

Online Interview Techniques – a guide

Effective and persuasive spoken communication is a primary requirement in most job roles. Perhaps unsurprisingly, then, it can be a decisive factor at job interviews, too. Sometimes we must also deal with the added complications of online or telephone interview conditions. Especially now, during the current Coronavirus-driven restrictions.



GPB is a specialist communication advisory consultancy which focuses on helping people to be '*at their best, even in the toughest situations*'. [Desmond Harney](#) (Des) is one of GPB's specialist consultants. He is an alumnus of Homerton College and a contributor to its Changemakers programme, in the area of Persuasive Communication

Here, in a guide originally created for the University of Cambridge Faculty of Education, Des advises on how best to approach online interviews, covering some of the key factors to consider and how to prepare. It is intended as a starting point. You can also carry out further research of your own. If you would like to discuss the advice in this guide, contact Des on 07342 271071 or via d.harney@gpb.eu.

Executive Summary: "Top Ten Tips" (all points are explored and explained further in this guide)

Before your interview

- 1) Complete specific background research – know your audience
- 2) Prepare and practice for the 'virtual world' logistics of an online interview
- 3) Prepare strong Content, including establishing your Key Message(s)
- 4) Rehearse and review your Vocal and Visual delivery
- 5) Prepare good answers to the tough questions you could be asked
- 6) Rehearse your question-handling technique
- 7) Prepare strong, relevant questions to ask your audience – to show you are 'invested'

During your interview

- 8) Make a positive start and introduction – speak clearly
- 9) Be alert for Vocal and Visual clues and prompts, shared by your interviewers
- 10) Conclude positively – end on a high!

Interviews (general advice)

Identify in advance who you will be speaking to and carry out at least some preliminary desk research on them and their setting. E.g. what are their roles and responsibilities? How long have they been in their positions? What are their backgrounds? Consider what sort of questions each person is likely to ask you.

Remember that your audience wants to find out as much as possible about you in the short time available. The more you can do to help them in this task, the better. Some people think about interviews as interrogations – just a gruelling series of questions. Making your interview more like a conversation will help both sides achieve their goals, and may make you stand out from the competition.



Your attire and grooming should, of course, also suitably support your candidacy.

At the Beginning (First Impressions Last – the ‘Halo’ or ‘Primacy’ Effect)

- Check how long the interview is expected to last. Is this the duration you have prepared for?
- Establish rapport - via a positive greeting, smiling, and appropriate ‘small talk’
- Posture - when sitting, push your bottom to the back of your chair, for comfort and stability.

During the Interview

- Remain calm. Pause and think whenever necessary
- Answer all reasonable questions
- Make positively-worded statements. Give positive responses to any negatively-worded questions
- Seek opportunities to make some of your key points (see below),
- Give short answers, backed by good examples. Use max. one example for each point you make
- Ask relevant questions. Actively listen to the answers. Ask follow-up questions, where possible
- Understand the differences between open and closed questions and use both, as appropriate.

Online Communication (the context)

Most of the following considerations apply to regular (that is direct, face-to-face communication, taking place in the physical world) as well as to online communication. Some aspects need adjustment/recalibration for optimal online effectiveness. This advice is a start point, to get you thinking in the right way about the opportunity which online communication represents. You can carry out further research into any of these areas.

Because there are additional considerations in play (as outlined below) specific to online communication, this approach can create significant incremental Cognitive Strain¹. As a result of the necessary device mediation, we need to work harder² to process, for instance, non-verbal cues from our audience (their facial expressions and other body language) plus their tone and pitch of voice, etc. Therefore, online interviews can feel more tiring than their face-to-face equivalents, reducing our normal capacity to respond spontaneously and to maintain optimal attention and energy levels. This cognitive load can be reduced with some judicious preparation. Consider the following factors before and during an interview.

And remember that the online medium poses the same challenges for everyone. It is no less ‘fair’ than face-to-face communication. But those who think and prepare the most thoroughly to suit the conditions can gain a distinct advantage. If the outcome is important to you, it’s well worth preparing in advance.

Logistics

Before an interview (or any online communication) make sure you are familiar with the software platform which will be used (e.g. GoTo, Lifesize, Microsoft Teams, Skype, WebEx, Zoom, etc.). The organiser should make this information clear to you in their invitation. Identify in advance what sound, vision and other settings you can adjust. These platforms have slightly varying flexibility and user control panels. Check links or sign-in credentials you’ve been sent. It’s amazing how often incorrect details are shared.

Test your camera and audio devices before the interview: speakers, headphones, microphone, etc. Set up your camera and its angle. Ideally so your head, shoulders and the top half of your torso are clearly visible to your online audience. This should also ensure that any hand gestures you make can be seen.

