

## How Skype Is Changing the Job Interview

By **BARBARA KIVIAT** Tuesday, Oct. 20, 2009



Tom Grill / Corbis

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Get ready for a closeup: your next job interview might be on webcam. Looking to save time and money, companies are turning to video-chat software as a cheap, low-hassle way to vet job candidates. That means a growing number of people looking for work are meeting their prospective new bosses not at the office but in the comfort of their own home.

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Naturally, the transition from in-person to online isn't without its hiccups. Fuzzy transmissions, dropped calls (especially on wireless networks) and unusual disruptions are all par for the course. Tip No. 1: Get your dog out of barking range before you start the interview. (We'll return to the pointers in a bit)

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What's the draw? Largely money. Last year, as executives at online retailer Zappos.com looked to cut expenses, they noticed how much the firm spent on travel. In HR alone, it easily cost \$1,000 a pop to fly out job candidates and put them up for the night. The firm had used Skype internally, so about six months ago, recruiters started trying it for interviews.

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Their opinion: a video link does a pretty good job of replacing an in-person meeting — and in a way that a phone call can't. "If you see facial expressions and body language, you have a different sense of what a person is saying," says recruiting manager Christa Foley. Now, instead of flying out 20 finalists for a job, the company first screens with Skype and then brings in only the best two or three candidates.

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Job seekers are hopping on board too. Last spring, after Stephen Bhadran got laid off, he quickly realized there were more openings for computer programmers in Dallas, Atlanta and Los Angeles than in South Florida, where he lived. So he cast a wide net — and got a bite from the University of California, Los Angeles. The university wanted to interview him but wouldn't pay the airfare. "I was laid off and running out of funds," says Bhadran. "I couldn't fly on my own dime." He suggested interviewing by Skype. He got his request — and the job.

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Things don't always run smoothly. Bobby Fitzgerald, a restaurateur who has been interviewing job candidates by Skype since March, has had his share of amusements. For instance: the candidate who leaned forward while he spoke, giving Fitzgerald an intimate view of his nose. Another, a college senior, didn't bother cleaning up his dorm room before the interview; the mess was painfully visible in the background.

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And then there was the dog that wouldn't stop barking. Fitzgerald cut the interview short and said he'd have to reschedule. Did the disruption influence his decision? "Well," he says, "a big part of management is handling problems as they arise."

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Still, webcam interviews are entirely worth it, he says. Fitzgerald runs restaurants in four states and likes to hire from the nation's top culinary and hospitality schools. It's rare that he, the job candidate and the job are all in the same time zone. And the benefit of video-interviewing for him isn't just saved money — it's also saved time. "More than once, I've flown someone in and within an hour, I realize it's not a fit," he says. "But I'm stuck with that person for six more hours."

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So what should you do if you're asked to interview by Skype — or even brave enough to suggest it yourself?

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First off, realize that we perceive people differently through a camera than we do in person. Bill McGowan, a former news anchor who now trains people to go on TV, starts his list of pointers with lighting: whether you're sitting in your kitchen or an office borrowed from a friend, make

sure there's no bright light (like from a window) behind you. That will only darken your face. When your interviewer is talking, it's fine to look at his image on the screen, but when you answer, look at the camera. That's how to make "eye contact." Avoid wearing patterns and the color white, since we notice white spots on a screen first — you want your interviewer drawn to your teeth and eyes, not to your shirt. And don't forget that what's behind you is visible too. "It's best to put away the *Mad Men* bar," says McGowan.

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Next, think about framing. Sitting flush with a plain white wall will make you look like you're in a police lineup, so angle your knees to the corner of your computer screen, and then turn your head slightly back to look at the camera. Sit tall in your chair, but not too close to the camera: the first three buttons of your shirt should be visible, or else you risk looking like a floating head, counsels Priscilla Shanks, a coach for broadcast journalists and public speakers. Most important, do a dry run with a friend to check your color, sound and facial expressions — neutral often comes off as glum onscreen.

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After all that, don't forget that this is still a job interview. Even though you're not meeting face to face, dress as though you are. When you "walk in," have your résumé ready — this time, as an e-mail attachment. And don't forget to do all the standard prep work. Are you ready to talk about your greatest weakness? "This adds another layer, but people will still expect you to be prepared to have a conversation with them," says career counselor Judith Gerberg.

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Though that's not to say you can't acknowledge the medium. This past summer, Deanna Reed, principal of the Marie Murphy School in suburban Chicago, started doing Skype interviews and has already considered candidates from as far away as Asia. "The time difference was so great, it was like 1 in the morning for him," she says about a teacher in Japan. "I said, 'Oh, you had to get on your suit in the middle of the night?' And he said, 'No, I have my pajamas on the bottom.' He was fun — he had a real sense of humor." Even over video, it's possible to make a great first impression.