

Switchboard Operator interview questions

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What to expect

Switchboard operator interviews assess your phone manner, ability to handle pressure, familiarity with call systems and your approach to customer service. Employers want to know you can stay calm, route calls accurately and represent the organisation professionally.

- **Process:** Questions about your step-by-step approach to handling calls, taking messages and managing multiple lines.
- **Behavioural:** Questions that ask for examples from your past experience, such as managing high call volumes or dealing with difficult callers.
- **Scenario:** Hypothetical situations that test your judgement under pressure, such as an angry caller or a system failure.
- **Technical:** Questions about your experience with PBX, VoIP and call management software.
- **Customer service:** Questions that explore how you create a positive first impression and handle enquiries professionally.

The interview usually begins with a phone screen or a short face-to-face meeting with a supervisor or office manager. You may be asked to complete a practical task, such as demonstrating call handling on a simulated switchboard or taking a message accurately. The conversation then moves through behavioural and scenario questions, and often ends with an opportunity for you to ask questions about the team and systems.

1. Can you walk me through how you handle an incoming call from start to finish?

Why they ask

To assess your systematic approach and efficiency in managing calls.

How to structure your answer

Provide a step-by-step walkthrough of your standard procedure, covering greeting, identifying the caller's needs, transferring, confirming the connection and logging the call if required.

Example answer

"I start by answering promptly with a friendly greeting and the organisation's name. I listen carefully to the caller's request, then use my knowledge of the organisation to identify the right department or person. I let the caller know I'm transferring them and provide the extension number if they need it later. If the person is unavailable, I offer to take a message, ensuring I capture their name, contact details and the purpose of the call. I then log the call in the system and pass the message on promptly."

2. Tell me about a time you had to manage a high volume of calls while maintaining accuracy.

Why they ask

To see how you prioritise and stay calm under pressure.

How to structure your answer

Use the STAR method: describe the Situation, the Task you faced, the Action you took, and the Result.

Example answer

"In my previous role at a busy medical centre, we often had peak periods where calls would queue. I would acknowledge each caller quickly, prioritise urgent calls and use the switchboard's hold feature

politely. I kept a notepad to jot down key details and used the system's directory efficiently. As a result, I maintained a low call abandonment rate and received positive feedback from callers and staff for my calm and accurate handling."

3. How would you handle a caller who is angry or upset?

Why they ask

To assess your customer service and de-escalation skills.

How to structure your answer

Demonstrate judgement under pressure: stay calm, listen, empathise, avoid taking it personally, and find a solution or escalate appropriately.

Example answer

"I would remain calm and let the caller speak without interruption. I'd acknowledge their frustration with a phrase like 'I understand this is frustrating, and I'm here to help.' I would then ask clarifying questions to understand the issue and either resolve it myself, such as providing information or transferring to the right person, or take a message and assure them it will be passed on urgently. If the caller becomes abusive, I would politely inform them that I can help but need them to speak respectfully, and if it continues, I would follow my organisation's policy for difficult callers."

4. What experience do you have with PBX or VoIP systems?

Why they ask

To gauge your technical familiarity with the tools of the role.

How to structure your answer

Describe specific systems you have used, your proficiency level, and how you troubleshoot common issues.

Example answer

"I have used a range of PBX systems, including Cisco and Avaya, and VoIP platforms such as Skype for Business and Zoom Phone. I'm comfortable managing multiple lines, transferring calls and setting up conference calls. When issues arise, such as a dropped call, I first check the connection and then follow standard troubleshooting steps, like restarting the softphone or checking headset connections. I'm quick to learn new systems and have picked up new software within days."

5. How do you ensure messages are taken accurately and passed on promptly?

Why they ask

To evaluate your attention to detail and time management.

How to structure your answer

Describe your method for capturing information, verifying it and ensuring timely delivery.

Example answer

"I use a standard message template that includes the caller's name, organisation, contact number, the person they need to reach and a brief summary of the request. I repeat the details back to the caller to confirm accuracy. I then send the message immediately via email or the internal messaging system, or place a written note in a designated tray if the person is on site. For urgent messages, I follow up with a phone call or in-person alert if possible. I prioritise messages based on urgency and track them to ensure they're actioned."

6. Why do you want to work as a switchboard operator here?

Why they ask

To see if you understand the role and are genuinely interested in the organisation.

How to structure your answer

Connect your skills to the role, show you have researched the organisation, and express enthusiasm for being the first point of contact.

Example answer

"I enjoy being the voice of an organisation and helping callers feel heard and directed efficiently. I understand that [Company Name] values [mention something specific from your research, such as customer service or community focus], and I want to contribute to that by providing a professional and welcoming switchboard service. I'm also keen to work in an environment where I can learn more about the organisation and grow my skills. I find it rewarding to be the person who ensures every caller has a positive first interaction."