



First Contact — How to Take Control of Your Job Search from the Start

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MANY PEOPLE VIEW the ad-answering phase of a job search too narrowly, as if it were only a two-step process: 1) You answer the advertisement, and then 2) you interview with your potential employer. The most ignored aspect of this activity is as important as a steppingstone in the middle of a fast-flowing stream.

In the time between sending the letter containing your resume and the actual job interview is a critical intermediate step: the phone call that asks you to come in for a meeting. The outcome of your interview hinges upon how well you handle this crucial scheduling call. Consider what happened to Stephanie Dillon after she answered that want ad in the legal newspaper.

Stephanie Dillon had seen the job advertisement while browsing the classifieds over the weekend. So Monday morning, she mailed out her cover letter and resume, but after several days at trial, the furthest thing from her mind by week's end was her job search. Leaving court on Thursday, Stephanie went back to the Public Defender's office to clean up some files and arrived home later than usual. She washed her hair and collapsed on the sofa. While eating a pint of Ben and Jerry's and watching the latest episode of *Law and Order*, her phone rang.

The caller identified himself as Michael Angelo, a partner in the defense litigation firm of Caravaggio and Bernini. He apologized for the lateness of the call, but said that he had received Stephanie's resume, was impressed by her credentials, and would like to interview her as soon as possible. Although it was very short notice, he asked if Friday afternoon after work would be convenient.

Surprised by the call, Stephanie took a deep breath, but said sure, she could be in their office around 5:00 p.m. She thanked Mr. Angelo and hung up. But after she put down the phone, Stephanie's mind started racing. Who was this firm? What credentials were they looking for? Where did she put that stupid ad? How many people would be interviewing her? What should she wear?

The next morning, on her office computer, Stephanie tried to find something about the firm with a quick search on the Martindale-Hubbell website, but came up empty. She asked a colleague if she'd ever heard of Caravaggio & Bernini, and her friend said she wasn't sure, but thought they were new, a spin-off by a couple of former partners of a highly respected Center City Philadelphia firm, Bramante, Bernini, Botticelli & Borgia. Of course, if Stephanie were to have a job counselor, recruiter, or employment advocate to work with, finding information on the firm with his or her help would have solved her problem.

After work on Friday, Stephanie walked over to meet the lawyers at Caravaggio & Bernini, not knowing anything about the firm, not sure of who would be interviewing her, and not at all prepared



for her first job interview in several years.

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More Than Just Mailing a Resume

It's surprising, after all the care lawyers take designing their resumes and writing creative cover letters, that they respond so inadequately when taking a phone call to schedule a job interview. Stephanie's inept handling of the call from the firm is not an exaggeration. Her response to something as simple, yet as important, as an interview-scheduling invitation is typical of many job seekers, including a good number of lawyers.

Although responding to a request to come in for an interview seems a relatively easy matter, it is critically important to the hiring process. It is something most job seekers take for granted, but there is a right and wrong way to schedule an interview. This chapter will show you how to turn that simple phone call into a great opportunity to stand out from the crowd. Appropriate responses will be outlined, as will a few simple rules for answering an interview-scheduling phone call.

When You Answer the Phone

Rule 1: Take Control of the Situation

The critical element in responding correctly to an invitation for a job interview is that, right from this very first phone call, you put yourself in the driver's seat. Your goal must be to turn this simple conversation—and the whole interviewing experience—into a great opportunity to make yourself memorable and present yourself as someone a cut above the other candidates being considered for the advertised position.

This is a subtle process. It certainly doesn't mean that you talk nonstop about yourself and your credentials, try to intimidate the caller, ask inappropriate questions, or make unreasonable demands. Simply put, it *does* mean that once you begin answering ads, **you have a plan** for the way you're going to handle phone calls inviting you to interview.

You should know, generally, when the phone rings for you, how you are going to respond, paying particular attention to the tone of voice you use when talking to a potential employer. A good first step to take control and steer the hiring process in the direction you intend is to photocopy the scripts on the pages that follow and leave them by your telephone as soon as you start mailing out resumes.

