Screen Presence, Stage Presence, and Flexibility

Shortlist Interview Skills for COVID Times

By Dean Lincoln Hyers and Pete Machalek

For decades, shortlist project interviews remained relatively static, with prospective teams meeting face to face with selection committees in a room together.

Interviews started to change incrementally when Zoom and Cisco Webex came along, to accommodate the occasional team member unable to attend, usually due to extreme circumstances. But now that COVID-19 has introduced us all to an experience of perpetual extreme circumstances, those changes have come faster—and will continue to do so—for the foreseeable future.

By now, most firms have participated in virtual interviews. Initially, teams viewed virtual interview preparation as pro tempore. They now realize virtual interviewing is here to stay as an ongoing option, pandemic aside. Why? Virtual interviews create cost savings. They reduce setup and travel time. They put everyone on an equal playing field. They're relatively borderless: People can attend from anywhere. And they work … well enough.

As the country opens back up, teams are now starting to experience the in-person, socially distanced interview. And as conditions continue to change, teams are also seeing all manners of hybrid interviews, with both virtual and in-person presenters.

So, looking forward, you're going to need to build your pool of interview team members to be able to accommodate the three variations. Teams need to be at the ready with screen presence for virtual interviews, stage presence for socially distanced interviews, and flexibility for hybrid interviews.

Screen Presence for Virtual Interviews

Screen presence for virtual interviews means your team members need to:

- Project warm confidence despite the off-putting, impersonal nature of virtual technology
- Connect with selection committee members virtually, through a lens, sometimes without being able to see the audience at all
- Show teamwork, camaraderie, and unity with each other, even when they're presenting from completely separate spaces

Just putting these things on your team's radar can vastly improve their screen presence. But to truly stand out, have them practice actively appreciating as they present; consciously presenting to the lens, not the screen; and listening and responding to each other as their teammates present.

Stage Presence for Socially Distanced Interviews

As of this writing, socially distanced interviews are still rare, but we anticipate they'll pick up in frequency over the coming months. In our experience, several changes in the way they're now conducted can throw interviewing teams off their game.

Your interviewing team will likely be requested to enter and exit wearing masks, to minimize direct interaction with selection committee members outside of the formal interview, and to only have the mask off for the duration of the interview itself.

Your team and selection committee members alike will be spaced at least six feet apart. Meaning your team will need to push themselves even harder to tag-team and bounce off

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each other during the presentation, to mentally erase the space between them. At the same time, they'll have to consciously reach out to each of the selection committee members with eye contact and warmth, despite the distance.

Often, the compounded distance means some presenters will end up far away from the selection committee members. In this case, your team must either project like stage actors or use microphones to be heard. To succeed, the team must practice both of these things.

In one interview we recently assisted with, the selection committee couldn't produce enough microphones for the presentation teams. The presenters passed the microphones among themselves (using antibacterial wipes in the handoff). Despite the awkward situation, team members amped up their graciousness and sense of humor to project themselves as positive professionals and understanding team players.

Flexibility for Hybrid Interviews

Hybrid interviews are their own animal.

As a pursuit leader, you must collaborate with the selection committee to truly understand their goals. With this knowledge, you must design an approach that will work with their requirements while simultaneously allowing your team to stand out. This intimate understanding of their requirements will help your team simulate the interview as accurately as possible and practice it.

Task your team with figuring out as much as possible. Have them clarify their point of view, approach, and messages. Have them work out answers to anticipated questions. But make sure they remember that some things simply can't be anticipated or planned for. When things go differently from the plan, it's not necessarily a bad thing; it just is what it is.

This is why flexibility is so important. Your strategy can be designed with flexibility in mind, grounded in a focus on the human factors that your team can control—their soft skills, not the technology of the selection committee.

That's what we did when we worked recently with a team on their hybrid interview. The project was big and important enough that the selection committee couldn't allow themselves to choose a team without meeting them face to face. But they required such a large number of presenters that, combined with the social distancing rules, there were no rooms large enough to host everyone. So, half of the presenters and half of the selection committee had to attend virtually.

This necessitated the in-person presenters to be flexible enough to present to the in-person selection committee members and to the camera in the room. And it required the remote presenters to support their teammates despite not being able to see them well, if at all.

The rules of engagement were rigid, making the challenges all the more limiting. But we focused on the human core of our argument— why *this team* was a perfect fit for *this project*. We knew what we had to say, and we designed it so every team member knew how to support the main point.

We built each team member's ability to project presence. The in-person presenters made eye contact with the selection committee members individually, and the remote presenters made eye contact with the camera lens. Everyone listened and was prepared to tag-team with each other, both in the room and virtually.

In the end, they won the project because they had invested the time and energy to strengthen the skills of their team members in the art of projecting *stage presence* and *screen presence*. And they had the flexibility to accommodate both in-person and virtual venues. ■