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Interviewing and Working in a (Post-)Pandemic World

In an age of rapid change, effective engagement with others—whether in person or remotely—requires being mindful of the fundamentals.

Alan Eli Willner

General Mark Milley, the chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, has said that the fundamental *nature* of war does not change, but that its *character*—how it’s actually fought—does. Although there are huge differences between the battlefield and the office, I believe that the core of Milley’s insight applies to both settings. The fundamentals of interviewing and working haven’t changed as a result of the pandemic, but the techniques certainly have—in ways we are only beginning to understand.

Remote work can bring convenience, flexibility and efficiency. But it comes with challenges, especially for those just starting their careers. It raises new questions like “How can I possibly stand out in a Zoom interview?” “How can I build true collegial relationships when I don’t interact with others in person?” “How can I impress my boss when she barely knows what I look like?”

The job market in optics and photonics is robust. The challenge lies in doing one’s best in the new (post-)

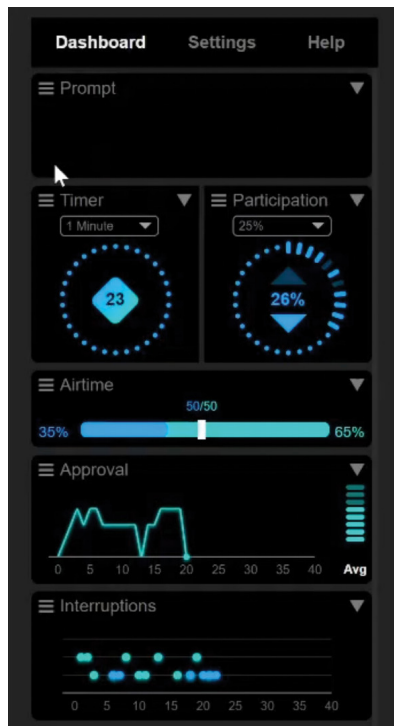
pandemic environment. Is it harder to interview by Zoom? Typically, yes—but that applies to everyone. And somebody will get hired, so it might as well be you. An old joke remains relevant: Two people are being chased by a bear, when one person stops and says to the other, “Stop running! There is no way you can outrun the bear.” At which point the other responds, “I don’t need to outrun the bear; I only need to outrun you.”

Techniques for remote interviews

My father, who passed away 20 years ago this month, was known for his interpersonal wisdom. Before my first interview 45 years ago he gave me some advice: “Smile; say hello and shake the person’s hand heartily; look directly at the person; don’t speak too softly, too quickly, or too garbled; be relaxed and present yourself nicely; nod your head to show you are listening; express interest and care by asking questions; be polite; don’t interrupt; and thank them.”

Except for the handshakes, each of those points can be implemented remotely. But it takes some careful thought and ingenuity. (Note: While there are many remote platforms, I use Zoom here.)

One example involves looking at the interviewer. I advise my students to use an idea suggested by a friend of mine, which is to put a note near the computer’s camera that reads “Look Here!” With Zoom, to look the interviewer in the eye, you need to look at your camera—not at the interviewer’s image on your screen. Configure your screen so that the interviewer’s face appears right near your camera, and thus your gaze is roughly in the right direction.



An engagement-quantification platform developed by Ingage Solutions.
Courtesy of A.E. Willner

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Importantly, the interviewer will also be looking at *you* for signs of engagement, and may even be measuring it. A friend, Jamal Madni, has started a company called Ingage Solutions. It developed a platform which gives interviewers specific numerical metrics, in real time, of each person’s level of engagement—how much they smile, speak, gesture with hands, nod their head, display energy and so on. These

factors are simply fundamentals that the interviewer is considering—whether using software or their own gut instincts, whether in person or by Zoom.

To save time and effort, many companies will likely keep conducting the initial job interview—and perhaps even the entire process—using Zoom. Since every person has different strengths, it is important to strategize and tailor your techniques for presenting yourself at your best, by focusing on the fundamentals and your own core strengths. Practice different techniques over Zoom with friends and mentors, and pay careful attention to their feedback.

Remotely building relationships

Will “remote” remain woven into daily work, meetings and conferences? To some extent, probably yes. Therefore, people who are early in their careers should devote special attention to building relationships remotely. Nearly all points concerning remote interviews will apply to remote work engagements, but building relationships requires longer-term vision and passion. Casually chatting with colleagues when passing them in the hallway or during a meeting’s coffee break? Gone and gone. The new reality requires you to make an extra and different effort.

The video

For any person speaking in a Zoom meeting, staring at a bunch of participants who have their video cameras off is often frustrating and deflating. Do you need to keep your camera on all the time? Of course not—but don’t expect people to emotionally connect as well with you if you present as a blank screen. Frankly, before the pandemic, I was never in an in-person

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meeting where someone had a black box around them, so that they couldn't be seen. Work is work—and you are not a spectator.

The private chat (PC)

Saying hello to different people before the start of a meeting, whispering to a person during a brief break, making a friendly comment when passing in the hallway—I use Zoom's "private chat" feature to do similar things. When the meeting is starting, I send a PC "hello" to the people I know. If somebody says something, I'll often send a complimentary PC commenting on it. If someone sneezes, I'll send a PC "gezundheit." I enjoy seeing someone break out into a big smile when reading my PC. People understand that I send PCs because I care about them, and I believe these brief messages have brought me closer to many people.

The personal touch

Making a joke or engaging in personal discussion is not Zoom's strong point. But, as in an in-person meeting, a few minutes of casual banter can be quite enjoyable and healthy for small groups. Here are two examples with people I didn't know well beforehand: (1) I mentioned to someone that my father-in-law was in the hospital. At the start of every subsequent

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meeting, she asked how my father-in-law was feeling. It meant a lot to me, and I felt a growing collegial relationship; (2) A person casually mentioned a good book he had read. I immediately ordered it. At the next meeting, I held up the book he had mentioned. He said that it made him feel "super" that I took his comment to heart and that our interaction wasn't just business.

The plain-old telephone

Our old friend the telephone. No need to schedule anything—just dial. I will often call individuals a few minutes after a multi-person Zoom meeting to ask an additional question or share a thought. It is efficient, builds a personal connection and shows that you value their opinion. If the person is busy, they will tell you. And often you can exchange more ideas and build a much better relationship in a few minutes on the phone than in a series of emails or texts.

A hybrid: In-person with remote work

Particularly vexing is navigating the hybrid environment, where your time is divided between working remotely and in person. This is a balancing act, and early-career folk are at a disadvantage since they are still squarely in "network-building mode."

A healthy balance between in-person and remote work is possible, but the two modes are usually not equal. In-person face time breeds a level of comfort and repartee that is hard to replicate remotely. Some corporations say they are trying to assign promotions without regard to in-person versus remote status. This is a lofty goal. Decision makers are often risk averse, which can put unfamiliar faces at a disadvantage, such as in promotions.

Specifically, it is often easier in person to judge an employee's key management strengths—such as the ability to encourage people, inspire performance, build bridges, communicate goals and facilitate collaboration. The disadvantages that go along with the old expression of "out of sight, out of mind" can occur and hurt your career. If you work in a hybrid environment, try to maximize your interactions when in person and schedule your in-person time to overlap with people with whom you want to most interact.

My sincere hope is that young professionals can navigate this new environment by staying true to fundamentals and being innovative in utilizing technologies to bond with others. **OPN**

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