Rule 2: Stall for Time

Often, when law firms call to request an interview, they are in a hurry to hire and want to schedule the initial meeting as soon as possible. Your first step in guiding the interview in the direction you desire is to buy yourself some time. **Use a socially acceptable excuse** to delay the interview date for just a few days to give you an opportunity to prepare. Most reasonable people, who have to juggle



their own schedules from day to day, will accept your request and readily negotiate an alternative time for your interview. When a firm calls one evening and asks you to interview the next day, or within two or three days, say something like this:

Let me check my schedule to make sure I'm free tomorrow afternoon. You know, I see that I have another appointment at the time you suggest. Would next Tuesday at the same time be convenient for you?

Offer any acceptable reason for the delay (e.g., dentist's appointment), and then suggest an alternative date. Why ask for a later date? Because you need that time to do some basic research on the firm or company that wants to interview you.

What if they say no, they can't reschedule? "If you want to interview," a law firm representative might reply, "you'll have to come in Friday afternoon. That's the only time convenient for us." Their answer tells you, right then and there, all you need to know about the climate of the firm, doesn't it? But that kind of response is the exception. Most employers, even busy law firms scheduling interviews, will accept a reasonable excuse and reschedule.

Information is power. Use the time you've gained to go a public listing, or better, to consult your recruiter, employment advocate, or job counselor. You may also check the business section archive of your local newspaper, and especially the firm's own homepage, to find out general background information you need about the firm—its size, its practice, and the names and credentials of the other lawyers who work there. Especially look for "links" among its personnel—lawyers who are alumni of your law school or have worked previously in firms or agencies where you have worked.

As a last resort, if you can't find the information you need through research, then call friends, as Stephanie did, if only to find out the word on the street about the firm and a realistic salary range for someone with your credentials and number of years out of law school.

If you are interviewing with a corporation or business entity, you will need to do some background reading on trends in the company's industry or the company's products or pull up their website so that you can be reasonably knowledgeable about their business. You make this effort, obviously, so that you can ask some intelligent questions of your own at the interview to determine if the advertised position is a right fit for you.

Your efforts will also communicate to the interviewer your interest and your initiative. They indicate that you are likely to hit the ground running and will prove yourself an immediate asset to the company.

An example:

Avery Jackson was one of four finalists for the position of General Counsel with ByronBionics, a mid-sized high-tech company. While waiting for the final round of interviews, Avery had spent some time



on the Internet researching the industry. He knew that ByronBionics was a subsidiary of Canterbury, Ltd., an English conglomerate, but while scanning back issues of the *Wall Street Journal*, he found a small item, buried on a back page, that the Director of Canterbury, Ltd., Lord Whitby, was stepping down because of an inoperable brain tumor.

Two weeks later, after an exhausting day of final interviews, Avery inquired when the company would be reaching its decision. ByronBionics' president answered, "All the finalists are all so highly qualified, it may take us a few more weeks." Asked if he had any more questions, Avery said yes and then inquired whether Lord Whitby's recent resignation as Director of the parent company, because of his brain tumor, would have any impact on ByronBionics' North American operations.

The president hesitated for a moment, but then said no, he was sure the company would carry on as usual. Avery drove home, late for supper. But as he walked in, the phone in the kitchen rang. It was ByronBionics' VP of Personnel. "Avery," she said, "you're our man!" Surprised, Avery asked what it was that inspired the president to hire him so quickly. The VP lowered her voice, "Your question about Lord Whitby. It blew him out of the water. He didn't know!" Information is power.

A more mundane reason to stall for time is also that you may want to improve your appearance with a haircut. If you haven't had time to do much shopping recently, you may need to use the time to look for a new shirt and tie or suit and blouse.

Rule 3: Reduce the Interview Unknowns

After agreeing on a time and location for the interview, but before the caller hangs up, make an effort to establish a rapport and try to ask a few well-chosen questions that will not only help you prepare for the interview, but will ease your anxieties of an unknown situation.