Laptop PCs with built-in cameras come with built-in problems that need addressing. Ideally, the camera lens should be in line with your face (rather than tilted to look up at you – and into your nostrils!). If the camera is built-in (e.g. to a lap-top) the whole device might need to be safely raised. Perhaps by using a high table and/or some large books, for instance – or a ‘repurposed jewellery box’ (see image below).

The lighting source (whether it’s natural daylight or artificial) should be on your face, rather than behind you, to allow greatest visibility of your facial expressions. And check that the background your audience will see is appropriate. What will your camera show them? A blank wall, a tidy room, a bookcase, a dishevelled bed, dirty laundry? Each one of these projects its own backstory.



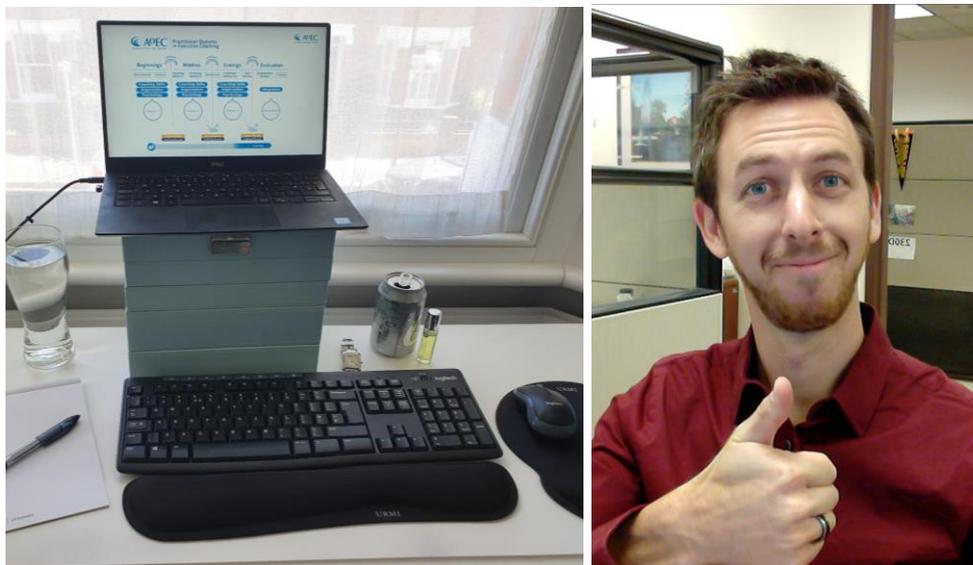
Join the session early. The organiser should normally create a virtual waiting room where you will be ‘parked’. While you wait, you should be able to carry out a final check on your camera angle and other device settings, including screen sharing - if you plan to use any pre-prepared documents.

Be aware that potential delays ‘on the line’ may mean you need to wait for slightly longer pauses than normal in the online conversation, in order to take your ‘turn’. Doing this can help you avoid interrupting or talking over people too much. When NOT speaking for a period of time, it is advisable to turn your microphone off (i.e. to ‘mute’). But do remember when you have turned it is off!

Technical difficulties can affect anyone at the most unhelpful moments. So try to establish a Plan B. For instance, do you have telephone contact numbers, if a phone call is the only way to conduct or complete the interview? What other alternative back-up could you use?



A nice view up the nostrils, or back-lighting? Neither, thanks – and do try to make eye-contact



A ‘repurposed jewellery box’ (left) used as a makeshift plinth. But be careful with all cables and devices. On the right is the view your interviewers might then get of you: a smile, head (at eye level), shoulders and hand gestures

The Communication Basics

You will typically have two fundamental goals: to communicate both your Message and your Personality. You should aim to appear Logical, Credible and Likeable, to be at your most persuasive. You can achieve this by harnessing strong Content (what you say) along with good Vocal and Visual delivery (how you say it and how you look while you’re saying it), whilst still projecting your own true character. Each of these areas is explored further below.



Content (What you will say)

Your content requires preparation. Establish what your Key Message(s) should be. These are the main priority things you want to communicate and want your audience to remember about you later, in relation to this job opportunity. There should be no more than THREE of these, one of which will probably be your Key, Key Message – the most important.

Resist the urge to cover too many points. Your audience won't remember them all anyway. So stick to the essentials. Expand on these if and when the audience asks you to do so. Once you have identified your key messages, work out what examples and other evidence you need, to support each of them. Bear in mind how much time is available/scheduled.

The best way to appear confident and competent is to be both of these things. "Get your head right!" You can achieve this by preparing well and practicing until you are one delivery short of perfect.

