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Virtual Vetting: Online Interview Advice for Candidates and Employers

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Virtual vetting

Online interview advice for candidates and employers

Our search committee gathered in a conference room anxiously awaiting the start of the online interview with our first candidate. A prospective new colleague submitted a superb application and possessed useful qualifications far beyond what the position required. Filled with hope, we initiated the call, but as soon as the candidate appeared onscreen, our positivity began fading. The person on screen was wearing a bathrobe and appeared to have just emerged from bed. Within the first few minutes of the conversation, the candidate began ignoring us to speak with someone else in the room. Our initial enthusiasm turned into disappointment.

This candidate's experience was impressive, but the discourteous behavior was off-putting and, more importantly, prevented the person from adequately responding to our questions.

During that same interview process, we also had a list of candidates whose application materials were not a perfect match for our position, but since the online interview process is easy and free, we decided to give them a first look. The extra time spent on this process was well worth it. Several of them presented so well, further clarifying details of their résumés and cover letters, that we decided to invite them for an on-site interview.

Many other libraries have turned to online video conferencing software such as Skype to replace audio-only interviews when making first contact with candidates. This method offers many benefits both to interviewers and candidates. For example, the visual element can help advance the conversation more naturally than a phone conversation between relative strangers. It also helps both parties understand what one another is saying, particularly if anyone has an accent or speech impairment.

The interviewer has the advantage of observing how candidates react to questions. On the phone you may hear only pauses while a question is considered, however online you can observe the thought process and be less likely to interrupt during silences. You can also see whether the candidates comport themselves professionally. Crucially, this method of interview provides the search committee with an idea of how a candidate will interact with colleagues and library patrons. Perhaps most importantly, you will save money by ensuring that the candidates you invite for a site visit are the most appropriate ones from your pool, thus reducing the chance of a failed search.

For the candidate, an online interview offers the opportunity to distinguish yourself to the potential employer. When you present yourself professionally, you will not only have the chance to describe your expertise in more detail, but also the oppor-

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tunity to better understand the employer's work environment, meet those who may be your future colleagues, and demonstrate strong interpersonal skills before visiting the institution.

This following advice is based on our experiences as search committee members as well as former job candidates. It will serve interviewers and candidates alike by offering advice on achieving a highly successful online interview.

Technological considerations before the video interview

Even though the online interview has numerous advantages, it also presents some unique challenges for interviewer and candidate alike. Taking time before the interview to prepare the space, troubleshoot technical problems, and practice formal online interaction can help all participants maximize the benefits of the format.

Prior to the interview, be sure to:

• confirm the time and other important details at least 24 hours in advance,

• provide each other with the handles you use for the video service so that you recognize one another when contact is initiated,

• provide backup phone numbers in case of technical difficulties, and

• log in to the online service about ten minutes before the appointed time.

It is also critical for you to test and experiment with your equipment prior to the interview to make sure that audio and video work properly, and so that you know how to troubleshoot when something goes wrong. It is not uncommon for audio or video to fail, and you should plan for these eventualities as follows.

• Use the highest possible connection speed. Skipping video and fading volume can frustrate both parties. If you experience difficulties related to your connection, consider a different venue, such as your campus technology center or local library.

• Make sure that updates on your computer are completed so that it will not turn off suddenly.

• Close all other applications, and make your account invisible to other online contacts.

In addition, ask a colleague or friend to do a test call with you. Have that person verify that your lighting is adequate without causing glare, that all parties in the room can be heard while speaking at a reasonable volume, and that everyone can be seen on camera. Individuals should distance themselves so that the torso is visible, without an extreme close-up on the face.

Maintaining eye contact during an online interview is important, though camera placement may make it feel counterintuitive. External video cameras may be situated at a distance from the computer screen; therefore, when you look at the screen, you will appear to be looking away from the person on the other end. Be sure to look at the camera, not at the screen, when you are speaking. While allowing you to maintain a semblance of eye contact, this also avoids the appearance that you are staring off into space.

Advice for the candidate

One of the benefits of an online interview for the candidate is that you can choose to take the call in a location that is comfortable, thus reducing some of the stress associated with the interview process. If you decide to interview at home, you must be aware that this can present certain distractions you would not experience in an office setting. Being surrounded by your personal effects, perhaps with friends or relatives in the vicinity, may unintentionally result in you exhibiting unprofessional behavior, or discussing your personal life more than is advisable, particularly following an interruption by someone or something in your home. Make sure to minimize the possibility of potential household disruptions such as pets jumping on you or family members requiring your attention.

