Video Interviews: Guidelines for Leadership Candidates

Kimberly Smith and Ashley Rittgers

As COVID-19, at least for the near term, changes the way recruiting takes place, it is important for hiring organizations and candidates alike to recognize that the medium of getting to know one another is changing. How one makes a first and lasting impression via a computer screen differs from how one does that in person.

If you are candidate, preparation is crucial. You should still learn all you can about the organization, the role and the people with whom you will be meeting. But you also must plan for elements specific to video interviews that could hinder your candidacy if not approached thoughtfully and in advance.

The following recommendations are intended for leadership candidates who wish to impress a potential employer during a video interview.

Setting

The setting of a video interview – particularly your own – is something you very much can control. Turn on your laptop camera and look at the background of the room where you will be participating in the video. What is behind you? Family photos? A bright window that makes it hard to see your face? A busy bookshelf that could distract from what you are saying? Or worse, if you're at the kitchen table, a refrigerator full of notes and papers or a sink full of dirty dishes? All these are real examples of how videos have gone wrong.

Give real thought to the setting because it communicates your preparation and how seriously you are taking the process. Be sure you are in a quiet area, free from background noise or traffic. Make sure the room is private from work or home activities. Your interviewers shouldn't hear SportsCenter in the background or watch your teen come home from school. (Again, real examples.)

Test the lighting. Light behind you is problematic, and generally any window without covering on a bright, sunny day will make your face wash out and your features hard to discern.

Technology

As with the entire interview, plan ahead. Be sure you check the operability of your technology. If you are using a laptop, ensure it is connected to a power source – don't rely upon your battery unless you are absolutely sure it will last considerably longer than your interview.

There are multiple video software programs that are available to use for interviewing. Among them, Zoom, FaceTime and Skype for Business all require downloading the software in advance. Be sure to do this at least a day in advance so you are not rushed to get it done immediately prior to the interview.

Do a trial run on your camera, microphone and internet connection to be sure all function appropriately. Ideally, conducting this trial run with another participant – a family member, friend, colleague – will provide you with feedback on how the image looks, how your voice comes through, etc. While it may go without saying, do not do your video interview on your smartphone.

Personal Appearance

Dress as you would for an in person interview. While it might be tempting to wear a pair of jeans, with a dress shirt and blazer, avoid the temptation – if you should have to get up to adjust the screen or get a file, you'll be mortified and without a reasonable explanation.

Be mindful of how video transmission can impact the visual appearance of your clothing. Generally, avoid all white or strong patterns (stripes, flowers, etc.) as they are magnified on the screen. The best approach is to keep colors neutral. Avoid distracting jewelry – particularly anything that makes a sound when you move.

When you test your screen image, be sure you know where you are looking – and that should be directly at the camera. There is a great temptation to look at the person on the screen but you should be looking at the camera.

Finally, maintain an appropriate distance from the camera, so that you are framed nicely by the computer screen – neither too close nor too far away.

Voice

Speak up and speak clearly. Be sure to take a pause at the end of each thought. It can be more difficult to read your audience by video and whether they are about to ask a question or make a comment in response to what you have said. A brief pause will allow that to happen, without fear of talking over one another.

Body Language

During the interview, try to appear calm and natural. Your movement – rocking back and forth in a desk chair, looking around, or touching your face or hands – is magnified on the screen. By all means, use hand gestures and do things that you ordinarily do in person, but not to the degree that they are distracting.

Your Interviewers

You may be interviewing with an individual or with a group. In the latter case, keep track of the names of the individuals with whom you are meeting and where they are sitting. It will be important to know the background of

each individual in advance of the call. In that way, you can respond more directly as they ask questions during the interview.

Video interviews have become the norm for many leadership searches. In order to make the right impression, it pays to prepare and practice.

This article was written by Kimberly Smith, senior partner and leader of the Academic Medicine and Health Sciences Practice for WittKieffer, and Ashley Rittgers, an associate in the practice.