

How to do a Telephone Screening Interview as an Attorney or Law Student: Why Most Attorneys and Law Students Fail Law Firm Telephone Screening Interviews

By Harrison Barnes from Los Angeles Office Managing Director

Phone-screening interviews are now commonly used by law firms.

But there's a caveat to the phone-screen interview.

Law firms don't like to waste time, which is why they conduct phone interviews.

Firms also conduct phone interviews with attorneys they're not particularly interested in hiring.

Summary: Learn what getting a phone-screening interview with a law firm means and how you can prepare yourself before the interview.

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It is increasingly common for law firms to do phone interviews before bringing in attorneys for formal interviews. They do not want to waste time on people they can tell very quickly are not likely to work out.

While law firm screening interviews are common for attorneys trying to relocate to another city, **law firms typically will not conduct telephone-screening interviews for candidates they are truly interested in hiring.** Most law firms will just go ahead and do in-person interviews with the people they like on paper right away. Firms want to impress the candidate as much as they want the candidate to impress them. They also are busy, have a staffing need, are losing money each day without adequate staffing, and want someone as quickly as possible. A phone interview is more passive, less committal, and suggests that you may not be the right candidate.

If a law firm wants to speak with you before meeting you in person, **WATCH OUT.** Let's get something clear right away: **The telephone screening is an opportunity but not necessarily a good thing.** A phone-screening interview is dangerous--incredibly dangerous--and you need to approach it more seriously than you would an in-person interview. These are not pleasant chats. These are elimination exercises, where the law firm will use laser-like precision in an attempt to remove you from consideration. The law firm is not spending any "face-to-face" time with you because the firm does not yet feel you merit it. You are starting at the very bottom and will need to distinguish yourself from the rest of the candidates whose resumes are dumped in the pile of unqualified resumes that are fired at firms daily. Instead of evaluating you after a series of interviews in a more "holistic" fashion, the interviewer may reject you for just one bad answer.

If the law firm liked you, it would fly you out and meet you in person instead of arranging for a telephone-screening interview. I can tell you from experience: Every law firm wants to personally meet with an attorney (without first speaking with him or her on the phone) if the firm likes the attorney and his or her background.

If the law firm is not very excited about you, the firm will speak with you by phone. **Period.**

Do not pat yourself on the back if you get a phone screen. You need to "step up" and take this extremely seriously because the person doing the phone interview will shoot you down if you are not careful. The phone interview requires more preparation than an in-person interview.

What do you do to prepare yourself for a phone interview? Share your answer in the comments below.

- I have one candidate right now who graduated at the top of her class from the [University of Chicago Law](#)

[School](#) and is working at a major firm, in a hot practice area, and with three years of experience. She has had six phone screens over the past few months and has not gotten a single in-person interview.

- Attorneys who are less-than-stellar fits for major law firms (not coming from a great firm, too senior, too junior, not strong enough experience, and so forth) may have very limited options and need to "blow away" their interviewers on a phone screen. If you do not get many opportunities to interview with a major law firm, you sure better make the most of any phone interviews you get.
- I have one partner with \$2,000,000 in business who has had approximately 15 phone screens over the past year but has not had a single in-person interview.

The Good News: A successful phone interview can change your life and the course of your career. A [good phone interview can help you move to a better firm](#) and more.

Because phone interviews are so incredibly important, you better know what to do. A lot is generally at stake. I had one candidate who was a graduate of [Columbia Law School](#) and was unemployed for three years working as a bartender in Washington, DC. He had a phone interview with a major international law firm in London. He did so well he received a job offer without ever meeting with the law firm. I have had several other candidates get offers after phone interviews. If you perform well, you will do well.

In general, you are at least three times more likely to get a position from an in-person interview than a telephone-screening interview. If the firm or job is important to you, then you need to be as prepared as possible to excel during the telephone screen.

