



March 2007
Vol. 52, No. 3

Lights, Camera ... Interview!

To use videoconferencing to interview job candidates, HR must learn to manage problems and maximize the positives.

By **Matt Bolch**

Raising one hand straight up and using the other to form a "T," Jerry McGrath has called many time-outs during his career. McGrath isn't a basketball coach, however. He's a Korn/Ferry International recruiter who often signals for a time-out during videoconference interviews when job candidates go overboard—talking over the voices of their interviewers, perhaps, or disrupting the conversation's flow by jamming words into every pause.

McGrath's simple but effective solution demonstrates how HR professionals must continue to adapt to the limitations of interviews conducted by videoconference—a promising but still imperfect technology.

"Under no circumstances would I fill a job by video only, but it is a handy tool when speed matters or the candidate is in a remote location," says McGrath, senior client partner in the New York office of the Los Angeles-based executive recruitment firm. "My pet peeve is that the technology can really be unreliable: no sound, delays or an echo," he says. "It's still a frustrating, imperfect medium that has pluses and minuses."

Though videoconferencing may have the drawbacks of an emerging technology, it's expected to be used increasingly in job interviews as collaboration tools such as web conferencing gain traction. A study on web conferencing by global consulting company Frost & Sullivan shows this market jumping nearly 300 percent between 2005 and 2011, to \$2.9 billion. So the question isn't whether companies should consider video interviewing, but when they should use the available technology and how they can get the most out of it.

Pluses and Minuses

The advantages of videoconferencing include speeding up the search process, eliminating the costs of flying candidates in for interviews before finalists are selected and reducing time demands on applicants.

Even as videoconferencing systems evolve and improve, the principal minuses remain technical. Palpable lags in transmission leave candidates

grasping to fill what they perceive to be “dead” air, resulting in interviews where McGrath aches for a time-out.

Other potential disadvantages can show up on either end of the connection. For example, candidates new to videoconferencing may not know where to look or may be hesitant to ask interviewers to repeat their questions. And interviewers have to remember that their actions are visible to applicants and thus shouldn't slouch or engage in other tasks during the interview—such as flipping through magazines and reports or checking their BlackBerry devices.

When It Is Used

At Korn/Ferry, video technology is not used to conduct initial screenings. Video interviews are an option for the best prospects—those identified by recruiters or through resume searches in conjunction with phone interviews. Those finalists are invited to interview face to face. If the candidate and the recruiter are more than a half-day of travel apart, a video conference may be in order, depending on the preferences of the client and the recruiter. But it still does not replace a face-to-face meeting.

The recruiting firm has nearly two dozen U.S. offices where video interviews can take place, so candidates can travel to the closest Korn/Ferry location. Many of its clients also have videoconferencing capabilities available to applicants. Another option, McGrath notes, is to use the videoconferencing services available at 120 FedEx Kinko's locations.

At the U.S. division of the Switzerland-based international investment banking firm UBS, videoconferencing has been used to help screen job candidates for about five years, says Anthony Brown, a managing director and head of HR for the investment banking department in New York. Brown has interviewed scores of candidates during that time and is a proponent of the technology.

Still, video interviews are used mainly in special circumstances at UBS, such as for potential hires who would work in the United States but would have close ties with international offices.

If the job is in New York and involves working with the London office, for example, a videoconference interview of the applicant by the London office enables UBS to “save a lot of money vs. sticking somebody on a plane to London,” Brown says. “Videoconferencing is very inexpensive, and we get about 90 percent of the same things we'd get from a face-to-face meeting.”

Unlike McGrath, Brown reports few technical difficulties with the company's videoconferencing package and notes that the quality is quite good. “It's like sitting in front of a TV that talks back,” Brown says. “If the technology were bad, I wouldn't do it.”

But Lee Creasman, former vice president of HR and senior legal counsel for Rollins Inc., a pest control company based in Atlanta, has experienced technical difficulties with video interviews, such as people trying to talk over each other and long, disjointed pauses between questions and answers.

Even so, he found the technology useful for narrowing candidate lists remotely from five or so to the two or three finalists who would be flown to Atlanta for face-to-face meetings.

Prepping Applicants

While videoconferencing can help employers save time and money, applicants often have a hard time putting their best foot forward in videoconference interviews, contends Karen Friedman, a media and communications training consultant.

"For the company, it's a huge advantage, but not so for candidates who want to make a good first impression," says Friedman, president of Karen Friedman Enterprises in Blue Bell, Pa. "People form impressions within seven seconds of meeting someone, and if that person is unfamiliar with the technology, nervous, has his arms folded and appears aloof, that person's blown [the interview], and that's not fair."

What's more, refusing a video interview isn't an option because it can be disastrous for an applicant, Friedman maintains. "A candidate can't say, 'I'm not going to do it,' because that person can kiss the job goodbye."

