

THE CHRONICLE

of Higher Education

Manage Your Career

[Home](#) » [Advice](#) » [Manage Your Career](#)



March 2, 2011

How Skype Is Changing the Interview Process

By *Stephen Winzenburg*

For years, search committees conducted preliminary job interviews for academic positions by telephone, making it easy for a candidate to sit at home in shorts while answering serious questions.

But times have changed, and Skype is now the preferred method many institutions use to conduct long-distance interviews. Some job listings are even warning candidates that they may have to make an initial appearance before the committee via Webcam.

Skype is an Internet-based video service that started in 2003, its name short for "sky peer-to-peer." It is free to use in its basic version with an easy registration process and has become one of the best-known services of its type. *The Chronicle* first reported on Skype in the fall of 2003, but the response from the academic community ranged from embracing the simple technology to fearing lawsuits over misuse of copyrighted material.

Only in the past few years has Skype been put into broad use on campuses, for admissions interviews, classroom guest speakers, collaborative distance-learning projects, and search-committee work. Marc Bousquet, writing on *The Chronicle's* Brainstorm blog, said that Skype was affecting the MLA hiring process, with 12 percent to 18 percent of interviews now conducted via the Internet, bypassing the traditional face-to-face process at the convention. He estimated that Web-based interviewing saved departments \$5,000 to \$10,000 per search.

Even though I had read about universities using Skype for job interviews, I was unprepared to be so quickly thrust into on-camera performances in front of three different search committees over a period of two weeks. With only a couple days' notice, I had to make my first screen appearance.

After losing a bit of sleep pondering the proper Webcam angle and what to wear, I approached the first meeting with an attitude of trepidation and adventure. Before the interview, I conducted a Skype test run with my daughter to—let's be honest—see how bad I looked. A Webcam isn't the most flattering piece of technology and can make you appear gaunt, overweight, beady-eyed, or narcoleptic. And often you look all those things at the same time.

My best camera angle turned out to be with the Webcam pointed

down slightly, so I placed my laptop on an empty cardboard box and tilted the Webcam toward me. Then I turned the laptop so the light wouldn't be behind me (avoiding a shadowy face).

Because the first interview was being done in my home, I cleared out whatever could be seen over my shoulder so the committee wouldn't have to stare at the scuffed shoes sitting on the floor or the dog's toys scattered around the room. I changed into a blue pinstripe oxford, knowing that white is a bad camera color because it reflects too much light and can wash out your facial features.

The first Skype connection took place right on time, but the committee was surprisingly distant from its camera. In order to accommodate all five in the screen, the table they sat behind was set well away from the lens, so I couldn't make out facial details. The little image I saw of myself in the corner of my screen, however, showed a larger-than-life close-up of my face that seemed to distort my features.

The interview itself went surprisingly well. Instead of answering questions over the phone with no reaction on the other end, I could see committee members nodding their heads or taking notes, leading me to believe I had said something that they liked. They may have been grading papers or smiling at my pasty-white winter complexion, but I choose to believe they were reacting positively to my responses.

Only one of the five faculty members didn't seem to want to be there. He appeared on the upper-right corner of the screen, partially cut off from my view, taking no notes and fidgeting in his seat. He looked down all the time, even when he was asking me his lone question. Only later did I discover that he had just been replaced as department chair a month earlier and apparently wanted nothing to do with the hiring process.

After the call ended, I not only felt a sense of relief but also found that I had actually enjoyed the experience. I felt that I got to know them much better than I would have if I had only heard their voices coming from a speakerphone. Instead of the blank uncertainty I had always felt, hanging up after a phone interview, I left the Skype experience feeling that I had made new friends.

It was only a few days later when I had my second Webcam interview—his time in my college office. As a faculty member with heaping shelves of books and messy piles of papers waiting to be filed, I knew I had to clean up the place a bit. After everything behind me got put away (some of it hidden in spots the interviewers couldn't see), I propped my laptop on the empty cardboard box and checked the scene. The lighting in my office was not only dramatically different from my home, but the fluorescent ceiling bulbs added an angelic glow to my hair. I was uncertain if that would help or hurt my chances.