First, if a law firm is interviewing you by phone, the firm's guard is up, and the firm is being careful. While it is not always the case, more often than not the firm is "gun shy" and finding reasons why you may not be worth interviewing in person. The firm wants to speak with you to understand if you are someone it wants to spend time speaking with in person. The firm is looking to eliminate you because there is something in your background that the firm is concerned about, that signals a possible bad "fit," or that the firm is uncomfortable about based on past bad experiences. The person doing the phone interview will focus on something to eliminate you--and you may or may not know what this is. (There are nearly "foolproof" ways to deal with these potential "elimination" questions that I cover later in this guide.)

Second, if a law firm is interviewing you by phone, it will be very easy for the firm to reject you. In an in-person interview, a law firm can observe how you dress, how you conduct yourself, and better assess how well you connect with interviewers and the firm. The largest problem with telephone interviews is that the interviewer will be judging you on your voice and tone and whether he or she believes the answers you give.

Some Quick Words of Advice

- You need to have positive energy in your voice and speak in a tone that is neither too loud nor too soft.
- You need to sound like someone the law firm would want advising its clients.
- You cannot sound too arrogant and you need to make sure that the law firm realizes that you want the job.
- You should not sound the least bit unprofessional while on the phone.
- You should never use slang, never swear (even if the interviewer does), and never say things like "um."
- You should make sure that the interviewer is speaking the majority of the time and that you are asking

questions that allow the interviewer to speak.

- You should do your best to never answer "yes" or "no" and, to the extent possible, you should try to connect with your interviewer.

It is difficult for law firms to reject and dismiss people they meet in person. Not so with phone interviews. If you say one wrong thing--or if one thing goes wrong--you will blow a phone interview. More attorneys get rejected through phone interviews than in any other sort of interviews.

Third, law firms who are interviewing people by phone may not be just "on the fence" about you, they may be "on the fence" about hiring. They may have work coming down the pipeline or concerns about using their existing resources instead of hiring. The person calling you may be looking for "ammo" about how great a particular candidate is ("you") that the interviewer can use to persuade his or her partners about the need to bring in a new person. You just do not know. If a law firm is on the fence, you need to get the firm off the fence and in your corner.

[Have you seen phone-screening interviews go horribly wrong? Share what you've seen below.](#)

The Number One Reason Law Firms Screen You on the Phone and Not in Person Is Due to Concerns about Your Perceived Lack of Commitment

Law firms want to hire people who are [committed to the job and to the firm](#). If there is anything that indicates a lack of commitment--past or present--you will get a rejection. Most of the time, when the law firm is interviewing you by phone, the firm has found something about you or your background that indicates a potential lack of commitment and the firm is using the phone screen to ascertain if you will commit and take the job seriously.

Law firms do not need to mess around with you if you are not going to commit. Major law firms pay huge salaries and have lots of people who want to work there. They simply do not have time for anything other than full-on commitment. They pay a lot of money to attract committed people. They have a lot of resources to throw at hiring and do not need to waste time on people who will not commit. They have no reason to hire you because they have lots and lots of applicants. It is embarrassing for firms when attorneys start with them, meet their clients, and then leave.

The entire ecosystem of major law firms is about measuring who is committed and who is not. People who stay and make partner are the most committed, of course. People who leave are the least committed. Law firms want people who are committed at all times because they make more money and are in control when people commit.

If you have any of the following **RED ALERT** warning signs of lack of [commitment on your resume](#), you will have to do exceptionally well on your phone screen and convince the law firm of your commitment if you want to proceed to an in-person interview and job offer. Law firms make money and survive when their partners and others are fully engaged, working as many hours as possible, and doing good work. Anything that suggests otherwise is viewed as a lack of commitment and will be struck down and expelled like a virus.

Here are the reasons that most law firms will do screening interviews and not in-person interviews first.
The Law Firm Wants to See If You Are Interested in the Firm; Not Having a Real Interest in the Firm Suggests You Will Not Commit

You need to research the firm and your interviewer before the phone-screen interview. You need to be able to discuss the reasons why you would be a good fit for the firm. You need to find out as much information as

you can about the work, culture, and people of the firm and try to let the interviewer know why you would be a good fit. You need to be able to tell the person that you want to be part of what the firm is doing and would be a good fit.

Many attorneys go into interviews and are unable to articulate why they are interested in the law firm. Law firms may look the same from the outside, but they are not. You need to do your research on the firm and be able to speak about the firm's work and why you want to be part of what the firm is doing.