Employers, of course, want to hire the best candidate and have no desire to stack the deck against applicants who may have never participated in a videoconference. So Friedman, a former television reporter and anchor, suggests putting the candidate at ease prior to the interview, perhaps with a primer via phone on video interviewing etiquette.

"Tell the person you realize this isn't the same as a face-to-face interview and [the applicant] isn't a media professional," Friedman says. She also suggests coaching applicants on where to look, how wide the video image will be and what to do with one's hands.

Possible technical issues also should be discussed beforehand, letting candidates know that it's perfectly acceptable for them to interrupt should they not be able to hear or should some other technical difficulty arise. (In such situations, McGraw's "time-out" signal may be helpful.)

"The overall message companies should send is that they want the interview to be as effective for the candidate as for them," Friedman says. "Instruct the interviewee to be as conversational as possible."

Trying to have a casual conversation while the video camera rolls, however, is easier said than done, McGrath says. "It's not an authentic setting," he says of the video interview. "It's hard for people to get past the feeling that they're 'on,' to get out of the guest/host mode and talk about the opportunity."

Creasman agrees that adjusting to video interviews can be difficult. At Rollins, he participated in dozens of video interviews as both the potential employer and potential employee. As a candidate, "it's difficult to feel at ease," he says. "The interviewer may have done this hundreds of times in the past, but it's often the first time for the interviewee."

For video novices in particular, then, employers should take steps to prepare them for the process ahead of time.

Before applicants arrive at the interview site, make sure they are comfortable with the procedure and understand what's expected, Brown says. This should be considered part of the HR department's candidate care that extends from receiving resumes to fielding queries and conducting interviews to making a job offer, Brown says. Before the interview begins, reaffirm with the candidate the process and how to address any technical issues that might occur.

Legal Concerns

Some companies may want to record video interviews to share with hiring officials or managers who didn't participate, but care must be taken to obtain written permission from candidates beforehand, says Creasman, who now serves as a partner in the Atlanta-based law firm of Elarbee, Thompson, Sapp & Wilson LLP.

What's more, taped interviews should be retained or discarded in accordance with a company's document retention policies pertaining to employee recruitment and hiring, Creasman says.

Employers also should be aware that taped interviews can be admissible as evidence in court, so interviewers should be especially wary of avoiding questions that are inappropriate or that may reflect poorly on the company. >

Some employers don't make a practice of recording such interviews. For example, Brown says UBS never records interviews—video or audio—and feels it would be odd to do so.

Creasman says candidates generally pay for travel to and from the interview site, while videoconferencing charges are almost always billed to the employer. He also notes that the employer's liability for harm that might befall a candidate while traveling to and from a videoconferencing site should come under the employer's traditional interview policies.

A Two-Way Street

As in any job-seeking encounter, the candidate should be on his best behavior. But company representatives also should demonstrate good manners; how managers prepare for and behave during the video interview can speak volumes about the company culture.

McGrath of Korn/Ferry says preparation for a video interview is like that for a face-to-face meeting, but he does stress the need to forget the technology and just have a good conversation with the candidate. Other companies, however, may want to structure a video interview to maximize the time of all participants.

When groups of people participate in a video interview, extra care should be taken to prepare the candidate, Brown says. "Tell the candidate up front who will be in the meeting and what they do. It helps [applicants] prioritize what they want to talk about and frame their questions," Brown says.

"It's awkward for the candidate to be 20 minutes into an interview and have to ask what someone does in the company," he says. Such a lack of communication also may color an applicant's perception about an organization's culture.

The group interview scenario also often includes managers or supervisors who might be untrained in interviewing techniques and could ask questions that run afoul of hiring laws, Creasman says. All participants in an interview, regardless of medium, should let the HR and recruiting professionals ask questions that aren't specifically related to job function.

Friedman says employers should remember that they're being interviewed, too. "Model the atmosphere of what it's like to work for you," Friedman says. "Smile and act appropriately."

That means refraining from checking e-mail (which Friedman says shows inattention) or leaning back in one's chair (which shows disengagement). To appear engaged, she suggests that interviewers lean forward in their chairs. "Maintain steady eye contact," Friedman says. "If you look off, the interviewee may feel you're not listening to them."

Make the Most Of a Good Thing

The key to any successful videoconference meeting is to get past the technology and connect on a person-to-person level. As collaboration technology continues to improve, there's little doubt that more web encounters and video encounters between employers and job candidates will take place—and that those interactions will become ever easier.

In the meantime, it is up to HR to minimize the disadvantages of videoconferencing and maximize the advantages. And there are plenty of advantages to tap.

"Videoconferencing never is as good as a face-to-face meeting," says Brown, "but it's pretty darned close."