Effective virtual interviews

An interviewer's guide

ODGERS BERNDTSON

A NEW ERA

The COVID-19 pandemic has fundamentally changed business behaviour. With so much of the population now working remotely, traditional interviewing processes may no longer be feasible, and many are turning to virtual methods.

Whilst advances in technology have encouraged an increase in video interviews over recent years, in-person interviewing has remained a preference for both interviewers and interviewees, particularly at a senior level.

However, as the current global situation marks a new era for business communication, virtual interviews will become commonplace, provoking a need to consider how best to convey yourself and your company online.

This guide considers some important issues for virtual recruitment interviews, and the more complicated considerations when several interviewers are involved.

WHAT ARE SOME OF THE CHALLENGES?

NARROWING OF PARTICIPANTS' BANDWIDTH

In a virtual interview situation, there is a reduction in the cues that people use to interpret what people say. This is particularly difficult if the technology is less than perfect. Whilst we make allowances for that in our social and day-to-day digital interactions, the stakes are much higher for all parties in a hiring interview.

BUILDING RAPPORT

Participants need to pay particular attention to building rapport through focusing on introductions, ensuring effective eye contact, paying attention to body language and other interpersonal cues, and managing the conversation to allow space for participants to make their point.

PRESENCE

The flattening of the interaction, and reduction in cues, can affect perceptions of gravitas. Participants need to project themselves more (without overdoing it), speak at an appropriate speed, and create a business-compatible image (e.g. personal attire and background to the video) in order to manage their presence on screen.

CULTURAL ASPECTS

Whilst first round interviews are often carried out remotely, final rounds are typically in-person. If the final round is online, all parties need to work out how to explore the "fit-with-the-culture" usually facilitated by the physical and social cues of a visit to the office – for example, the 'feel' at reception, and sense of the broader work environment.

TECHNOLOGY AS AN ENABLER, AND AS A FILTER

The better the technology the more effective it will be. This requires planning and preparation for everyone involved, especially if networks, and home broadband arrangements, are in heavy use.

THE INTERVIEWER'S PERSPECTIVE

CONSIDERATIONS FOR ONE-TO-ONE INTERVIEWS

For candidates, especially early in the process, there will be a need to recreate the sense of the interview as an essential opportunity to find out more about the company, its culture and the role. For the recruiter, there is a symmetrical challenge to retain the important element of exciting candidates about the role.

The rituals at the beginning of a traditional one-to-one (greetings, coffee, chat about the journey, the office location etc) create a slow run-in to the meeting, helpful for both parties to settle in and get a sense of meeting properly. In a virtual interview situation, it can seem as if you are in the interview the moment you press 'go'.

In this context, preparation will be more than usually important in terms of curating an experience from start to finish over the hour.

Draw on experience of the 'fireside chat' to set a relaxed tone, and consciously prepare a number of social 'icebreaker' questions. Put yourself in the candidate's shoes.

Take additional care in planning time to allow coverage of the necessary ground, including candidate questions.

Maintain focus on the candidate by looking through the camera as much as is feasible; be conscious that spending a large amount of time looking at briefing notes, CVs and papers will get in the way of building and sustaining rapport.

Emphasise signalling during the meeting, particularly when there is a change of focus, for example between the social chat and informal discussion at the beginning, and the more formal questions as the interview progresses.

Invest particular attention to the wrap-up process, ensuring that there are no unanswered questions on either side

You may also find it helpful to refer to our guidelines for interviewees later in the paper.

CONSIDERATIONS FOR PANEL INTERVIEWS

In final interviews there may be two, three or more interviewers, all in separate locations. Participants may not have the level of tech support possible for an in-office conference call, and the high stakes for both the interviewer/s and the candidate mean that it is worth adopting some clear ground rules.

Pre-interview

Having set up the interview with the panel and candidates, administrators should proactively check with each person that they are familiar with the technology and that it is installed and working on their laptop or computer. This is particularly important for external panel members and candidates outside of the organisation.

A panel pre-briefing with the administrator or the Chair provides an opportunity to test the technology, and to set the ground rules for the particular circumstances of a virtual interview.

More deliberate behaviours are required in this online atmosphere. Establish the role of the chair, and how questions will be fielded – the lag on some technologies mean that cutting across or jumping in on a question can cause confusion. Panel members need to be more than usually attentive to the Chair's direction, and the Chair will need to actively manage cues for additional questions and follow-ups.

