

The Pandemic Virtual Interview

If you're facing a job search right now, you're not alone. There are record numbers of people filing for unemployment benefits in the U.S. and half of the global workforce is at risk of losing their livelihoods. Whether you were recently laid off, were unemployed before the global pandemic hit, or are choosing to make a change, looking for a job now — amidst hiring freezes and layoffs — will be different than it was a few months ago. But how different? How has the crisis affected how you approach a job search — from finding open positions to writing a cover letter and resume to (ideally) interviewing? Does the usual advice still apply?

To answer these questions, I spoke with Art Markman, a professor of psychology at the University of Texas at Austin and author of *Bring Your Brain to Work: Using Cognitive Science to Get a Job, Do it Well, and Advance Your Career* and Claudio Fernández-Aráoz, an executive fellow at Harvard Business School and the author of *It's Not the How or the What but the Who*. Here's their advice for facing what feels like a daunting challenge at this time.

Tap your network

Fernández-Aráoz and Markman agree that, more than ever, getting a job in this climate will be about who you know, especially for more senior positions. "When hiring managers are faced with a stack of resumes or portfolios, they're going to be looking for some kind of familiarity," says Markman. So actively engage with your network. You might post on social media that you're looking for your next opportunity and describe what talents you'd bring to a future employer.

You can also reach out directly to former colleagues who you've lost touch with. You could send them an invitation on LinkedIn or an email asking how they're doing, explain your situation, and ask if they have any advice as you're looking for your next position. This isn't easy, of course. It can be tough when you're out of work and don't have good news to share — and people might be more overwhelmed than usual at the moment — but remember that people want to help when they can. I recently reconnected with a former colleague who is looking for work and it felt great to be able to offer her advice and even a few job leads.

Brush up your resume and cover letter

Fernández-Aráoz says you should "go out of your way to find a mutual acquaintance" to mention in your cover letter to grab the reader's attention. You might also want to highlight that you've worked in high-pressure environments before, since most companies' priority right now will be weathering the crisis and will be looking for people who can contribute to that effort. Of course, it's good practice to keep your resume updated at any time, but is especially important when you've just lost your job or expect you might soon. And the classic advice on how to draft a cover letter and resume still holds true.

Prepare for a remote interview

Given that most people are working from home, there's a good chance that if you're lucky enough to get an interview, you'll be doing it remotely. All of the standard advice about how to prepare for and perform during an interview still applies but you'll also need to think about others aspects as well:

Technology. When the interview is scheduled, ask what video platform they'll be using and then spend time familiarizing yourself with how it works, especially if you'll need to use any features like screen

sharing. Test out the link ahead of time. Be sure you have a way to reach the interviewer in case the technology fails. “The last thing you want is to be disfluent in a high-pressure situation,” advises Markman. “People are going to be as forgiving as possible, but if you can demonstrate that you’ve thought through the contingencies, it’ll convey competence.” And set up the best possible circumstances for the technology to work. For example, Markman suggests asking others in your household to not stream TV while you’re doing the interview.

Appearance. Your goal is to look professional. You don’t need to wear a suit jacket — that would look awkward under the circumstances — but you don’t want to wear a sweatshirt either. Choose a neutral background for your interview (it probably goes without saying to avoid one of those virtual beach backgrounds). Fernández-Aráoz says that if you have a professional-looking space you can show in the background, it can help to humanize you, and it’s better than being right up against a wall. However, a blank wall can be less risky when it comes to interruptions or accidentally displaying a messy room. You might also consider standing during the interview. “It’s more dynamic and your vocal chords warm up faster and it’s easier to project,” he says.

Company’s crisis response. In addition to the usual research you’d do on the company, Markman advises looking into what the firm is doing in response to the Covid-19 crisis. Try to get the latest information. “Things have changed so rapidly and you may have applied for the job a few months ago,” he says. “Make sure you’re as conversant as possible. Check their website, any newsletters, and social media feeds — up to and including the day of the interview.”

Rehearse ahead of time

Experiment with how you might answer common questions. “When we get nervous, we tend to start monitoring ourselves. Since you’ll be able to see your own image as you’re talking during the interview, you’re likely to get distracted. Staring at a face — especially your own — will make you lose your train of thought,” says Markman. Be sure to rehearse in the spot where you plan to do the interview so you can see how you look. If you can’t stop looking at yourself when you practice, you might want to close the window with your image in it. You don’t want to be self-conscious to the point of distraction. “But it can be useful to occasionally look at yourself during the interview,” says Markman, “to make sure you don’t have a tag sticking out or something.”

Go into the interview with a positive mindset

Remember that during the interview, you won’t be getting the same level of non-verbal information from the interviewer. And as Fernández-Aráoz points out, there’s lots of research that shows when we don’t have feedback, we tend toward a negativity bias. We think “this isn’t going well.” So experiment ahead of time with staying positive and assuming the best is happening. You might have a mantra you tell yourself when you start to doubt your performance. Or you might sit quietly for five minutes before the interview starts and mentally review all the reasons the interview is likely to go well.

Exaggerate your emotions a bit on screen

For the same reason, you want to practice being emotive during the interview. “Unless you have a sophisticated set of earphones, the audio gets compressed and you lose many of the undertones, which convey emotions,” he explains. “So you need to exaggerate those a bit.” He suggests practicing with a friend on video to “get some feedback about the setting, your tone, and your body language.” Your goal is to appear natural and at ease. You might record yourself answering a few sample questions and watch

how you appear. But don't do this if you'll just focus on everything you're doing wrong. Again, you don't want to make yourself so self-conscious that it hinders your performance.

Convey warmth during the interview

The crisis has made people more eager to connect with colleagues on an emotional level and your interviewer may have a higher expectation about how much warmth you convey during the interview. Markman recommends that you follow the lead of the interviewer on small talk, but it may be appropriate to ask the interviewer how they and their loved ones are doing right now. And you should have a good response prepared for the same question should it come back to you. He suggests something like, "Thanks for asking. I'm doing as well as possible under the circumstances." You don't need to go into unnecessary detail.

Ask pertinent questions

When given the chance to ask questions during the interview, Fernández-Aráoz says you should ask all "the usual questions" such as What are your expectations for this role? How will you measure success for the position? What am I not asking you that I should? Markman suggests also asking about their onboarding process in the virtual environment. How will they be helping new hires get acclimated?

Credit: <https://hbr.org>