This time the initial connection didn't go quite as well on their end. First the chair had my wrong Skype address, misspelling it by one letter. Then it took the committee members 20 minutes to get their Skype called up, so I anxiously waited, staring at a blank screen, while they used a cellphone to give me updates. Note to search committees using Internet video links: Have someone come early to set up the technology.

Once the interview started, I tried to watch the facial expressions of the four distant people. The members of the group were spread out in a small classroom and had to look way up into a corner to see me on their monitor. With my halo hair and their upward glances, the experience could only be described as celestial.

Everyone smiled, nodded, and took notes—except for the one guy in the upper-right corner who was playing with his laptop and checking his phone for text messages the whole time. He asked one question and made no eye contact. I began to wonder if it is a requirement that every interview must include one committee member who acts like a student who doesn't want to be in class.

By the time I had my third Skype interview the next week, I felt like an old pro. I was happy to have a smiling older professor call me at home. He was seated in a TV studio and was close to the Webcam but was difficult to see because the camera lens pointed up toward some glaring television lights. He said there were three committee members in the room, but the only other person in the picture was a woman sitting 20 feet directly behind him, and I could not make out her face.

The committee chair asked all of the prepared questions, and in the middle of one of my answers, I saw the woman behind him start waving wildly. It looked like she was pointing at something behind me with one hand, trying to signal that I should look. I turned around but had no idea what she was gesturing about.

Then, out of nowhere, a young male head popped in from the left side of the screen. He looked at me for about five seconds, then disappeared—never to be seen again. I assume he was the third member of the committee, but I'm still unsure why neither of the other members said anything during the interview.

I handled most of the questions well, until I suffered the consequences of a very poor preinterview decision on my part. After having no trouble with my dog in my first at-home Skype interview, I had allowed her to once again lounge just off camera. But as this interview was winding down, I heard the dog run to the front window and start to growl. That meant she spotted something, and she was going to make sure everyone knew about it.

In the middle of an eloquent (I thought) answer about my

philosophy of teaching, the dog started barking wildly and would not stop. I stared into the Webcam and kept talking with a plastered smile on my face as I moved my left hand out of view, snapping my fingers to try to get the dog's attention. Nothing would keep her quiet. So with gritted teeth, I pretended that it was totally normal to have a dog barking in the background of a professional interview.

The first two Skype interviews led immediately to campus interviews. The lesson here: A face-to-face preliminary interview turns out to have advantages for both sides. It's easier to have a conversation when you can see how people are responding to your remarks. And even when things go wrong technologically, it's revealing to see how both parties handle the problem. As for that third Skype interview, I heard nothing from the search committee for weeks and blamed that on my pesky pooch. Then one day, I got a call informing me that I was finalist for the position. I decided not to ask whether all of the barking was what led the committee to delay calling me.

But I am now resolved: The next time I have a Skype interview at home, my dog will be safely resting in the windowless laundry room at the other end of the house.

Stephen M. Winzenburg is a professor of communication at Grand View University in Des Moines.

Comments
Powered by DISQUS

Add a comment

Log in to post
with your Chronicle account: Chronicle Don't have an account? [Create one now.](#)
Or log in using one of these alternatives: DISQUS Connect Twitter

Showing 16 comments
Sort by Oldest first Follow comments: by e-mail by RSS
Real-time updating is **enabled**. [\(Pause\)](#)

gglynn 1 day ago

A headset with a built in microphone will really improve the quality of the audio and may even prevent the barking dog from being so noticeable. As you move your head the volume of your voice stays consistent. Using the microphone in the web camera will tend to pick up more background sounds and even feed the sound from your speakers back to the other end producing an echo.

2 people liked this. Like

Andrew Howes 3 hours ago in reply to gglynn

I would say that a lavalier microphone would look somewhat better than a headset, clipped to the collar or the tie, and would also capture very good audio. They're pretty cheap at about \$20 on Amazon for a pro-quality wired mic.