Many attorneys do not do well at this and fail to prepare for interviews. If you are not prepared and cannot talk about the firm and ask intelligent questions that show you have done your homework, this indicates to your interviewer that you are relatively uninterested in the firm and the screening interview will likely be unsuccessful.

ADVICE: Always spend at least an hour or two preparing for each phone screen. Find out as much as you can about the person and firms you are interviewing with and why the firm might be interested in you. Research the attorneys in your practice area at the firm and see the sort of work they are doing. Be prepared to discuss how much you enjoy the work and your practice area.

What do you recommend an attorney do to show they are interested in the firm during a phone screening? The Interviewer Wants to See If You Can Connect with Him or Her; If You Cannot Connect This Suggests You Might Not Truly Be Committed

You need to be able to connect with your interviewer. If you connect with your interviewer, he or she will overlook a lot to get you past the screen. You can do this through the tone of your voice, by identifying with the interviewer, and by sounding enthusiastic about the position, the practice of law and the firm. Attorneys who do not connect typically may not want the job. If you truly want something, you will do whatever you can to connect with the person who holds your career and your fate in his or her hands.

To connect, it is important that you try to establish common ground with your interviewer. You need to find common ground to the extent possible.

The idea that you should want and need to connect with an interviewer should not come as any surprise--but it is something many attorneys ultimately fail to do during phone screens. Being able to connect with an interviewer is not much different from showing that you can connect with a client, jury, or anyone else you need to connect with in the course of being an attorney. They better you are at connecting with the interviewer, the better your chances of being brought in for an in-person interview, and the better your chances of being hired.

ADVICE: Remember that the person you are speaking with has your future in his or her hands. Do your best to make your interviewer like you. Try and figure out the sort of person your interviewer is and what is important to him or her and speak to your interviewer with this in mind. In all cases, though, you need to make sure that you show the person deference and respect. If the position is very important to you, then (without being overly solicitous) you must do everything you can to make the person like you.

What are some ways that have helped you connect with law firms during a phone screen interview? If You Are Working for the Government or at an In-House or Non-Law Firm Position, This Suggests You Are Not Committed to Working in a Law Firm

If you left a law firm to work for the government, or for any non-law firm position (except a clerkship or a role

as a US Attorney), it is almost certain that a major law firm will not want to welcome you back. Why would they? Either you are committed to the private sector and practicing law, or you are not. If you left for volunteer work, the odds are that you will leave your firm again for some reason in the future. Law firms will not want to hire you.

The largest issue with not working in a law firm is that the practice settings of non-law firm positions are different, the quality of work expected is different, the people are different, the hours are different, and the expectations tend to be different across the board. Law firms want people committed to working in them. If you leave for another practice setting once they believe you will leave again. Most practice settings are also more pleasant than law firms. Due to this, most attorneys who come back to law firms end up returning to the different practice setting again.

ADVICE: If you are in a non-law firm setting, you need to do what you can to convince a future employer that you value working in a law firm and want to remain there. You need to explain the reasons why you went in-house, and the reasons need to involve you wanting more challenging work as opposed to less challenging work. The law firm also needs to be convinced that you will not leave to go to another [in-house position](#) in the future because the law firm practice and environment is what you are seeking. The firm needs to believe it can control you and that what it has to offer is important to you.

What do you recommend attorneys say to show firms that you will not leave them during a phone interview? If You Are Working Part-Time, This Suggests You Might Not Commit to Your Next Law Firm

Working part-time suggests a lack of commitment. If an attorney is working part-time, the odds are pretty good that he or she is not 100% committed to the work. Unless an attorney has a rare skill, [top law firms](#) only want to hire people who are fully engaged, enthusiastic, and working as hard as they can. Law firms are in business to make money. Law firms make the most money when their attorneys work the most hours. If you are working part-time, this suggests that you are not fully engaged and committed. Switching firms while working part-time is especially difficult for working mothers. Law firms will poke and prod to see if you are working part-time and if you expect to continue doing so; if this is the case, you will close down your options.

