



Hiring in the Time of Coronavirus: How to make mission-critical senior executive hires using virtual interviews

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This is part 1 of a three-part series. Part 1 focuses on how to adapt your interview process with finalist candidates. Part 2 focuses on how to sell candidates in a virtual environment. Part 3 provides guidance and best practices on how to onboard senior hires in a virtual environment.

The COVID-19 pandemic and associated economic fallout has required a rapid and painful shift in the ways organizations operate, which includes interviewing and hiring decisions for senior executive roles. Many businesses are having to make heart-wrenching decisions to control costs, including layoffs and hiring freezes. At the same time, leaders and boards know that getting the right people in senior roles is still a fundamental mandate for many businesses as they look to navigate the crisis and emerge from it stronger. In the words of legendary UCLA basketball coach, John Wooden: “Do not let what you cannot control interfere with what you *can* do.”

During this time, we have received questions from dozens of clients asking if they should make hiring decisions without meeting the candidate in person. We believe that video interviews are to in-person interviews what Peloton is to outdoor cycling: potentially less engaging of both body and mind, but still capable of delivering on the desired outcome if done well. In fact, we have extensive experience assessing senior leaders, including CEOs, via video conference. What we have found is that this virtual model can deliver similar outcomes to in-person interviewing, assuming the interviewer follows a rigorous and data-driven approach.

Can you make a senior hiring decision only based on virtual interactions?

The answer is a resounding yes. Since hiring for senior roles is a 3- to 6-month process, you put the brakes on sourcing and interviewing at your own peril, as doing so will leave talent gaps open even longer. In fact, if social distancing ends up lasting for an extended period, you could put your business at even greater risk if you choose not to find the right leaders who can improve performance during these challenging times.

The foundational principle of hiring senior leaders is the same for in-person interviews and video conferences: hiring decisions must be data-based decisions, minimizing the reliance on “gut” feelings. In fact, our research shows that following standard interview approaches only results in a 50% success rate, while following our fact-based A Method of Hiring can increase that to 90%+ accuracy levels¹. What this means is that *how* you interview is significantly more important than being in person. Using video interviews may even help you minimize “gut” decisions, because it will force you to use a more structured method. Below we have outlined our recommended approach, adapting ghSMART’s A Method of Hiring for today’s unprecedented environment:

- ***Start with the scorecard.*** Define the three to five most critical business outcomes you want this leader to achieve as well as a qualitative and rigorous description of “how” they should operate. Given the dislocation impacting all industries, incorporate the new scorecard outcome(s) your leaders will have to deliver on based on new economic realities and scenarios. The resulting scorecard will serve as the measuring stick to evaluate candidates, and you can use the interview process to gather data to inform whether a candidate is likely to be able to deliver on these outcomes.
- ***Hold a structured career interview over video conference.*** Once a candidate has moved through initial phone or video screenings, you should dedicate several hours for a structured walkthrough of the individual’s career—this should be at least 3 hours. The data generated by this discussion will allow you to uncover patterns of results, behaviors, and motivations relevant to the scorecard. To gather this data, talk through each role the candidate has had in the last 10-15 years, asking questions about the same five areas for each role. While 3 hours may not be feasible for every hiring manager, another alternative is to have a different colleague cover a “chapter” in the candidate’s career, in which case you need to ensure that the interviews are done in a consistent manner and quarterbacked by the hiring manager or their HR business partner. Here are some sample questions, though this is not an exhaustive list:
 - ***Context:*** Get a clear window into the candidate’s goals and targets for a specific job:
 - What were you hired to do?
 - How was success measured?
 - How were your results relative to your plan? Relative to peers? Relative to past years?

¹ Based on an independent analysis by Dr. Steve Kaplan at the University of Chicago.

- *Achievements:* Understand the highlights in a person’s career:
 - What were your three biggest accomplishments, and what did you uniquely do to drive them?
 - What is the metric that best highlights your success in this role?
 - Where did you add the most value to the organization in this chapter?
- *Low points:* While candidates can be hesitant to share low points, having assessed over 21,000 leaders, we can confidently assert that everyone has low points at work. To move past a candidate’s discomfort with this question, you can re-frame it in a variety of ways:
 - What was your biggest mistake in this role?
 - With hindsight being 20/20, what would you have done differently in this role?
 - What was your biggest blind spot in this role?
- *Bosses and teams:* Ask candidates about their bosses and teams:
 - Who was your boss? (To encourage candor, you should ask them to spell the name of their previous bosses.)
 - What was it like working with that person?
 - When I talk to your boss (or other reference), what will they say made you stand out from others?
 - When I talk to your boss, what will they say were some development areas?
 - What feedback would your team give you, both positive and constructive?
- *Rationale for leaving:* Learn whether a candidate was promoted, recruited, or fired from a previous role, and push to understand the context behind the departure:
 - Why did you leave?
 - How did your boss react to the news?
- **Evaluate the data.** During the interview, be sure to take notes on each section—this is your data. After the interview, review the notes and look for patterns that demonstrate whether they are likely to deliver against the scorecard. Based on these patterns, rate the candidate on each outcome in the scorecard.

