

Conversations with Chris (Extended) : Nailing a Virtual Job Interview

Remote hiring is here to stay. If you're job hunting right now, chances are you're also interviewing remotely. There are some serious upsides to this. You can avoid being late (no traffic), reference notes without being too obvious, and if you're located in a rural area and transit based, you now have access to the same opportunities as people who live in the city and drive. There are also downsides. Combined with technical problems — like forgetting you're unmuted or having a cat filter stuck on your face. You're unable to visit physical offices, meet potential teammates, and get a clear sense of a company's culture. Last but not least, now that more people have access to more (remote) jobs, your competitors, like your opportunities, have likely increased.

Here are four areas and some tips for each you can use to turn your next virtual interview into a job offer!

You Control Your Space

Set up your space. Yes, you can do your interview wearing formal clothes on top and PJs on bottom. But you still need to control how *the illusion* of you is coming across on a 9×16 screen. You will need to use your space, and your environment, to create a strong and lasting impression.

Have a clean, uncluttered background: Don't start rearranging your entire room. Just find a spot that is simple and free of distractions (like a blank wall or one that has a few pictures hanging on it). If your background is too cluttered, it will pull the recruiters attention away from you. You can even choose a simple virtual background instead of propping yourself in front of a messy bookshelf.

Check your lighting: You want recruiters to view you in the best light possible; both figuratively and literally. During your call, light yourself from the front. If your light source is behind you, you'll turn into a mysterious silhouette, and the recruiter will spend their time trying to see you as opposed to focusing on what you have to say. If you have a desk light, position it towards your face so you're clearly visible. Try to use cool rather than warm light.

Do a speed test: Poor internet = poor communication. To ensure your internet is working at optimum speed, ask family members or roommates to log out while you're in your interview. If you don't trust your WiFi, connect by plugging in your local area network (LAN) cable. You can also test your connection through a simple Google search for "Internet speed test."

Preparation

Prepare for the unexpected. Unlike traditional face-to-face interviews, virtual interviews can be conducted from the comfort of your home. Despite the familiar setting, you may still encounter some unexpected situations.

Master the platform: Become an expert on whatever platform is chosen for your interview (WebEx, Zoom, Microsoft Teams, etc). If you have not used it before, download the interface and practice the features by doing some mock calls with a family member or a friend.

Keep notes handy, but don't refer to them too often: During job interviews, it's standard for recruiters to ask candidates for examples of their most impactful work. Don't let this unnerve you in the moment. Create a printout or Word document of notes with crisp bullet points highlighting a few projects you want to share. The goal is to refer to your notes minimally. Use them only to remind you of points you have already practiced.

Keep calm: If you feel stressed or overwhelmed at any point during the call, it's okay to ask your recruiter for a moment to gather yourself. You could say, "Could I take few seconds to think and answer?" Recruiters will appreciate your ability to stay calm under pressure instead of fumbling.

Rehearse. It's easier to pick up important cues from facial expressions, gestures, body language, or tone when you meet someone face-to-face. However, these are often lost or more difficult to pick up remotely.

During the Interview

Monitor your pace: Speak neither so slowly that your recruiter falls asleep, nor so fast that they find it difficult to keep up. By maintaining a steady amount of words per minute and taking time to pause before important points, you'll not only better connect with your interviewer, but you will also ooze confidence, even if you're nervous on the inside.

Use hand gestures: Use wide hand gestures for big and exciting points and move hands closer to your heart when sharing personal reflections. Your body language can impact what you're saying and how you come across. You can connect to your interviewer just by keeping an open posture and remembering not to cross your arms. When people connect with you, they're more likely to trust the information you are sharing.

Look into your webcam, not at your reflection: Making eye contact is the first step to building trust with your recruiter, because “eyes play a key role in human social encounters.” Framing yourself in a way where you’re not too far from the camera (no more than two feet). Make sure your head and top of your shoulders dominate the screen, and as you’ve heard before, look into the camera when you speak.

Pro tip: Turn off video mirroring so you’re not tempted to look at yourself while you speak.

Create Engaging Conversations

Don’t perform a monologue; spark conversations. Zoom calls are more monotonous than their in-person alternatives. Your main challenge during the interview itself will be keeping the conversation lively.

Be interested: Successful candidates converse with their recruiters in a natural, candid way. How? Show genuine interest in their interviewer by asking questions.

Find common interests: Do some pre-work to see if you and your interviewer share any interests. Most companies will tell you who you are meeting with ahead of time. This means you can, and probably should, Google them. Explore what kind of articles they post or share on LinkedIn, what groups they’re a part of, what conferences they spoke at, or what kind of voluntary work they do. When the conversation starts to dry up, ask them about these things.

Ask questions. There’s always an opportunity to ask questions about the office and the culture in an interview, but when you interview remotely, you’re going to be left with more questions than usual (what the office and facilities are like, how big and diverse the team is, how the company culture feels, etc.). Whatever you want to know, ask. Don’t worry about looking silly. The recruiter will appreciate your curiosity.

Pro Tip: If your interviewer is looking bored — maybe they’re flicking through their notes or starting to fidget — they probably are. Wrap up your answer before you lose their attention. And always remember to bookend your answers with personality!

For better or worse, remote hiring is here to stay. While there are many unrivaled benefits to this, you need to always do your best to ace your interview. **Remember, pants are optional, outstanding delivery is not!**

Chris is a facilitator with WorkBC Centre New Westminster, and offers workshops to clients on a number of topics. This material was prepared and shared for the benefit of our clients, and was originally published in our centre’s newsletter.