

HALSEY / KEETCH

EXPERTISE IN FINANCIAL SERVICES GOVERNANCE & CONTROLS SINCE 1988

VIRTUAL/ VC INTERVIEW ADVICE

Given the unusual circumstances under which we are all operating at the moment, we thought it would be helpful to provide some pointers on the increasingly prevalent art of interviewing via VC, whether the medium is WhatsApp, FaceTime, Skype, Teams, Zoom or one of the other tools available. Interestingly, the VC interview, at least as a component of senior recruitment processes, could become a permanent aspect of modern business life, as the medium proves its value and as firms look to reduce travel costs and real estate usage.

We ourselves are, of course, conducting assessment interviews and feedback sessions at the moment via VC and we have regularly done so in recent years, as geography / logistics around certain assignments has required. We have also organised, coordinated and taken feedback on thousands of interviews, both virtual and in person, over the course of our careers. With the above in mind, we have compiled some tips to share based on the protocols that are emerging as best practice, in the interest of helping our contacts to optimise their VC interview performance.

NB: We are aware that our contacts are adept at conducting meetings via VC. The below is therefore intended to be a useful complement to existing know-how.

General /Technical

- **Be focused and be well set-up; have your VC equipment charged up / plugged in securely** in a quiet place where you can speak freely and clearly, with as good a connection as you are able to have; at your home in a dedicated room with a strong internet connection is ideal. It may also be wise to request that your family hold off heavy internet usage whilst your meeting is in progress as bandwidth demand is currently at a premium everywhere.
- **Be familiar with your technology, whichever medium is being used.** There are some new tools available – Zoom and Teams being two of the most popular new ones. These are quite user-friendly but to avoid any last minute uncertainty, get some practice in if you can.
- **Take guidance from your search consultant and their client** on how best to utilise the technology being used, if in any doubt at all. Deploy existing knowledge as far as possible if you use these tools for work, and stay calm if technical issues arise, such as a delay on the line. There is often a brief lag – between half a second to a second or two – but enough that you can talk over each other once or twice, laugh it off and then just wait a second before speaking and keep it in mind so it won't happen again.
- **Endeavour to resolve technical issues if they arise in a calm manner.** If the issues are unresolvable, exit the call gracefully and either suggest a good, old-fashioned landline call as a replacement, or look to reschedule. A landline number can be a useful back-up if needed.
- **Ideally you should have a dedicated space in your home** with a neutral background where you can professionally conduct such virtual conversations, without fear of any distraction being caused by a feature of the background.
- Difficult though this may be, **ensure that children and animals will be managed elsewhere**, throughout the duration of the interview: no barking dogs, cats on the keyboard or banging on the study door, as these will be real impairments to your concentration / performance, and the old adage holds true – “you don't get a second chance to make a first impression.”
- Another useful tip on the distraction front is to **make sure notifications on your computer and / or mobile are turned off as far as possible.** This will avoid any distracting noises, and / or the possibility of your attention being taken off the conversation by an interesting headline, text message or email. If it happens accidentally, turn the device to silent and recover focus quickly and calmly.



Preparation

- **Prepare for a VC interview in the same way as you would a normal interview and remember the basics** – that is to say, prepare extensively in advance and avoid doing so at short notice, so that key information does not crop up too late in your thought process to be put to use.. **Pro-tip:** Write questions or important things to remember on sticky notes and place them on the edge of the computer screen. That way you don't have to look down or search for them.
- Whilst at your computer, phone, tablet or similar, to avoid confusion and losing your train of thought, avoid being surrounded with notes and research. You can **have neatly prepared and organized questions to refer to and you should take notes.**
- **Know whom you're meeting** (the individual's background and possible points of connection between your experience and your professional networks) and why (what role are they playing in the selection process and to what extent does the role in question interact with them and their teams?)
- **Research the company and the role and look for areas of common ground** between these and your own experience and your interests / aspirations; if in doubt, ask your search consultant for more information, e.g. on the firm's business model or the background to the hire, before the meeting.
- **Be sure to check whether an interview format is likely to be** casual, formal, focused on competency questions, or to involve a presentation element; in any case, aim to strike the balance between a) a relaxed, nerve-free conversation with an industry peer, and b) a pitch-perfect and impressive interview performance in pursuit of a highly prestigious and strategically critical leadership role – easier said than done!
- **'Answer the question' (we often hear feedback suggesting candidates at interview didn't do so);** avoid colloquialism or excessively polemical opinions; if you find you are doing these things, stop and change course.

Appearance

- **Dress code – take guidance from clients and / or your search consultant on this.** Smart casual is probably generally appropriate, but casual / comfy is almost certainly not, even though you may be in the comfort of your own home. A full suit and tie is probably not necessary but consider what would make a good impression. A shirt and tie may be appropriate if business attire is required / requested, and / or if you are aware that the company in question has a more formal culture. Also, consider what may attire make you feel focused, confident and ready to perform well.
- From a recent article on this topic: **"Lighting is important, too. Aim for flattering, direct light.** Do not sit with your back to a window, television or other light source as you may be silhouetted against the light. You may need to elevate your computer to get the camera angle to show you to your best advantage."

Approach/Tone/General

- **Under present conditions, be aware of the interviewer's own circumstances;** hopefully they too will have made appropriate preparations, but be ready for anything. Also, avoid complacency – acknowledge whilst getting started that "we're all in the same boat" and everyone is finding it tough to operate in these circumstances, but don't expect any leniency.
- **Expect the interviewer to take the session seriously,** to set the agenda, to come at you with tough and probing questions and potentially to make it as challenging an interaction as a normal job interview in person would be.
- Their role in the process is to interview you and establish your suitability for the role in question. Depending on what stage in the process you are at, **you may be interviewing with somebody who may be even tougher than the hiring manager or key stakeholder** because they're more impartial than the person leading the hiring process, and may have their own areas of focus / issues of interest to test you on.



- **Your tone is really important** – keep it serious but optimistic, e.g. turn challenging situations into learning opportunities. It is an oft-quoted adage that one of the most important things to convey at interview is enthusiasm, and that may be truer now than ever before. This is especially important in the current circumstances, trying though they may be.
- **Avoiding using the excuse – “it was a VC so they were a bit hard to read” – now that this is the ‘new normal’** it is as essential to make as good an impression using this new medium at every stage as it would be if you were meeting in person.
- Also on this topic: an online meeting is not a phone call. You have to be present for the person on the other side of the computer screen. **Making a personal connection through an impersonal device is sometimes tricky, but it is a skill that we must all develop.** Online interviews could be the new normal not just because of the coronavirus crisis but if it works well, companies will realise cost savings can be meaningful, and they will more broadly adopt the practice. It should be said, it may never displace in-person interviews when it comes to final hiring decisions, but when it comes to making one’s way through the process, being great at such interactions online is likely to be a significant differentiator.