The words you choose to communicate with should:

- Be clear, to help your key messages be easily understood
- Suit you and your personality (Don't pretend to 'be somebody else' – you will risk seeming insincere and untrustworthy)
- Support your Vocal and Visual delivery: e.g. use energetic words.

Vocal Delivery (How you say your Content)

The human voice can be a subtle and powerful tool for persuasion. Yet people sometimes seem bland and uninspiring when communicating/presenting, if they have not prepared thoroughly. Learn to listen to your voice (and to those of others). Use yours to illustrate and support your personality and key messages (see above) just as you would do in normal conversation.

Modulate your Vocal Pitch (the degree to which your voice goes up and down when you speak) and your loudness, accordingly, as though this were a 'normal' conversation. Practice so that you sound natural. Take vocal (and visual) recordings on your phone and review these, as appropriate. This may feel awkward at first, but it will help you to understand (and improve) how you sound to other people - and how you look.

Everyone gets nervous from time to time. One result of nervousness is the production of extra Adrenalin in the body, which alters our perception of time. The amount of time distortion is proportional to the amount of extra Adrenalin produced. It is, therefore, best to speak at a steady pace and not to rush. It's also sensible to make your pauses last longer than feels natural. This is true whether you are making a statement or answering a question.

Visual Delivery (How you look, when you say your Content)

The visual impression you make has two key components: face and head (or 'neck up') and body (or 'neck down')

Facial expression and head movement (neck up)

- Genuine vs. fake smiles (i.e. 'Duchenne'³, rather than mouth-only). Ensure yours are genuine, using the muscles of the mouth AND eyes; consistent with your words (the Content) and voice, in order to demonstrate a high level of credibility, confidence and comfort. Some people worry that smiling will make them seem frivolous. But failing to do so at all risks appearing severe and humourless
- It is important to exhibit some variety of facial expression: a range of smiles, thoughtfulness, interest, etc., just as most of us do, entirely naturally, during face-to-face communication
- Nods can signal attentiveness, engagement and, sometimes, agreement; varying in scale and speed
- Eye Contact: in physical world communication, eye-to-eye contact should be maintained between c. 50-80% of the time. But online communication introduces additional factors to consider, as explained below.



According to the Harvard Business Review⁴, recent research shows that in online settings we spend a large proportion of the time gazing at the image of our own face on the screen. This should be avoided as much as possible, except where a brief, deliberate self-check is required.

Although it may feel unnatural (and may need practice) you should mostly avoid looking at your own image AND those of your interviewers. Instead, spend as much time as possible looking into the camera lens. Think of the lens as an electronic eyeball and make 'eye' contact with this when you would naturally look your audience in the eye. They will gain the impression you are looking into their eyes, as you would be doing if you were in the same room. If you look at their eyes on your screen instead, you will seem to them to be looking away from them.

Try to minimise the appearance of looking away. Only do so to check your notes, to check your own (briefly) or your audience's expressions and gestures, as explained below, or when you are thinking and reflecting.

Other non-verbal communication (or 'Body Language' - neck down)

- Use your hands naturally, to emphasise key points and to add helpful expression to your words. Don't keep them clasped tightly together but do, instead, find a natural resting position for when they are not in use. Avoid rude gestures, including direct finger-pointing
- Ensure the camera and, therefore, your audience can see your hand gestures. You may briefly re-check this in your on-screen image.



Epic fail! Any hand gestures will probably be invisible. A nice view of the ceiling; less so the face and body, though.

Handling Tough Questions

Almost inevitably, interviews involve answering a series of questions, designed to find out more about you. As long as you have prepared for this fact, they should hold no fears. In fact, you should view this as a distinctly positive aspect of the meeting. You may also be asked to complete a task during the online session.

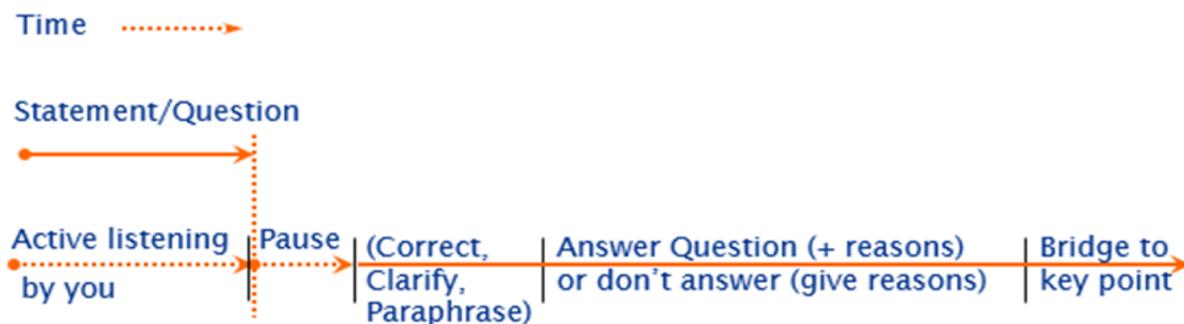
GPB recommends a methodology for handling tough questions well. The basis of which is that every question represents an opportunity to successfully restate and amplify one of your Key Messages.

