When the recruiter calls

Getting past the phone screen

Most recruiters will place an initial phone call to candidates to help in the rough sort process. The objective of this call is usually to identify any knock-out factors that may impact candidacy and to get a quick read of communication skills. These factors may include things like ability to relocate, specific training, skills, experiences, reason leaving prior employment, compensation requirements and sometimes to get a general understanding of career goals. The job seeker’s objective should always be to get to the next step in the hiring process. Here are some ideas to help do that developed by people on the other side of the phone.

- **Pursue every interview** - Some people sabotage their career options without realizing it. They adopt a hard-to-get strategy or play it too cool when the recruiter calls, leaving a feeling of disinterest. Unlike the guy that turned down an interview at Google because he thought the name was weird, be open to anything. The more interviews the better the interviewing skills. Project enthusiasm about the opportunity and express gratitude for the phone call.

- **Handle getting caught off guard** - When you take a call on-the-fly and give answers without knowing the full picture, it’s a risk. The better strategy is to gather all of the information you can and politely request that you return the call at a more appropriate time – doing it on your terms and after you have fully prepared. The caller will completely understand if you simply say, “I am very interested in speaking with you but timing is not great at this moment. When may I return your call?” IMPORTANT - Make sure to get the name (spelling), title, company, phone number and position this is about. Always offer to call them back rather than leaving it up to them.

- **The “Smell Test”** - In the first ten seconds of the call, the recruiter is conducting what is sometimes referred to as the smell test. Etiquette is critical. The way the phone is answered, verbal skills, articulation, use of slang, projected energy and level of interest are all being weighted and judged. Measure every word. Even things like eating, chewing gum, smoking, or anything out of place makes a difference. One executive level candidate was cast aside for yawning.

- **Square peg vs. round hole** - Nobody’s perfect and this includes being perfect for a specific position. The recruiter is balancing many factors from skills and requirements to personality traits. When you respond, express your capacity for learning new things, adaptability, flexibility, and visualize rounding the edges of a square peg. They called because they feel you are a possible candidate for the position, so help them to confirm their findings. Be concise but leave room for adjustments.

- **Developing rapport vs. too much information** - It is difficult to develop rapport in one short phone call, especially when the caller has limited time and is just looking for some basic facts. Without becoming overly personal, ask carefully constructed questions that communicate a positive spin. Some candidates fall into a trap of revealing too much information, especially with sensitive questions like, “Why did you leave your last employer?”, “What was your parting salary?” or “What was your GPA?” The more explaining you do, the deeper the hole you dig. Any hint of negativism about a past employer or excuse about your background will be picked up and noted. Stay positive.

- **Preparation is everything** - Consider the following in your preparation:
  1. Know the company and position you are being screened for.
  2. Have a copy of your resume, letter and any communications you have sent them at hand. Underline or highlight strengths vs. the position on your resume in yellow.
  3. Anticipate questions and craft answers considering where you may not be the strongest fit.
  4. Take or make the call from a private setting at a desk with no distractions or background noise.
  5. Take notes and listen carefully. Get confirmation that the questions were answered.
  6. Ask about the next step in the hiring process.
  7. Get address information to send a follow up letter or note. (hand-signed notes work best)

- **Relentlessly follow up** - Even if you have been told that you are not being considered for the position, politely follow up offering thanks and try to keep the door open. Often times, job specs will change, new positions will come open or people turn down offers. Hiring managers will sometimes choose people more because they like them and appreciate their desire to work for the company, and will overlook some deficiency that surfaced in the screening interview process.