires. It provides an economical way to take advantage of the national talent pool—or even international in the case of Jolley-Kabi. Job candidates can be anywhere; so can multiple decision makers from, say, headquarters and a branch office.

Many job candidates also like the flexibility the teleconference option creates. Jolley-Kabi, who had already worked for the agency in a more junior position several years earlier, said she was grateful for management's flexibility and willingness to hire her on the basis of a long-distance interview. "It was a reminder of the supportive atmosphere of the agency—one of the very reasons I wanted to return to work here," she said.

Not all applicants have such positive experiences. H.K. Park said he found a phone interview with five people for a government job several years ago convenient,



BY ROLLIN MCGRAIL FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

but "disconcerting."

"All of the usual visual clues in a personal interview were absent," said Park, 34. "I was unable to match voices to names and titles. I could not gauge body language and whether I should take more time answering questions or hurry it up."

He did not get the job. After that, the Arlingtonian vowed never again to do a telephone interview if he could help it.

Park's career has progressed well enough since then that he probably won't have to do so. For many of the rest of us, however, telephone interviews will continue to be a fact of working life. Here are some ways to help yours go more smoothly.

■ **Get dressed.** While many workers extol the virtues of being able to be interviewed in their pajamas, you will probably sound more professional if you put yourself

together a bit for the call. Being comfortable is great, right up until it morphs into sloppiness.

■ **Talk on your own time.** If you can't schedule the interview for after-hours, at least try to arrange it during your lunch break. It's disrespectful to your current employers to conduct your job search when you are supposed to be working. If the potential employers balk at this request, point out to them that you would give them the same courtesy as their employee.

■ **Avoid distractions.** Find a private room. Hold your other calls if you're at the office; disable your call waiting if you're at home. Find out ahead of time from the interviewers approximately how long they expect the conversation to take.

Make it clear to those around you that you are not available during that time. If you're at home with children, find someone else to watch them.

■ **Find a land line.** Yes, cell phones are part of modern life. But they are also prone to dropping calls and have limited battery life. Even if you keep your signal, cell phones can cause problems. Andrea Pearson, a 39-year-old lawyer who lives in Arlington, said that during her phone interview for a government job, the call kept fading in and out. "To compensate . . . we started yelling questions and responses at each other."

■ **Take notes.** One of the great things about a phone interview, from the job seeker's perspective, is that it allows you to keep all your paperwork (résumé, cover letter, projects you want to refer to as examples of your best work) right in front of you. And you can scribble all over it throughout the interview, without worrying about looking inattentive as you glance down at what you're writing.

■ **Slow down.** Your interviewers are probably taking notes, too. Don't make them struggle. Also, as Park pointed out, that quick banter that signals rapport in a face-to-face interview can be confusing over the phone. Without body language, it's much tougher to guess whether overlapping conversations are received as welcome interjections or rude interruptions. Consider practicing with a friend or two, and ask them for honest feedback on your phone etiquette.

Join Mary Ellen Slayter on March 4 at 2 p.m. for Career Track Live, an online discussion of issues affecting young workers, at www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/liveonline/jobs/careertrack. E-mail her at slayterme@washpost.com.

YOUR JOB SOURCE IN PRINT AND ONLINE

Job Chat

Building a Future or Digging a Hole?

Questions from Career Track Live, Mary Ellen Slayter's online discussion about issues affecting young workers.

Washington: I started work at my current office when I graduated from college six years ago. I have stayed partly because I like my boss, but really I just don't know what else I would do. My wife is now four months pregnant, and I'm looking for a higher-paying job that will help me better provide for my growing family. I think in the long run going back to school to get an MBA would prove to be a good decision, but part of me feels too old to go back to school, take out loans and worry about income loss for two years. The other part of me thinks it will be a good decision in the long run. If I got my MBA, I would want to study full time and move back to the West Coast, where my wife and I are from. Is this a good idea?

It is, if you know why exactly you want that MBA. Is there a specific job or career path for which the MBA will qualify you that is closed off now? Graduate school, even business school, does not guarantee you will make more money. To figure out whether the risk is worth it, research the jobs you want and see how much they pay. And don't

rule out part-time programs. They come with considerably less financial strain, especially if your employer will pick up part of the bill. Many do.

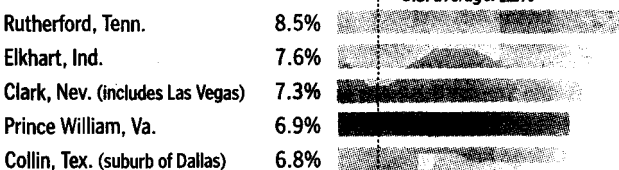
Washington: I've been at the nonprofit I work at for four years and have been steadily promoted. They have put me as exempt now, and pay me well. However, they can't seem to move along the rest of the way they treat me. My office is secretarial, I still have to cover phones, never get invited to meetings, etc. Help! I'm looking—is there any other way? I have talked to them . . . no luck.

It would help if you knew what it was exactly you wanted to do at those meetings you feel shut out of. Is there some specific profession in which you're interested? You will have better luck approaching your boss with "I'd like to learn to more about our budget process" than with "Promote me, please!" Once you have a sense of the direction in which you want to head, i.e. marketing, finance, human resources, you can evaluate your skills and work out a plan to fill in the gaps.

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Large counties with largest percentage increases in employment, June 2003-June 2004*



* out of 317 counties with employment levels of 75,000 or more
SOURCE: Bureau of Labor Statistics