In order to take up these opportunities, however, you must first (unlike most 'media-trained' politicians) attempt to answer the question. That is ***IF*** it is a reasonable question for your opposite number to ask you (e.g. relevant to your job application and not intrusively personal, or wildly esoteric).

Practice following the GPB technique for Handling Tough Questions (and see diagram, below):

- Actively listen to each question, especially ones with multiple parts
- If a question comes in several parts, write each part down to ensure that you answer them all
- Pause before answering, even if you have previously prepared an answer. This gives an impression of thoughtfulness and also allows you to check you have the BEST possible answer available, rather than just the first one that came to mind
- If there are any errors or inaccuracies in a question, or you're unsure you've heard it right, correct the errors or clarify you have understood the question fully. You could paraphrase it, to do this
- Then answer the question. Give evidence, reasons or an example. Don't over-answer. Know where to stop
- Or don't answer it, but give good reasons why you can't / won't
- If you are asked something you don't know the answer to, don't waffle or invent an answer
- You should still respond with something relevant that you do know, if you can. We call this technique 'I can't tell you THAT, but I can tell you THIS...' It involves sharing relevant adjacent information
- Having answered the question, Bridge to your Key Message (or some other relevant information about you). By answering well, you'll have already earned enough credit / the right to do so.

Handling tough questions



Key Question tips:

- Respond, don't react
- Pause before answering to think of best answer
- Avoid equivocation and over-answering: find a place to stop
- A good answer earns a 'credit' to spend on your Bridge point
- Bridge to the positive and/or a key message (earn and spend a credit)

Effective communication: a two-way process (back-channels)

Information from an audience travels back to you in the form of visual and/or audible feedback signals.

Visual feedback includes nods, smiles, yawning, frowns and gestures from listeners. Audible signals include non-verbal noises such as "uh-huh", "yup", "mmm". You should pay attention, look out for all of this useful feedback and use it to your advantage.

This feedback can be either positive or negative. In both cases, noticing it is pivotal to the effectiveness of the speaker, who must keep vigilant for the information, interpret it and respond accordingly. Checking for this behavioural feedback from the audience is one good reason for SOMETIMES not looking directly into the camera lens.



Conclude Positively (the ‘Recency’ effect)

First impressions are important; but so are final impressions. Make sure you conclude the interview on a positive note. This could include thanking the interviewers for their time and interest (a courtesy), restating your continued interest in the vacancy and asking about the timeline for their decision.

It is also the point at which you might helpfully restate your Key Messages about yourself, if time allows – or else just your one Key, Key Message. These might be the very last words your audience will hear from you and, if you make them memorable ones, they could have an important influence on their final decision-making.

To Summarise...

Online (and telephone) communication presents issues and obstacles, in addition to all the natural pressures of the interview process itself. But if you prepare well in advance, rehearse thoroughly, and plan to try and address the above factors, you will gain greater control – and put yourself in a position of advantage. Good luck!

As is so often the case, a simple cliché encompasses the main principle in play, and acts as a warning to us all:

To fail to Prepare is to prepare to Fail



All good: head, shoulders, top half of torso and hand gestures all visible; eye contact and a sincere smile. Result!

Selected references:

- 1) Daniel Kahneman, Nobel Prize Winner in Economic Sciences (in ‘Thinking, Fast and Slow’, 2012) Professor Emeritus of Psychology and Public Affairs at Princeton University’s Woodrow Wilson School.
- 2) Gianpiero Petriglieri, Associate Professor at Insead – Workplace Sustainable Learning and Development (in BBC.com – ‘[The reason Zoom calls drain your energy](#)’, 22nd April 2020); and Andrew Franklin, Assistant Professor of Cyberpsychology at Virginia’s Norfolk State University (National Geographic, April 24, 2020).
- 3) Named for French neurologist [Guillaume-Benjamin-Amand Duchenne \(de Boulogne\)](#)
- 4) ‘How to Combat Zoom Fatigue’, by Liz Fosslien and Mollie West Duffy (HBR, April 29, 2020)

GPB, May 2020