ADVICE: You need to express your desire to work full-time. The law firm needs to believe that this is what you want and that your career comes first. You need to drill this into your head before you have your phone-screen interview.

Do you think that firms should take a chance on attorneys that are working part-time?

If You Have Had Two or More Jobs in the Past Five Years, This Suggests You Might Not Commit to the Next Employer

Having too many positions in a short period suggests a problem with the quality of your work, restlessness with the practice of law, problems with getting along with others, and various other issues--none of them positive. If someone is continually leaving positions, the odds are quite good that he or she will leave the next one after a short period as well. There need to be good, well-reasoned justifications for your having left your past jobs, and they should be related to you trying to advance and get better work, more money, and better experience. If you do not have good reasons for having left your past jobs and they are related to you being fired (or something along those lines), the law firm will almost always not have a serious interest in you. The law firm is looking to see if the problem is you or the firms. In most cases, they will believe it is you, and you better be aware of how to handle this.

ADVICE: If you have had more than a few jobs in a short period, the best way to explain these moves is by saying you were looking for increasingly sophisticated work and to be in increasingly more challenging legal environments offering more opportunities. You need

to explain your past moves in such a way that the new law firm believes it offers what you have been seeking for your whole career.

What are some ways you have explained "job hopping" to law firms?

If You Are Trying to Relocate, This Suggests You Might Not Be Good at Your Job or Might Leave Your Next Job and Thus Might Not Be Committed

If you are trying to relocate, the law firm is going to be curious why you are interested in the new geographic area. Relocating is a drastic and serious career decision: You are leaving your contacts, network, friends, and so forth for a new area completely. If you can do this with your current job, the thinking goes, you could do it with your next one as well.

You need to be prepared to give answers about your connection with the new geographical area, such as friends or family nearby, so that relocation seems sensible under your circumstances. If you cannot do this, then the answer needs to be about the work specifically, such as that you are in a "niche" practice area where not a lot of work is available in your current location. Law firms never want to hire people because they cannot find jobs in their cities. That makes them feel like they are picking up someone else's trash. They need to feel that they are getting lucky finding you and that you have a lot of options.

ADVICE: The best answer for this is that you are relocating because you are moving home to somewhere you are from, where your spouse is from, or where you have significant and meaningful contacts. If you do not have this, then the area needs to fill some other sort of important need for you. If you want to move to New York City, for example, you might stress the sort of work that is done there in your practice area and its sophistication compared to other areas. The area of the country you are trying to relocate to needs to make sense. If there is no connection, the law firm knows that you may just leave if things do not work out. Law firms want people who will settle down and have nowhere else to go.

How do you recommend explaining relocating during a phone-screening interview?

If You Are Trying to Switch Practice Areas, This Suggests You May Not Commit to Your Next Job (or to the Practice of Law)

If you are trying to switch practice areas, the law firm will want to know why you cannot simply switch practice areas at your current law firm. The firm will also want to understand your interest in switching practice areas and whether or not you have compelling reasons to switch practice areas (or are just flighty or do not like the practice of law). The law firm will be looking to see if your reasons are genuine and sensible; if not, the firm will reject you.

ADVICE: To switch practice areas within the major law firm ecosystem, you need to have stellar qualifications--meaning, you likely were at the top of your law school class, working at a top law firm, and so forth. If you do not have these things, you will need to go to work at a smaller law firm to switch practice areas. Your best option will be to do this in the law firm where you are currently working if it has that practice area. If the law firm does not, this will help you-- but you still have some explaining to do. If the law firm does not allow you to switch practice areas, this is a major warning sign to the firm interviewing you that there is something wrong.

If you do have these things, you need to be very clear why you are better suited for another practice area:

- You love writing and do not get this as a corporate attorney, tax attorney, etc., and want to be a litigator.

- You hate doing litigation because it is too contentious and you want to represent businesses.

How do you recommend explaining your reasons for switching practice areas to your firm during a phone-screening interview?

If You Have Less Than a Year of Experience and Are looking for a New Associate Position, This Suggests to Law Firms That There Might Be Issues with Your Ability to Commit

If you are looking for a position after less than a year of experience, the odds are quite good that you are leaving because you are having a difficult time in your existing firm, or that you took your first job for the wrong reasons.