1 person liked this. Like

va_adjunct 1 day ago

Copyright 2011. All rights reserved.
The Chronicle of Higher Education 1255 Twenty-Third

I had a Skype interview about 2 weeks ago. I REALLY liked it over the phone-based interview. It was a MUCH more warm exchange than the typical phone interview. And yes, regarding location and lighting, I practiced with a family member to find the best location and angle to avoid looking like the original black and white Phantom of the Opera.

I wonder if its continued use will be permitted since phone interviews can initially help to shield racial identity and add a bit of equity to the hiring process.

2 people liked this. [Like](#)



Brianne McDonough 1 day ago

Cool!

[Like](#)



panrimo 23 hours ago

We're finding Skype to be our office's main mode of communication in speaking with our coordinators, our current students and companies abroad. Regarding companies, those are for internship interviews had between the international NGO/business/think tank abroad, the student (Panroamer) seeking the internship placement and our US-based staff moderating the interview. Skype truly has made life easier us--and the students.

Tony
Director of University Relations
Panrimo Customized Study and Intern Abroad Programs.

2 people liked this. [Like](#)



timmo3 22 hours ago

My Skype experiences have been somewhat less positive than Winzenburg's or those of other comments so far. I would like to offer a few observations that parallel the advice in the article, "Note to search committees using Internet video links: Have someone come early to set up the technology." I use Skype to communicate with friends and family on a regular basis, so I am aware of the lighting & microphone issues, as well as electronic glitches that can ruin the experience.

After my interviews, I walked away with the impression that I was much better prepared than the interviewers. They were so far from the microphone and camera, and the camera resolution so poor that they looked like cartoon figures viewed through a Coke bottle.

Here are a few suggestions for search committees and interviewees.

1. Know your Skype address. One institution gave me the wrong address, but the search engine in Skype took care of that. Add the institution to your contacts list in advance.
2. Have a phone number backup ready in case there are problems with Skype. Exchange phone numbers in advance.
3. Don't schedule back to back interviews. If problems arise with the connection, you might lose 10 minutes of a 30 min interview trying to fix them.
4. Keep the other Internet traffic to a minimum during your Skype session. Interviewees can't control this at work, but at home, make sure no one is surfing, playing on line games, or watching streaming video in another room. These all can compromise the bandwidth you need for Skype.

In the end, I wonder what committees hope to get from using Skype instead of phone.

6 people liked this. [Like](#)



bradleyascott 22 hours ago

Unfortunately, some job applicants cannot get broadband internet at home, and don't have a personal webcam. This leaves them with the choices of either (1) declining the interview, (2) locating (and paying for) rental facilities at a commercial outlet, or (3) trying to make use of webcam or videoconferencing facilities at their place of employment. The commercial outlets can be exorbitantly expensive and inconvenient to get to, and may have little or no useful technical support on site. As for option 3, well, even when that's possible, it's not always wise to advertise to one's employer that one is seeking other positions. (And no, not every employee of an academic institution has a private office that they can use for such purposes.)

Hiring committees should be aware that not all job applicants, even ones who are themselves reasonably tech-savvy, have easy access to personal or non-job-related use of that technology. This is especially true of people who live in rural or economically depressed areas, and it's especially true of people who are currently in part time or adjunct positions.

13 people liked this. [Like](#)



Nels P. Highberg 20 hours ago in reply to bradleyascott

This is why we were not allowed to use Skype when we interviewed candidates. We had to guarantee that each person was being treated fairly, and I did agree that it is not fair to see some candidates and not see others. Am I someone who judges by looks? I sure try not to be, but a candidate with a certain smile and light in their eyes might make me engage with them in a different way than a person with the same smile and light though I'm only hearing the voice that is monotone.

5 people liked this. [Like](#)



henry_adams 16 hours ago in reply to Nels P. Highberg

Good point. We can say we'll be objective, and we can tell ourselves we'll be objective, but...

1 person liked this. [Like](#)



Nels P. Highberg 15 hours ago in reply to henry_adams

Especially when one of the things search committee members are thinking during the interview is, "Can I imagine being trapped in a small room every month for department meetings over the next twenty years?"