Be careful of your tone of voice when you are asking these questions. Many lawyers find it difficult to switch from the direct speech patterns of their legal lives. Deliberately change the pace of your "legal speech." Use an upbeat and warm affect when you speak, and frame your queries in a casual, confiding, and friendly way. Some career consultants would even go so far as to advise their clients to assume a standing position for these phone calls, believing that this posture encourages a more self-confident, "take charge" attitude.

In any event, the questions you ask when scheduling a job interview are very important because the information you may be able to uncover before the interview will help reduce the ambiguities of the upcoming meeting with the firm. The questions that follow will also help you:

Display a professional approach to your job interviewing. You will come across as a serious candidate, someone who, as the saying goes, "has his or her act together."

Gain a powerful advantage over other job seekers who have not thought about gathering this kind of pre-interview information and are relatively unfamiliar with the firm or company.



Stand out from the crowd of the other job candidates who do not know how to take charge of the interviewing process.

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Please note that these are not the ultimate, perfect questions for each and every interview-scheduling phone call. They are merely topic suggestions. You may wish to change the format of the words and the order in which they are asked and tailor your queries to your own verbal style and the needs of the situation. But ask as many of these questions as you feel appropriate to the call and the degree of rapport you are able to establish with the caller.

You can usually find the information you need about the uncertainties surrounding the interview with either one of the two following questions:

A) *Before we hang up, would you help me with something? Who will be interviewing me?*

The interviewer has a significant impact on the importance of the interview. If you will only be talking to someone in the human resources department, then you can expect to fill out a standard application form—name, dates, and social security number—undergo a quick resume review, and submit to the usual “Tell me something about yourself” line of questioning.

On the other hand, if you’re told that you’ll be meeting a senior partner, the whole hiring committee, or some of the other lawyers at the firm, then expect an in-depth discussion of your credentials, your cases, your portables, and professional experience.

You can discover the same information by focusing on another aspect of the interview with this alternative question:

B) *Before we hang up, perhaps you could help me with something? How much time should I allow for the interview?*

If the answer is “about an hour,” then you’ll probably be having just a short screening interview with one lawyer or the firm’s human resources person. Most likely, you’ll be asked the typical screening questions, such as “Why do you want to leave the Public Defender’s Office?” or “How well did you do in law school?”

If the answer is “a couple of hours” or “all afternoon,” then you’re probably facing more than just a resume screening and will be talking with a senior partner or meeting with several lawyers and can expect a more comprehensive discussion of the firm’s practice, your recent cases, work habits, and so on.

Rule 4: Identify the Hiring Criteria

No matter what job qualifications are stated in the legal advertisement, human nature being what it is, some employers will have underlying hiring criteria that may not be immediately obvious, that



they may not even recognize themselves.

All other credentials being approximately equal, one interviewer may favor well-dressed applicants. A Midwest firm might be impressed with East Coast law school credentials; another firm might have a slight bias towards lawyers who have good literary and writing credentials, and so on.

For example:

When Sara Hartman was writing her resume, she asked her career coach about including her participation on Yale women's crew under the summary section (**Interests and Activities**). He told her that activity would certainly make her memorable to resume readers.

Several weeks later, Sara sat in the lobby of a major Wall Street law firm, the last in line of six male candidates. After a long afternoon's wait, Sara was finally ushered into the office of the interviewer, a female partner. The lawyer had Sara's resume in her hand. "Sara," she said, smiling, "it's so nice to meet another woman who's crewed for Yale. Please sit down!"

Sometimes these hidden criteria are subtle, hard to discover. But at other times, they can be identified. The next two questions are designed to help you uncover, if possible, the significant criteria that inclined the interviewer to ask you in for an interview.

First, ask casually:

Just out of curiosity—have you received many resumes in answer to your ad?

This query is just a lead-in to the next question. The person calling will probably answer "yes" or give an estimated number.

Next, ask this critical question:

The reason I asked is that I put a lot of time into writing my resume, and I was wondering what it was in the resume that suggested you call me in for an interview?

This question may help you identify the bottom-line criteria the firm is using to make its selection. The answer may hint at what strengths it values, at what it would like to hear during your interview. Just as lawyers who know the legal, political, or judicial preferences of a sitting judge will sometimes, as the saying goes, "feed the monkeys" and frame their arguments in legal theory or language attractive to the bench, so too will job applicants emphasize in their answers those elements of their backgrounds and experiences they believe the interviewers would be most interested in hearing.