Our approach is predicated on the belief that, when it comes to executives, past performance is the best indicator of future performance. By following this structured approach and supplementing it with reference calls, you can gain confidence on whether a candidate is likely to perform in the role.

How do I know if they are a cultural fit?

One of the biggest misconceptions is “It is impossible to evaluate cultural fit over video,” since it can be harder to build rapport virtually. For companies that have not made “cultural fit” objective and measurable, this may be true. For companies that have invested the time to define cultural fit in a rigorous and objective manner, there are three steps you can take to assess whether a candidate’s ways of working match well with those of your organization:

- **Follow a fact-based approach.** Assign a separate leader to gather data in a similarly structured way that will allow you to identify patterns of how they work and engage with others. Consider asking the following questions for each role:
 - What was the culture of the company like? What did you like about it? If there was something you would change, what would you change?
 - What did you like about your boss’s management style? What did you not like?
 - What was your favorite part of the job? Least favorite part?
 - Which peer counted on you the most? What was your toughest peer relationship?
 - How did you communicate and coordinate with your team? (Probe for specific examples.)

Compare the resulting data and patterns that you find to your definition of your organization’s culture to look for similarities and differences in where your candidate has thrived or struggled.

- **Dedicate more time and energy to relationship building (pre-selling).** This is the area where you will have to overcompensate in order to account for the fact that you cannot meet in person. For finalist candidates, schedule multiple sessions to connect personally over video conference, including having a virtual coffee or “[happy hour](#)” over video conference. Set the tone for these virtual conversations by sharing more about who you are as a person and your ambitions for the company. To take it a step further, you can even schedule one-on-one video conferences with their prospective peers, where the candidate has time to get to know them and to ask questions. This also has the incremental benefit that it can soften the ground for on-boarding by building more alignment around the hire.

What are the tradeoffs between in-person vs. video conference interviews?

As you adapt your hiring process by using video conferences for interviews, consider the following tradeoffs with respect to in-person interviews:

Benefits of video conference over in-person interviews

- Requires more structure, so lends itself to gathering higher quality data
- Can accelerate time to a decision since it simplifies scheduling as being in the same city is no longer a pre-requisite
- Is a more efficient use of interviewer and candidate’s time since it eliminates commuting and travel time

Challenges of video conference interviews relative to in-person interviews

- Is more difficult to build rapport
- Can be harder to read body language
- Is more exhausting psychologically for the candidate and the interviewer
- Can feel more transactional to the candidate

Given these tradeoffs, you need to make the right decision for your specific context and the role for which you are hiring. That said, you can mitigate some of the challenges of video conferences by over-investing in rapport building at the beginning of the discussion and throughout the interview. You can also ask the candidate at the beginning of the interview to sit further back from the camera, so that you can get a better sense for their body language. Finally, you should aim to take more breaks during the discussion in order to sustain the energy levels of the candidate and the interviewer.

How can I use reference calls to validate what I have learned?

Reference calls should be used to validate the achievements and calibrate the risks that are identified in the structured career interview. In addition to the list of references a candidate provides, you should also perform a couple “off-list” references of bosses, peers, and direct reports that came up during the structured interview process. Here are the key questions to use in your reference calls:

- What are her standout strengths?
- What were her biggest wins at your organization?
- What were his development areas back then?
- In what areas did he require the most support?
- What will others tell me about this person?

In addition, be sure to probe in specific areas that came up during the interview (e.g., “Sandy shared that she achieved X while running Marketing at your company. What role did she play in driving that result?”).

Reference calls also serve as an excellent tool to test for alignment with your organization’s values and ways of working. Here are the key questions around those areas to use in your reference calls:

- Describe the culture of the company where you worked with [the candidate]. In what ways was the candidate a good fit and not a good fit?
- What are examples of conflicts or debates you had with [candidate name]?
- Describe her leadership style. What about it works best/worst?

In addition, be sure to probe on specific areas that came up during the interview (e.g., “Sandy shared that she had conflict with Sam at your company. What was the nature of that conflict?”).

Principles to remember in making senior executive hires virtually:

Do:

- Be opportunistic. In our present work-from-home reality, great candidates will have more time and space to interview.
- Apply a rigorous and scientific approach to video conference interviews, which can increase the likelihood of success from 50% to 90%.
- Perform references to get the full picture of the candidate. Don't skip this step!
- Get creative about the ways you build rapport with the candidate and test cultural fit, leveraging technology (e.g., virtual coffee).

Don't:

- Wait until social distancing has ended to assess for mission-critical roles provided the role remains a priority and you can constructively share with the organization why this role is needed urgently.
- Assume that it is impossible to evaluate cultural fit on a role using virtual connections only.