ADVICE: The law firm will be looking for reasons that suggest you are not committed, are having problems, and are trying to switch firms for that reason. You need to have solid reasons for looking for a new job. Good reasons include:

- Entire practice group left.
- Firm laid-off entire first-year class.
- No first-years have gotten any work.
- Firm is closing the office.

What are some other solid reasons why you are trying to switch firms even though you have less than a year of experience?

If You Are Unemployed, This Suggests a Lack of Commitment and Future Firms Will Probe for the Reasons Why

Lawyers are expected to never be unemployed. If you are unemployed, most law firms will think there is something wrong and will probe for these reasons in their phone interview. **You will be more than 10x more likely to get a position with a major law firm if you look for a position while you are employed versus unemployed.** Either you are bad at your job and were fired, or you simply did not offer enough value to the law firm to keep you around, or you left because you did not commit and do not have a committing-type personality.

If you are unemployed and doing telephone interviews, then you need to be able to explain why you are unemployed. Law firms will dig very deep in phone interviews to understand the meaning of your unemployment. Anyone speaking with you is going to be trying to sniff out a phony excuse. Your interviewer will be trying to see if whatever excuse you are giving negatively reflects on your skills as an attorney.

Law firms (especially large ones) are experts in sifting the good from the bad. They are looking for good workers who will not make trouble, who do not have issues, and who will sit down, work hard, and try to get ahead. They want people who are smart, to whom others want to give work, and who will not complain, cause trouble, or gossip. They want people who are happy for the position and take it seriously.

At the partner level, they expect the same if the partner is servicing law firm clients. If the partner is bringing in his or her own clients, then they expect someone who will get along well with others, be happy about what the law firm pays the partner in compensation, and whose amount of business will hopefully increase.

ADVICE: if you are unemployed and trying to get a position, it is helpful to look at smaller markets or to be in a niche practice area. Law firms will be willing to overlook your unemployment if they have a strong need for you and cannot find people like you, or if you have the sorts of qualifications that would be extremely difficult for them to find normally.

However, in order for this to be the case, you generally need to (1) be looking outside of a major market (i.e., in smaller markets that receive few applications), (2) have very strong "niche" qualifications that are rare, or (3) be a partner with a ton of business.

The most competitive market in the United States is New York. While it is possible to get interviews if you are unemployed in New York, it is extremely difficult. Law firms will not be interested in you at all because they will presume the fault is yours. They will not even spend the time to ask questions and find out the reasons why if you are in a practice area like corporate, litigation, or another major one-- you are best off supplementing your search by looking at other (smaller) markets outside of New York as well. In fact, it can be near impossible for junior unemployed attorneys to [find new positions](#) in major law firms; however, it is not impossible. The point is that they experience failure far more often than they experience success.

What can you do to make sure you are employed when looking for another position?

In connection with any discussion about an attorney being unemployed, it is important to understand why many attorneys are unemployed and why law firms generally do not like to get involved with attorneys who are unemployed. I discuss these issues in the article below, along with ways you can handle questions about your unemployment that may get you past screening interviews.

If you have been fired or left voluntarily, you need to keep in mind that law firms that pay a lot of money have many, many choices for people they hire. You need to ensure that you do whatever you can to show that you are the most committed among the options that they have

Conclusions

A phone screen contains multiple "booby traps," and most people answer questions that suggest to interviewers a lack of commitment. There is no correct response for skeletons in your closet and past mistakes that will please every phone interviewer, and you certainly cannot change history. What you can do, though, is figure out a way to respond to every question that you are asked in a way that stresses you are committed, that your career is important to you, and that you may have shown a lack of commitment in the past that you now regret.

The phone interview is a time for you to show the law firm that you have a reason to commit. You need to overcome any and all resistance the interviewer may have to bring you in for additional interviews. You need to appear like you are someone who is an asset and not a liability, and who is committed.

Share Your Thoughts

What do you feel is the best way to show you are committed to a law firm during a phone-screening interview?

How can you best show law firms that they are important to you during a phone-screening interview?

How can you best respond to negative questions about your history during a phone-screening interview?