

# How to Ace the Virtual Interview

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*By Kim Brettschneider*

Interviews for campus-leadership positions have shifted entirely to video, in our Covid-19 era of travel bans and social distancing. Many of the clients I work with as a campus search consultant expect that shift to remain a trend, even after our shelter-in-place era passes. Video interviewing has its advantages — it saves money, for one — but it also creates a unique set of stresses for candidates.

In more than 100 administrative searches, I've seen an array of video snafus: cameras angled to focus on shiny foreheads, cameos by pets and naked toddlers, unmade beds clearly visible in the background. I've seen candidates — thinking they were on mute — shout at a spouse to be quiet and tell a child to "go pee." I've seen committee members — thinking they were on mute — talk about a candidate. I've watched candidates put on their eye makeup, sneeze into the screen, and bring in their kids to help manage the technology.

There is more than one good reason these days to avoid touching your face. In one video interview, the candidate's screen froze for the rest of the conversation. Unfortunately she had just scratched her lip, so it looked like she was picking her nose.

Some of those mistakes are recoverable and some aren't, yet most are entirely avoidable. The following video-interview tips can help even the most senior and technologically savvy candidates navigate popular videoconferencing services like Zoom, BlueJeans, Webex, Google Meet, or Skype.

**Consider an artificial backdrop.** In a video interview, you need to focus on nuances you would normally ignore — like the setting, which matters far more than whether you are wearing nice pants. If you can't create an attractive, office-like background at home, utilize virtual backdrop settings available on most of the video services.

I don't mean virtual backdrops of forests or beaches. It's best to use a neutral office setting. You can navigate those features easily on newer phones, laptops, and tablets. If you can't figure out how to do that, or your laptop and phone won't allow it, good lighting and a plain white wall or sheet will do the job.

The backdrop option allows you to block out everything behind you, such as piles of laundry or your bathtub, if the bathroom is the only quiet place you can find in your home. Wherever you are doing your virtual interview, be sure to lock or barricade the door from curious pets or bored spouses in pajamas, because if they get within two feet of the camera, they "pop" unexpectedly through the virtual background.

**If life happens, roll with it.** Sure it's amusing when someone's awkward moment goes viral — like that talking head whose children popped into his tranquil BBC interview on foreign policy, and chaos ensued (there's even [a virtual background](#) of this moment). But most administrative job candidates don't want to *be* that guy. And the backdrop feature is not perfect in blocking out the realities of family life at home.

Still, if some awkward moment disrupts your virtual job interview, go with it. Pick up your toddler, give your dog a bone, and continue the interview. Everyone is much more understanding of awkward live moments during this time of quarantine. For young children, try leaving a note with drawings to remind them what they can do for the hour, or, if needed, set them up next to you with their own "work" and crayons and introduce them before the meeting.

How you handle an unexpected interruption — assuming you do so gracefully and not by blowing up at the intrusion — can offer a human connection with the hiring committee that is sometimes lacking in virtual interviewing.

**Preemptive muting is your friend.** It helps keep those pesky distractions in check. Play it safe if you are worried about a sudden meow, bickering children, or loud blenders in the background. Leave your screen muted and hold down the key to unmute only when you

want to speak so that noise does not interrupt the other side of the conversation as the committee speaks. Shut down email and any online chatting so you do not get noisy notifications or pop-ups.

On Zoom, you can use the spacebar to open your microphone. On BlueJeans, press "m." Finding one key is easier than fumbling with your mouse to silence a chirping text message.

**Practice like a TV analyst.** Search committees are seeking executives and senior administrators who are a good fit with campus culture, but it is hard to make a personal connection and convey enthusiasm over a medium that is more like television than our regular day-to-day interactions.

The key is to practice the way you communicate, like professionals do on television. Write out your talking points. Rehearse them in front of a camera. Practice repeating the question in your answer. There is a record feature on most videoconference programs. Record a mock interview, and watch yourself to make sure you convey energy.

When it's time for the actual interview, however, don't try to mimic exactly what you said in your practice sessions. What matters most is to be fully attentive during the interview and ready to improvise based on what you hear. Active listening is even more important in a video interview because you can't take in as many visual cues as you do in a face-to-face conversation.

**Keep your notes handy on your screen.** Most videoconference programs offer a minimized view box of the speaker — a picture inside a picture. Make sure you know how to use that feature. It allows you to focus on the interviewers while still being able to sneak a peek at other boxes on your screen with, say, your notes or the job's leadership profile. That's actually an advantage of video interviews since it's something you can't easily do in person. (During your mock interviews, practice having your notes in view on your laptop screen.)

**Make eye contact with the camera.** Try to keep your eyes on the camera as much as possible, except in those quick moments when you are scanning your notes or glancing at the faces of search-committee members.

Experiment with the settings in advance. If you don't know much about taking a good selfie, ask someone who does. You want to center yourself on the screen, so your torso is visible and you don't look like a floating head. Once you see that you are eye-level with the camera, try not to look at yourself too much. It is human nature to become more self-conscious or distracted as you talk into a "mirror." Practice resisting that instinct.

**Username matter.** Especially if you are borrowing someone else's device or account, make sure you retype the username, and include your first name. Our search team recently had an interview in which a child's nickname loomed below the candidate onscreen, which

was both confusing and distracting.

A friend with a keen eye for detail can assist with a practice call and confirm you have the right professional details.

**Keep your cellphone handy (but silent).** If your computer freezes, give it a second before shutting down. Check your internet connection. If all else fails, log out. Have the number of your main contact saved in your cellphone, and call if things go south.

You can practice this, too. Get a sense of rhythm for a slightly more delayed microphone setting, and pause when you complete your main idea to allow for interruption and questions in case there is an internet delay.

**Smile early and often.** You are on camera with your future colleagues. Smile (naturally), sit up straight, and speak clearly. Enjoy the chance to talk about your proudest moments.

It's well established that all sorts of factors — personality type, gender, race, disability, body type, height, distance from the region, and even ability to travel at the last minute — can distract the hiring committee from what really matters: you, your record, and your leadership style. In some ways, a flat screen levels the playing field and allows more equal opportunity to shine in an interview setting and demonstrate advantages.

Use these tips to embrace the new normal. We are in a historic crisis, but creative and diverse leadership is still needed in higher education. The move from in-person to online interviewing is just a small piece of that puzzle. But the message is clear: You can make an important difference in your own career, even from the comfort of your home.

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