

## Job hunting in a pandemic: preparing for virtual interviews

**Richard Kenny,  
Chief Human Resources Officer**

### **With the UK back in lockdown once more, many people will be facing the prospect of a virtual job interview.**

Job interviews can be intimidating under any circumstances. On a personal and social level, you have to present yourself as someone who would be a pleasure to work with and, in the current climate, easy to lead and manage remotely. Professionally, you need to demonstrate that you are sharp, efficient, skilled and a virtual team player. The critical objective is to make yourself stand out from the crowd and to demonstrate that you are the best person socially and professionally for the role.

So how can you achieve this in a virtual interview world? From my perspective as a behavioural psychologist, people consultant and CHRO, there are four key areas to focus on.

### **FAIL TO PREPARE, PREPARE TO FAIL**

It's important to remember that in many ways the interview process is unchanged and the usual advice on how to prepare still applies. However, the two-dimensional nature of the actual interaction makes preparation for a virtual interview even more essential. Research the company, its industry and its customers. Understand what factors are affecting the interviewer's business. Be crystal clear about why you want the job and how your competencies and capabilities can help the business. Consider asking in advance why the position has arisen and what challenges the previous role owner experienced. This will demonstrate your knowledge of the company and your genuine interest in the role.

For virtual interviews, it is also imperative to put practical arrangements in place to ensure the meeting goes smoothly. Test your technology ahead of time, have a back-up should the technology fail and make sure your local environment is clear of distractions (and passing pet traffic and noise!).

### **BUILD RAPPORT**

Once the interview is underway, the greatest challenge in the virtual world is undoubtedly building rapport online. From the minute you walk into a room for an in-person interview you can start to project the confidence and professionalism you know the interviewer will be looking for. But without the benefit of face-to-face non-verbal communication, forging a connection with the interviewer can be infinitely harder. The usual eye contact and human connection options don't necessarily come naturally over a video call. So how can you enhance the key aspects of rapport-building digitally?

In some cases, interviewers can object to turning on their cameras at all (yes, really!), which dramatically reduces the potential for you to build rapport. You have the option to replicate this and switch off your own camera too, or to continue as normal and leave your camera on. If you feel it is appropriate (and I would recommend you do), you could politely request that cameras stay on or clarify in advance that this is a video interview.

From a behavioural psychology perspective, remember to actually look at the camera. Eye contact – or at least the appearance of eye contact – is extremely important for building rapport and making that human connection. With the current craze for dual screens, multiple applications and notes on other areas of the desktop, it's exceedingly obvious when the person you're speaking to is looking elsewhere and it gives the appearance of not paying attention, being disinterested or not connecting.

Make sure that you're conscious of your speech patterns, too. Without that hardwired human-to-human feedback, it is easy to fall into habits such as talking too fast, not waiting for a response and interrupting the interviewer. Remember: time feels different in a virtual setting. Learn your risk factors by watching yourself and others on the calls that have become an everyday part of our locked down lives and make the necessary changes to your virtual self.

# Job hunting in a pandemic: preparing for virtual interviews



## SUCCESS HAS A PATTERN

As an interviewer (and with Harmonic's growth I do a lot!), the key thing I am interviewing for, beyond functional competence and a professional personality, is a consistent pattern of success. I am searching for people whose previous employers gave them responsibilities beyond their role specification, showing faith in their ability to deliver. I am also looking for interviewees who were selected to get involved in projects that were part of a larger company transformation. Again, this demonstrates trust in their capability and reliability.

A candidate's pattern of continuing education is telling. How did they integrate what they have learnt previously into their current role? What did they do to excel and progress? In my experience, wanting to learn and improve is a sign of humility, confidence and a desire to succeed.

## FINISH STRONG

As the interview winds up, take the initiative to close the conversation decisively. For example, asking 'Are there any questions you'd like me to answer that you haven't asked?' reinforces your openness and gives the interviewer one last nudge to ask the question that could make your application stand out. I'm also a fan of the follow-up email. An old leader of mine once advised me to 'be first, and be last' – the first candidate in the interview and the last person on the interviewer's mind. In psychology it's called the 'recency effect'; a cognitive bias that simply means people remember first what was presented last.

With self-awareness, preparation and practice, you'll master the competencies needed to turn a virtual job interview into a real-life job. Good luck with your job search.

*If you would like advice on a particular virtual interview situation, please feel free to leave questions in the comments on this article.*

## HOW CAN HARMONIC HELP?

At Harmonic, we have extensive experience of helping companies win business and deliver projects more effectively.

Get in touch today to find out more – either drop me an **email** or give me a call on **07770 823463**.



**RICHARD KENNY**

