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6. Skype Interviews

“Humanity is acquiring all the right technology for all the wrong reasons.”

—R. Buckminster Fuller

Love it or hate it, video interviews are becoming more and more common. Especially given how the job search process is no longer limited to your area.

I worked abroad for many years, applying from the U.S. and applying from Europe. I have learned a few tips and tricks along the way that should be helpful if you are faced with this interview type.

Disclosure: I consider it to be the worst of both worlds. Skype interviews have all the downsides of a visual assessment with the inhuman touch of a phone call, wrapped in guaranteed tech problems.

What is it used for?

Sometimes the video interview can be used in place of the traditional interview. This can depend on the location of the office and where you are.

A hiring decision and offer can be made without physically meeting you. However, if possible you should always try to meet in person and tour the office where you will be working. I would be very hesitant to accept an offer after only a web interview.

This can be a method to get the ball rolling on negotiation before investing the time and money to come visit the office. The web interview can also help the firm decide if they want to front the money for you to come interview in person.

Wait. I have to talk to myself?

There is a new type of interview where you do not even speak to a real person. This “one-way” video interview is sometimes referred to as an “asynchronous interview” because only you are doing all the talking.

The interview questions are presented to you in either text or video form. Once you have recorded and submitted your responses, the recruiter or hiring manager will review your interview on their own time.

I have only heard of a couple instances of this being used in an architecture interview, hopefully this won't be an increasing trend. Currently only very large firms that have to screen large numbers of candidates have been using this system. However, I could see this becoming more widespread.

Think about it, if you had a very small firm and could have 15 interviews to watch on your own time? Imagine the time and effort that would save you and your staff.

Seems the machines are winning afterall. Lets hope they don't learn how to use Revit anytime soon.

What is a Skype or Video Conferencing or Webcam Interview?

As much as I dislike video interviews there are a few upsides worth considering.

Perhaps most importantly it eliminates the cost of travel while still providing many of the same benefits of an in-person interview. I found this to be quite valuable when interviewing for jobs abroad. It doesn't replace an interview but you can get a much better feeling toward what your future supervisor might be like.

Architecture interviewers also have to deal with the presentation of your portfolio during the interview.

There are usually two ways of doing this:

1. Send a pdf before the interview

This is the most foolproof way to get your information across. The downside is that everyone isn't on the same page (literally) and it can be frustrating not being able to point at things on the screen.

2. Screen share

Make sure you ask ahead of time exactly what software they are planning to use. Since Skype has become so popular some people just use the name “Skype” to describe any web-based video conference.

There are dozens of programs out there such as GoToMeeting, ShowMyPC, WebEx, etc. so make sure which one you need. I have been asked to use Apple FaceTime, so if you don't have an Apple product this could be an issue.

If you do use a screen share I recommend sending a pdf ahead of time. One of the screenshare interviews I did the sharing wasn't working but luckily I had send my portfolio and had a hard copy with me as well.

TIP:

Including page numbers on your portfolio makes referencing projects and sections much easier

Make sure you clean up your desktop background. Make it plain or something professional. You wouldn't want something embarrassing to show up when you minimize your folders.

Disable any email popups or other programs for the same reason.

Testing?

Test all of the software and make sure you have set up a username ahead of time. You don't want to be doing this at the last minute.

Practice with a friend or family member to make sure everything is working ahead of time. I am sure your mom would appreciate it too.

If you can't do it from home because of roommates, you live on a busy street or have neighbors that think wooden floors are made for breakdancing then there are a few options:

1. Do it from work

This is a bit of a last resort option, I did this when I was interviewing from London. I found a quiet meeting room and was able to do the interview with a nice professional background. The time difference allowed me to do it late in the evening.

The only issue I had was a janitor walked in during the interview! Luckily he assumed I was on a work call so he didn't disturb me. This can be a good option if there are separate meeting rooms or can do it on the weekend. Just make sure you know the janitor's schedule.

2. Book a meeting room

Depending on your city, you can rent a meeting room by the hour to do the interview. This is a good method and you have very little chance of being disturbed.

The downside is that it can be expensive. Also, technical problems can come up such as getting a good internet connection. Some places have their own tech setup so you may not need to bring a laptop other than for backup. You can check with the facility ahead of time on what they do and don't provide.

3. Coffee shop

I have had to do lunch phone interviews in a coffee shops before. This is definitely less than ideal since they are usually loud and have music playing. One trick is to look up coffee shops on Yelp and pick one with the lowest rating (hopefully with wifi).

This should ensure it will be as empty as possible. This will probably require you to wear earbuds. Not ideal but okay if your options are limited.

Camera

Test to make sure the camera is lined up with your face. If you are using a laptop or a separate camera try and elevate it with books or something so the camera is sitting closer to eye level. The problem with many laptop cameras is that they are looking up at you and the ceiling, it looks terrible.

Position the lower edge of the frame so that it roughly lines up with the third button of your dress shirt. The top of the frame should be about the width of your hand above your head.

You may want to consider investing in a quality webcam. Some of the built-in laptop cameras are of poor quality.

Prepare your space

This was one thing I found to be the most difficult. When you need to find a quiet place, with a nice background that you are guaranteed not to be disturbed is almost impossible.

However, you can do a few things to minimize distractions. If you have roommates, make sure you let them know ahead of time and ask them to not play music, watch tv or argue with their significant other while you are trying to interview.

It is important that the background looks professional. If you have to do it in your bedroom face the camera away from the bed and towards a blank wall or window.

Try to get as much natural light as possible as it will bring out your natural color so you look less like a fluorescent lit cubicle zombie. If you wear glasses try to position yourself or the screen to minimize reflections.

Shut down

Turn off anything that could make a noise: alarm clocks, phones (cell and landline), close windows and turn off the TV. Also dogs and birds and other loud animals should be moved into another room. You wouldn't want your cat jumping in front of you.

Mic check

As with the camera it is often a good idea to invest in a quality external microphone. They are very affordable and offer much better sound quality than your built in laptop mic.

Another option is to use a headset with a built in mic. I am reluctant to use one because they look like you work at a call center. It is worth a try if you have trouble hearing the interviewer.

Earbuds are another option, but they don't look professional so use only as a last resort. Make sure you can be heard clearly and get an idea of how loud you need to speak. You don't want to be whispering the whole time and have to repeat. Screaming at the screen can be a problem too.

Don't slouch

As with the in-person interview your posture is very important. Since they can still see you, be aware of your body language. Sit up straight and look into the camera, not the screen. This is how you make eye contact with the interviewer. Make sure you smile and keep your hands off of your face.

During the interview

Since there is usually a slight delay with the video feed make sure you give the interviewer enough time to comment or respond. Otherwise you will be awkwardly starting and stopping every other sentence.

TIP:

Try not to move around too much, this can create a really distracting and blurry image for the person on the other side.

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