

A User's Guide: Mastering Virtual Interviews In the "Virus-Impacted" Job Market

The employment interview is stressful enough, but given current circumstances, participating in a Skype / Zoom interview presents a completely different level of uncertainty and apprehension.

As time goes by and the economy starts opening up, seminary graduates will be hitting the job market along with the "new norm" of interviewing. Applicants will be interacting with potential employers online through Skype, Zoom or a similar online portal. Here are pointers to keep in mind when engaged in a video-conferencing interview.

1. **Dress professionally.** Wear a comfortably fitting blouse, knit, or shirt in light, solid colors that compliment your skin tone. **No busy patterned** shirts or blouses as they come across as too distracting. Feel free to wear a blazer and there's no need to wear a tie or scarf. Avoid short sleeves if possible; this can look unprofessional and detracts from your face.



2. **Camera and Microphone.** Have the camera positioned so that the interviewer can see your face and upper torso. This will allow you to use hand gestures to coordinate with your facial expressions. Avoid placing the camera too close to your face; the lens exaggerates your expressions. I recently viewed a pastor delivering a sermon via Zoom who had the camera only a couple of feet away. Her face filled the entire screen. Every time she raised her eyebrows, it looked as if she just sat on a cold toilet seat. Have the camera at eye level, not so low the viewer has to look up your nostrils, nor too high that s/he is talking to the top of your head. When speaking, face the camera rather than the image on your screen; the camera gives you eye contact with the viewer. Examine your equipment's sound system to ensure it will be adequate for the interview. Listen for the quality and if found lacking, you may need to obtain the use of an external mic.



3. **Background.** Be careful not to sit with a background that is going to diminish your image or distract the viewer. Remember not to sit in front of a window because it will frame you as an amorphous shadow. Have a clean, uncluttered backdrop. I once interviewed a candidate who showed a very professional look except he had a huge dead plant sitting in full view right behind him. Then there is the person who chose to wear colors the same as his background; he resembled a talking head. Select a background that can reflect your personality (bookshelves, photos, degrees, etc.) but not intrude on your presence. The Zoom app can help you select a favorable background.



4. **Technology.** Prior to your interview, check the technology on your laptop or computer; do not plan to rely on your cell phone. You should do a test run a few days before to check out the audio and video functions, perhaps conducting a practice round with family or friends. Make sure you are in a place where your Wi-Fi signal is strong, consistent, and reliable.

5. **Relax.** Feeling a little tense is going to be natural, just don't go into a full-throttle freeze as the interview begins. Just before you start, draw a deep breath through your nose, hold it for 15 seconds, then slowly exhale through your mouth. This exercise will loosen you up. Be cautious about hunching your shoulders, sit so you can feel comfortable and not as if you're constrict your breathing. Feel free to take a deep breath during the interview, as if you're pondering a reply to a question.

6. **Miscellaneous tips:**

- a) *Lighting.* Watch for shadows. Have a soft white light underneath your face to illuminate your features while eliminating uncomplimentary shadows. If you wear glasses, be certain they do not reflect into the camera and show a whiteout over your eyes.
- b) *Gestures.* Keep your hand and arm motions within the frame of your torso; gesturing beyond this boundary will seem too distracting and exaggerated to the viewer. Study broadcasters and see how little they employ gestures, taking note of how they emphasize their points with their voice and facial expressions. The camera highlights every slight movement so be careful to keep gestures to a minimum and coordinated with your facial expressions and vocal inflections.
- c) Make sure you know who is calling whom and when. Know the link you are to use along with any password or meeting ID. Be prepared to use your phone if your connection drops.

- d) Become familiar with managing shared documents in the platform chosen for the interview. You may have to place your resume or CV on the screen for all to review together.
- e) Select a location where you are not going to be interrupted or disturbed by ringing phones, barking dogs, or where you might be distracted by the conversation of others. A friend who is a professor at a small campus told me of a student who chose to conduct a Skype interview outdoors underneath the campus campanile. To her satisfaction no one else was around and it was still and quiet . . .until the bell tower, in the middle of her interview, announced the hour and rang out its numerical count.

While much of its current usage is due to the impact of the virus, video-conferencing will undoubtedly be a mainstay in employment interviews from this point going forward. Employers realize they are an inexpensive yet effective way to screen applicants. Consequently, it is in applicants' best interest to know how to prepare for such interviews and in the end, master them.

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