1 person liked this. [Like](#)



skaking 19 hours ago in reply to bradleyascott

you don't have ***any*** friends or acquaintances with a \$20 webcam and cable modem at their place?? that just seems bizarre in this day and age for an academic.

2 people liked this. [Like](#)



griff2030 22 hours ago

During a recent interview, I watched them looking at me on screen off to the side while I must have appeared to them to be looking down at my screen. I finally decided that I would look at the camera and treat the interview like a phone interview, listening to them but looking to them as though I were making eye contact.

2 people liked this. [Like](#)



mrgrundy 16 hours ago in reply to griff2030

Yes, this is one of the things to keep in mind with skype. If you are looking at them on your screen to get visual cues about whether you are connecting, you look as if you are not making eye contact. If you were sitting face to face with someone and they looked down or to the side, you might interpret that as evasive body language.

My concern is that search committees will view it that way. Even if they rationally know what the peculiarities of the technology is, subconsciously they could feel I was not entirely trustworthy.

Basically I stare straight ahead at the camera to give the illusion of direct eye contact and try to catch a little of what is happening on the other end with my peripheral vision.

Ultimately, I regard the Skype interview as only marginally preferable to the phone interview. You have all of the bad audio quality of a speaker phone call with the illusion of face to face interaction.

In my experience, the Skype interview is actually more detrimental to the interviewers than the interviewee in terms of the impression given. Not only is it clear that no one on the committee took the time to prepare for the interview by looking at my application materials as is usual in many interviews, but it is also apparent they are less prepared to use the technology than I am. But given

that hundreds of people apply for the positions, there is not a lot of motivation for the committees to improve.

2 people liked this. [Like](#)



Thomas Polaczek 21 hours ago

Dream on

the market is so bad so you'll never need this advice.

[Like](#)



henry_adams 20 hours ago

This looks promising. I'm eager to see the technology improve, too. Thanks for the article.

Henry Adams

[Like](#)



eajmtp2 3 hours ago

After dealing with it for over fifteen years, I can truthfully say Videoconferencing has a lot of potentials both positive and negative - and Murphy's law always applies. Redundancy is essential - a back-up computer and cell phone are always desirable and ideally the same holds true for the Internet connection. However the burden for this should be on those initiating the process. They should be prepared to resort to using the phone or actually inviting the interviewee to their campus.

Still Skype is very useful if sufficient forethought is given to using it. Even though the objective is to save money, the institution doing the recruiting should put more thought effort and resources into the process than just attaching a web cam to a lap top - after all a new hire is an expensive investment and they are saving money on either phone calls or travel costs. In that light, they should recognize that videoconferencing is single camera live television and should prepare accordingly.

It is important to have a camera that can focus on the person who is speaking - higher quality videoconferencing systems do this automatically. On the low end, one can use a digital camera with a zoom lens and a tripod. Either of these items can be rented by the committee along with good microphones and speakers. Instead of squinting at a screen, it is better to use a projector, ideally in a room that has the ability to light the committee members without washing out the screen. It also helps to have some soft music in the background to avoid creating a sense of dead air and to relax the interviewee.

Similar suggestions apply to the interviewee, but may be out of reach. If the interviewee wants to make eye contact and see the committee members at the same time it's best to position the camera just below the computer screen and have the screen above eye level. Practice this with someone who can give you live feedback to get the angles right. Also it is a good idea to shift positions every so often without looking fidgety - otherwise you can end up looking like a talking mannequin. It is helpful to have something available to shift visual attention if it becomes necessary, for example, in case you need to scratch your nose or squirm in your seat. Make sure it is something you want to show the committee like a simple graphic about your work or perhaps the cover of your latest book. If you need to sneeze make sure you don't do it into the microphone.

Most importantly the committee should make every effort to help the interviewee feel comfortable with the process. One suggestion is to virtually share a cup of coffee together. This gives everyone a sense of being in the same room if not at the same table. But the suggestions needs to come from the committee.

1 person liked this. [Like](#)