Treat an online interview with no less formality than you would an in-person meeting. As with any interview, you should research the institution to which you are applying prior to the call. This will help you develop ques-

tions so you can decide if the organization is a good fit. Following the advice below can further help to make your online interview a particularly successful experience, and maximize your chances of advancing to the next stage of the process. While some of these tips apply to any interview scenario, they may require a bit more conscious effort when interviewing online.

- **Attire.** While there is no dress code for an online interview, you should dress as professionally as you would in person. While you need not stifle your personal style, selecting clothes from your workplace wardrobe can help keep your interviewers focused on your skills and talents, and may also help you attain a professional mindset, thus helping to overcome some disadvantages of not being in an office. Pay equal attention to your lower half in case you need to stand up to adjust your camera or attend to other unforeseen circumstances.

- **Interruptions.** Make sure that you will not be interrupted. Let those in your vicinity know when you require privacy. Choose a location that is isolated and quiet, and where your interviewers will not see others wandering around behind you. Silence and put away all devices not needed for the interview.

- **Behavior.** Nervousness during any interview may engender bad habits, such as hair flipping or swaying. If you experience a dry throat, discreetly take sips from a small cup, avoiding large slugs from a bottle that requires you to tip your head at an unflattering angle. Have a friend help you identify and correct any potentially distracting behaviors.

Take particular care to prepare yourself for unforeseen technical eventualities as described previously. Although technological difficulties rarely bury your chances for an on-site interview, your reaction to them certainly can. Technological problems are part of a librarian's routine, and your capacity to behave professionally in circumstances when technology fails can play to your advantage.

- **Background.** Let your background be an indication of orderliness and organizational skills. Situate yourself in a neutral space that is free of clutter and eccentric collections. When you test your technology, ask your friend to ensure that your background is arranged neatly, and that personal effects are out of view.

- **Persona.** Your online name should reflect professionalism. Keep your online profiles updated and free of compromising images or posts that could be interpreted as insulting to your current or future employers or library patrons. During the interview, avoid negative talk about your employers, even if your job situation has been less than ideal.

- **Follow-up.** As with any interview, take a few minutes to thank the search committee in writing for their time following an online interview. Email messages are appropriate since the search committee may be moving quickly through this stage of the hiring process. Even if you do not pursue the position further, graciousness will leave a good impression on those whose paths you may cross in the future.

Advice for the interviewer

We often think about the interview process as a way for employers to review candidates' qualifications in order to determine if they are a good match for the position and the organization. But this process is also an opportunity for the interviewer to make a good impression on a potential colleague. As a representative of the organization, the interviewer has the power to influence whether an attractive candidate ultimately chooses to accept an offer. Therefore, it is important for the interviewer to convey a professional tone, and to ensure that the online interview is a positive experience for everyone involved.

- **Preparing the candidate.** The search committee should ensure that the candidates know what to expect during the online interview. For example, provide them with a schedule, a general idea of how the interview will be conducted, and a list of committee members who will be present. Make brief introductions at the outset of the interview. In addition to orienting the candidates, this verifies that they can hear everyone, and

provides an opportunity to resolve an audio problem before jumping into the more sub-stantive parts of the interview when making adjustments may be more disruptive.

• **Scheduling.** Stick to the schedule you provide. Contact the candidate as close to the start time as possible, but not earlier, and do not extend the interview significantly beyond your stated timeframe. Candidates are often taking time away from work or other obliga-tions to speak with you, so it is important to be respectful of their time. However, be prepared with ample questions in case the candidate's answers are more succinct than expected.

• **Behavior.** It is sometimes easy to forget that you are visible to the candidate, so be aware of your body language and what it conveys. Refrain from exchanging glances with your colleagues, making disapproving facial expressions, and exhibiting behaviors that could convey impatience.

Conclusion

There are many library blogs and websites filled with advice for job seekers and those hiring them.

Changes in technology and the market economy have made library jobs competitive, and one opening may attract scores of quali-fied candidates. Search committee members who spend long hours reviewing applications, researching candidates online, preparing questions, and discussing the qualifications of applicants naturally want the search to end successfully. The judicious use of technology can significantly improve the likelihood that qualified candidates will more easily match up with positions suited to their experience and career goals. Additionally, online interviews provide opportunities for the interviewer and the candidate to make good impressions on one another early in the search.

While the online interview format can present challenges for all parties, the poten-tial negatives can easily be overcome with preparation, effective communication, and professional behavior that highlights what the candidate and the employer have to offer one another. ✍