

Employers Use Video

As seen on Wall Street Journal.com

When Mark Heineman showed up for an interview with a headhunter a few months ago, he got an unpleasant surprise.

The meeting wasn't going to take place in person, as he had expected, but in a videoconference.

"I didn't know it was going to happen until I arrived at the reception," says the British magazine publishing executive about his first video interview. "It's quite unnerving to be interviewed over a link."

Are you prepared for such a possibility?

You should be.

Because of the post-Sept. 11 clampdown on business travel and an effort to reduce recruitment costs, prospective employers are more likely to want to grill you on camera.

"It's become a popular way for companies to interview," says Richard Chiumento, managing director of Chiumento, a London outplacement firm. "But from a candidate's point of view, it is quite a threatening vehicle to put yourself across effectively."

The trend is for employers to summon a short list of about six managerial, professional or graduate candidates for a one-on-one video session, Mr. Chiumento says. Perhaps three semifinalists then are called in for a second videoconference, he says. Ultimately, the finalists are invited in person.

This modus operandi has been accelerated by the improvement in technology in the past six years as well as by wider availability through private companies that sell such services at GBP 100 (162 euros) to GBP 200 an hour, he says.

That's cheaper than interview travel costs of GBP 300 to GBP 500 within Britain, and GBP 1,000 to GBP 1,500 across the Atlantic, he says.

The result is that of the 10,000 people his firm helped place in new jobs last year, 10% were interviewed in a videoconference first, Mr. Chiumento says. That compares with fewer than 5% a year earlier.

What do his clients say about their experience? "The first comment is that it was more scary and more demanding than they initially thought it would be," he says, "even though they had practiced."

Interviewees complain that the transmission delay - a lag similar to that in some long-distance phone calls - makes the conversation awkward. They are interrupted before they finish what they are saying, which makes them feel inhibited. They also feel physically constrained by having to keep within the camera's range.

David Slee, a British interim executive who did his first video interview last year, says, "It was slightly eerie because of the delay. When somebody moved it was a bit jerky. There's a slight echo on the sound. You're conscious of the camera on you all the time."

Job hunters also complain that the environment is artificial and sterile. The absence of physical contact and body language cues makes it much more difficult to feel the chemistry and develop rapport, they say.

That means the first part of the interview - when the ground rules are being set - is trickier to get through, says Richard Denning, senior consultant at the outplacement firm Coutts Consulting.

"It will take a slightly longer time to become comfortable," Mr. Denning says, "if you ever do."

In the end, Mr. Chimento says, you just don't get to know each other as well.

But practice can help, he says.

If you don't have access to formal training, you can rehearse with a small video camera or in front of a mirror. At least test your voice on a tape recorder.

Find out how long the interview is going to be - usually one to two hours - so that you can pace yourself. Agree on an agenda by e-mail before the interview.

Wear lightweight clothing to minimize perspiring under lights. Don't wear a constricting suit. Neutral solid colors - pastel blues and pinks - are best. Avoid white and patterned shirts and jangling jewelry.

Allow plenty of time to familiarize yourself with the location and the equipment. Ask for your image to be shown from the waist up, which is the most flattering angle. Make sure the lighting is bright enough, otherwise you lose the flavor of the meeting. Test the microphones or you might have difficulty hearing.

If you perform better when using visual aids, ask for a "whiteboard" - a piece of paper on which a camera is focused.

Assume right from the beginning that you are being observed. Relax and you risk showing a blank facial expression.

It's also important to maintain eye contact with the camera. It helps to imagine that you are talking to one person on the phone, Mr. Denning says.

Remember that the camera exaggerates movements such as eye-blinking, hand gestures and shifting around. So try to keep still.

Speak more slowly and distinctly.

Since it's harder to read whether the interviewer is bored or dissatisfied with your responses, be highly focused in your answers and allow time for the questioner to interject.

Mr. Heineman, for one, is still smarting from his personal experience, even though he did well enough to make it to the next interview, which was done in person. He strongly urges companies to inform candidates of the interview method in advance and for job-seekers to ask if they'll take part in a videoconference ahead of time. "They should be mentally prepared for it," he says.