Ensure papers are sent in good time, and that panellists have the facility to print at home/at a remote location as required.

Be clear to panel members on dress code and remind them on an appropriate background 'in shot'. Working at home can foster more informal behaviour, but is that an appropriate image to project to your candidates?

Always provide a phone contact name and number in the event the technology fails.

THE INTERVIEW ITSELF

All participants should set up to join in promptly for the session, to account for any connection challenges. Given the relative formality of the session (distinct from a routine virtual team meeting), it may be helpful for the Chair to pre-agree an approach to filling any gap that might occur between the candidate joining and the full panel 'arriving'.

In addition to the Chair's usual welcome to the candidate, it is worth checking that the candidate has a good Internet connection and that the video and audio are working effectively. The Chair should also explain the protocol in the event of any technology glitches during the interview.

Introductions from panellists should proceed in the normal way; participants should understand that to be seen to be looking at the candidate, they need to look at the camera. It can be helpful to move the tile/image of the candidate on the screen closer to the camera, to provide a more natural sightline.

As the interview progresses, the Chair may need to be clearer than in a co-located interview with regard to structuring and managing questions from the panellists.

For example: 'Stage managing' the move from one panel member to another and sticking to pre-agreed question protocol. The latter might involve the allocation of one panel member as 'prime' questioner for a specific topic, or to take the lead with a particular candidate. Rules for ad-hoc and follow up questions should also be made clear and be managed deliberately.

Other considerations for the best experience include ensuring discipline in terms of panellists speaking too quickly, or intervening too fast with follow-up questions. Being alert to the possibility that the candidate has not heard or understood the questions properly and/or had a chance to finish their answer.

With potentially reduced opportunity to visit and engage with the employing organisation, it is important to give candidates enough time for their own questions. Organisers may need to factor this in when timetabling a meeting.

Post-interview

Remember that interviews are a two-way process. In addition to the interview itself, it is important to ensure that candidates feel that they have gained sufficient insight into the organisation and its culture through the broader recruitment process.

THE INTERVIEWEE'S PERSPECTIVE

This is the kind of information we are sharing with candidates. It's not just good to know, some of the practical information could be handy from your side of the interview process too.

PLANNING FOR YOUR VIRTUAL INTERVIEW

- Make sure alerts that might pop up on screen (and distract you) are turned off; remove other distractions such as nearby phones, or other tech, and have a notepad and pen handy.

- Make sure you are in a quiet location; let others around you know that you are not to be disturbed and log in ahead of time to ensure a smooth start.

- Make sure your technology is working, that you have the correct software installed and that you have a strong connection. Test your camera and microphone ahead of time.

- Set up with an appropriate background, a neutral room with soft natural light is best.

- Think about the appropriate dress code for the interview and avoid very bright colours or complicated patterns.

- Do a trial run with a friend or colleague and ask them for tips on how you presented on screen. Think of the news or current affairs television personality that you find effective and consider how they present themselves.

- Good eye contact is particularly important in a technology enabled interview. The camera should be at eye level to avoid looking down on or away from the interviewer. Moving the on-screen tile/ video image of the interviewer so that it is adjacent to the camera will help.

- It's easy to let your eyes wander; try to avoid looking away from the camera – it will make you look distracted.

- It is not as easy to build or maintain rapport with a panel of interviewers through video conferencing. Consider responding to the questioner by name and then check at the end of the response whether they require any expansion.

- Do not use any notes or briefing materials, other than those you might have if you were physically present at an interview. You will look distracted if you are repeatedly looking away, so prepare properly instead.

- Maintain a good posture and nod and smile as appropriate to the conversation; it will give a sense of engagement. Take care to avoid excessive or distracting movement.

- Project your voice and check volume controls ahead of time. Think about timing – don't speak over the interviewer and ask for clarification if a question is indistinct or interrupted.

- Take time to settle into your chosen location for the interview.

TALENT. TECHNOLOGY. TOGETHER.

In today's fast-changing world there has never been a better time to familiarise yourself with technology and to take advantage of it. After the current situation passes, the way we work and our engagement with technology will have changed significantly for the long term. Those who take the opportunity to make this shift now will be the best positioned to emerge stronger.

We hope this guide has been of use as we adjust to this new way of working together. Please don't hesitate to get in touch if you have any queries about this subject, or any other aspect of talent or leadership. We are here to help, now, and in the future.

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