The advertisement that caught Stephanie's eye listed these credentials for a defense litigation associate:



Qualified candidate will possess 3-7 years substantial civil litigation experience; have extensive client contact, an ability to work with a diverse clientele, and strong motivation to serve the needs of demanding clients in a fast-paced environment. Excellent writing and communication skills, as well as good academic credentials, preferred. Reply with resume, cover letter, and salary requirements. No faxes or emails, please.

If Stephanie had been coached on what to do when scheduling interviews on the phone, she would have asked Michael Angelo that seemingly casual question about her resume: What was it that inclined the firm to invite her in for an interview? Michael Angelo, as he probably was the one who reviewed all the resumes, would have answered that because Stephanie had worked with a diverse and demanding clientele in the Public Defender's office, her credentials present her as the type of person it is seeking.

His answer, in all likelihood, hints of Caravaggio & Bernini's bottom-line hiring criteria. More than anything else, it probably wants an experienced lawyer who is strongly motivated to serve the needs of demanding clients in a fast-paced environment.

Having identified that criteria, a job seeker like Stephanie would then weave into the conversational fabric of her interview every example she could remember about difficult and diverse clients. Without neglecting her other excellent credentials, she should nevertheless "pitch" to Caravaggio & Bernini's needs by describing with stories her many successes in representing some of the most critical and hard-to-please clients in the City of Philadelphia.

Rule 5: Be Prepared for Screening Questions

It is more common today for law firms, indeed all employers, to use the phone as a screening tool. Rather than take the time for office interviews with 20 potential new hires, it is easier to evaluate these candidates on the phone and weed out the ones who don't meet minimal qualifications for the position or who, for one reason or another, disqualify themselves as viable job candidates. As a result of these phone interviews, the caller then decides, say, on five potential hires who will be brought into the office for face-to-face interviews.

Sometimes, when the phone rings for you, you may be asked one or two threshold questions before the interviewer decides whether or not to schedule a time to interview you in person. But your response to a screening call should be the same as any other phone interview: Establish rapport and describe your career accomplishments and credentials. It helps enormously, as you start answering advertisements, to develop a script, or "cue sheet," for these inquiries, just as you have prepared answers to other interview questions and to have your script handy for easy reference.

Screening Question # 1:

We've received your resume. Could you tell us a little more about yourself?



Your answer is easy. All you use to answer this one is the **Profile Statement** that you have already written to introduce yourself at self-marketing meetings and job interviews. This is nothing more than your “opening argument”—your 60-second sound bite, your infomercial—that tells interviewers where you’re coming from, where you want to go, and your credentials to get there. If you haven’t yet completely memorized it, print it up and leave a cue-card copy by the phone.

Screening Question # 2:

We’ve received your resume, and we’re wondering what kind of a salary you’re looking for.

The short answer is that you want to avoid a premature disclosure of your salary requirements. In other words, you’re not about to give up a negotiating advantage or commit yourself to a certain level of compensation before you have a better understanding of the job description and the employer’s expectations for that position.

Your answer - You handle this query exactly as if the question were being asked in a face-to-face job interview as explained in this book. One excellent way to avoid a specific figure and, at the same time, take the initiative away from the interviewer would be to reply in this manner:

My salary requirements are negotiable. I’m interested in finding the right opportunity, and I’ll be open to any fair offer when I do. What’s your salary range for this position?

Summary

Be prepared for unexpected job-related phone calls, especially those you may receive late in the evening.

Take charge of the interviewing process, starting with this interview-scheduling phone call.

Keep copies of your Profile and scripts within easy reach of your phone and do not hang up without asking questions that will help you better prepare for the interview.

Stall for more time if your caller requests that you come in for an interview on short notice

The friendlier and more upbeat you sound over the phone, the easier it will be for you to connect with the caller.

Do your homework and research **before** the interview, and you will make yourself memorable as a candidate **after** the interview. Knowledge is power.